



Loose Id

*Rachel
Carrington*

TILL WE
MEET AGAIN

TILLWE MEET AGAIN

Rachel Carrington

LooseId®

www.loose-id.com

Warning

This e-book contains sexually explicit scenes and adult language and may be considered offensive to some readers. Loose Id® e-books are for sale to adults ONLY, as defined by the laws of the country in which you made your purchase. Please store your files wisely, where they cannot be accessed by under-aged readers.

* * * * *

This book contains explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable.

Till We Meet Again

Rachel Carrington

This e-book is a work of fiction. While reference might be made to actual historical events or existing locations, the names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Published by
Loose Id LLC
1802 N Carson Street, Suite 212-2924
Carson City NV 89701-1215
www.loose-id.com

Copyright © May 2007 by Rachel Carrington

All rights reserved. This copy is intended for the purchaser of this e-book ONLY. No part of this e-book may be reproduced or shared in any form, including, but not limited to printing, photocopying, faxing, or emailing without prior written permission from Loose Id LLC.

ISBN 978-1-59632-468-8

Available in Adobe PDF, HTML, MobiPocket, and MS Reader

Printed in the United States of America

Editor: Maryam Salim
Cover Artist: Scott Carpenter



www.loose-id.com

Chapter One

Out of all his years on the force, Quinn admitted to himself that this was the worst crime scene he'd encountered – and he'd encountered more than his fair share. Reaching out a hand, he brushed the hair away from the face, a beautiful face, which came as no surprise. With the exception of each chosen victim, young, beautiful, blonde females in their early to mid-twenties, the MOs differed and yet, Quinn didn't doubt the same killer was responsible for all of the deaths.

Tossing one more glance toward the unfortunate girl's mutilated body, Quinn moved toward the medical examiner. "Can you tell me anything I don't already know by looking at her?"

Dr. Saunders, an aging man with a paunch and glasses which tipped on the edge of his nose, grimaced. "Yeah, she was tortured." He rocked back on his heels and shook his head. "But you'll have my report in the morning." He paused. "You look like hell. When's the last time you got some sleep?"

Quinn didn't bother answering the question. If the truth were told, he hadn't slept much in the past month since the killings had begun. And he'd bet his last month's salary not too many single, blonde females were sleeping too well, either. The thought sent a shiver down his spine as one particular blonde came to mind.

Scrubbing the back of his neck with one hand, he rolled his shoulders forward to ease the tension in his muscles. Since the killing spree had begun, the mayor had taken a particular liking to Quinn's ass, chewing on it daily. But it wasn't the mayor who had put Quinn back on the streets, working this crime like he had the ones in the years past. This was his choice...his duty to the citizens of this town.

"Captain, there's something you should see in here." A uniformed officer interrupted Quinn's trip down memory lane, and he couldn't decide whether to be grateful or irritated.

He followed the young officer into the bathroom just inside the victim's apartment and immediately wished he hadn't. "Shit." It was all he could say. It seemed to fit the occasion.

Bloody, torn fingernails and toenails littered the bathroom counter while chunks of the victim's bloodied hair soaked in the toilet, giving voice to a perverted mind. Quinn exhaled on a pungent curse. Spinning on his heel, he bolted from the bathroom, leaning against the wall outside to catch his breath. "This is one sick bastard."

"And you're surprised?" Wade, the lead detective until Quinn had taken over, approached, offering a cigarette.

"No, thanks. Still trying to quit. Have you looked inside there?"

"Are you kidding me? Unfortunately, it was the first place I went after seeing the body. I had to go outside for some fresh air before I could lose today's lunch. The uniforms are canvassing along with Brick and Waters. I don't think we're going to pull in much information, though. Either no one's seen anything or no one's talking. Who can blame them? They're all scared they'll end up on this bastard's hit list."

Taking a deep draw on the cigarette, Wade exhaled, tilting his head back to send a cloud of smoke spiraling toward the ceiling. "Jenny's scared to death; we were just going to send the girls to their grandmother's house in Maine, but now I've told her I want her to go as well. I want her as far away from this as possible."

Quinn pushed himself away from the wall and flicked a glance at Wade, his best friend since grade school. "That's probably a good idea. Any takes on all of this?"

Wade's glance slid toward where the victim still lay. "I'm clueless. He raped this one, which was a different scenario."

"Maybe he didn't rape her."

"Did you see what I saw on that body?"

Quinn pushed away from the wall and scrubbed his hands over his face. "We'll wait for the coroner's report, but I don't think he raped her. I think he wants it to look like he raped her. Once the news gets a hold of this, more women will run for cover, and he knows it. He likes the smell of fear."

He couldn't shake the grisly scene from his mind or the images it brought with it. The young girl's horrified screams as the killer held her, a knife pressed against her throat. Quinn surmised, from the girl's torn fingernails, she'd put up a good fight. He shook his head and caught onto his partner's words.

"Yeah, well, unfortunately, we're all scared out of our wits. This guy has got us by the short and curlies, and he knows it. He's calling all the shots."

"Yeah, well, not for long. I'll find him." Quinn's voice rang with self-confidence. He'd make finding this latest piece of scum top priority, and he wouldn't stop even if it became the last case he closed in his twenty year career.

"Hey, Cap, look at this."

Quinn moved away from his friend at the summons, though Wade followed him as they made their way back to the body of the young girl. Following Detective Ryan's index finger, he inspected the three-inch wide gash on the victim's back.

"What the hell made that?" Wade leaned closer for a better view.

"Looks like he sawed her." The young detective shuddered.

"This wasn't a saw; I've seen this before...one other time." Lifting his head, Quinn pinned his friend with a steely gaze. "Remember, we had a homicide about six years back? The guy killed two women, both under the age of twenty. Looks like the same weapon." He walked back toward the open front door and paused to look over his shoulder.

Wade's brow furrowed as he tried to recall the case. "Oh, yeah, the waitress from the steakhouse was his first victim. And then there was, oh, hell, what was her name? Mayor Bertram's daughter." He joined Quinn on the small concrete enclosure leading to the back apartment where the victim had lived.

"Helen."

"Yeah, that's it." Wade whistled low between his teeth. "Both of them were killed with that ceremonial dagger which had been stolen from the museum in Asheville."

Quinn inclined his head toward where the girl still lay inside. "That wound looks identical."

"At least we know it's not the same guy. The first killer died in prison two, three years ago, I think."

"Two." Quinn had been the first one to receive the call from the warden the day Henry Sparks's throat had been slit. The only response Quinn had been able to provide was a sigh of relief.

"Think there's a possibility this new killer knew Sparks?"

"Either that or we have a copycat. Call Buncombe County and see who Sparks bunked with, who his buddies were."

"Wasn't the dagger returned to the museum?"

A sick feeling settled in the pit of Quinn's stomach. "You better check that out, too." His breath fogged in the chilly air.

"This bastard wants us to get close to him. He's getting tired of playing the game without a challenge. So now, he's upped the stakes."

* * * * *

From a safe distance, a man smiled as he viewed the scene unfolding just around the corner. The police scurried around like fucking ants, afraid the queen would destroy them in her displeasure at their inefficiency. He chuckled. They were so good at their jobs and yet, couldn't catch one man.

They would never be able to catch him. He thought like they thought, worked like they worked and he was too damn good. He lovingly patted the lock of blonde hair and shimmering, gold bracelet, appreciating the blonde's taste in jewelry. He liked adding nice things to his collection.

* * * * *

"Here, thought you could use this." Wade placed a steaming cup of coffee on Quinn's already cluttered desk and plopped his large frame in the only available chair.

Quinn wrapped a grateful hand around the cup and took a large swallow, wincing as the hot liquid burned its way down his throat. "Thanks. Did you find out anything else?"

"It was just as I suspected. No one knew anything about Sparks. His only roommate died of unknown causes within two weeks of his arrival. From there on in, Sparks had a room to himself. He was a loner. Warden said he didn't hang round anyone in particular."

"What about the victim?"

"Marie Younger was an all-around American girl. Loved parties, pizza, and guys. Hated prejudice, intolerance, and cruelty to animals. She didn't have an enemy in the world...at least none that she knew about."

Wade flipped open his notebook to refresh his memory. "She was a student at UNC, a senior, majoring in psychology. She had just broken up with her boyfriend a couple of days ago. He was mattress surfing with some other wave riders, if you get my drift, and Marie found out about it. He checks out clean, though, well, as clean as you can be when you're an asshole. Marie was originally from Georgia. Her parents are on their way here to claim her body. I'll talk to them when they arrive, but I doubt they're going to know much more than what her roommates have already told me."

He scratched his head and studied his notes before continuing. "I talked to her father on the phone already. He was pretty shaken up, of course, but he was able to assure me that his daughter wasn't into drugs, illegal activities, and she wasn't promiscuous. Of course, what do parents know when their kids are away? My college days are one big blur."

Quinn rocked back in his chair, his fingers steepled. "We both know this wasn't because of who she was, Wade. She could have screwed the entire football team at University of North Carolina, and it wouldn't have made a difference to this killer. This girl was killed because of what she was...a twenty-two-year-old blonde."

Wade fished out a cigarette from his pocket, lit it, and inhaled deeply before responding. "Yeah, but once this hits the papers, the town's going to panic. This girl wasn't just killed like all the other ones. And with this guy picking off blondes, well, it's not like we're a major metropolis here. Pretty soon, he's going to run out of targets. Then what? Is he going to change his tastes? That's what's got this town in an uproar already. The people want to know what the hell's going on and I can't say I blame them."

Loafer-clad feet hitting the floor, Quinn spun around, fixing his friend and partner with a glare. "I don't blame them, either, but if I knew anything, I'd tell them. We haven't said anything because we don't know what the hell is going on other than innocent women are getting killed. I think the news has already reported that."

Wade held up his hands in a pacifying gesture. "Hey, you don't need to tell me. I'm working on this crap, too, you know." Pushing himself to his feet, he took two more long drags on his cigarette before dropping the remainder into his now cold coffee. "Look," a long stream of smoke accompanied the word, "I'm going to run home, take a shower, see the girls off, and then I'll be back."

"You should catch some sleep first. You look like hell," Quinn noted with a dry smile.

"Yeah, well, you should try looking in a mirror, friend. You're not going to win any Mr. America contests yourself," Wade returned before sauntering toward the door.

"I'm the boss; I get paid to look like hell." Quinn took another swig of the stout coffee.

"Then, you're certainly earning your pay," came the caustic reply as Wade slammed the door behind him.

* * * * *

"Mrs. Johnson and her daughter are in examining room one." Kim, a registered nurse just barely out of college, greeted her employer at the door to the lounge. Pretty, blonde, and vivacious, the young woman had quickly garnered Dr. Gabi Reddick's friendship and loyalty.

Gabi rubbed the back of her neck wearily, pasting a welcoming smile on her face in spite of her exhaustion. Twelve hours on her feet with only five hours sleep the night before was not conducive to a healthy lifestyle. "Thanks." She walked out of the waiting area toward the examining room. Stepping inside, she closed the door behind her as she greeted her next patient. "Now, Mrs. Johnson, what can I do for you today?"

The slightly overweight mother of four shoved her oldest daughter forward with a glare. "I think Kate is pregnant."

Gabi's smile faded as she met her young patient's gaze squarely. "Kate, could that be possible?"

The teenager's lower lip trembled. "I'm not pregnant, Dr. Reddick, honestly."

"But you've been sleeping with the next door neighbor's boy." Mrs. Johnson inserted in a harsh tone of voice, making Gabi's skin crawl.

"Mama, I –" Kate tried to defend herself.

"You just shut up. Dr. Reddick, I want a pregnancy test done on her right away, and if she's pregnant, I want you to arrange for an abortion."

It was times like these when Gabi wished the clinic didn't count on community funds to stay open, and she could say what she wanted to say. "Mrs. Johnson, I will be happy to

perform a pregnancy test if that is your daughter's wish. However, if Kate is pregnant, what she chooses to do from there is out of my hands. I'm afraid I can't make an appointment for an abortion for your daughter without her consent, as she's eighteen."

"Don't make no difference," the woman screeched. "She's living under my roof, and as long as she is, she'll abide my rules. Ain't no child of mine going to tell me how things are going to be. My daughter will do as she's told."

Kate lowered her gaze, clasping her shaking hands together in front of her slender frame. "I'm not pregnant, Mama; so none of this talk is necessary."

The examining room door flew open, and Kim burst inside, her chocolate brown eyes wide with fear. "Dr. Reddick, we have an emergency out here."

Gabi removed her latex gloves and hurried toward the door. "Kate, Kim will be back to draw some blood for a pregnancy test, that is, if that's what you want." She gave her young patient time to refuse, but Kate remained silent. Gabi then directed her gaze back toward Mrs. Johnson. "We'll give you a call as soon as we have the results. I'm sorry to rush out like this. Please excuse me."

A man dressed in slacks and a bloody dress shirt leaned against the doorframe of the county clinic, one arm wrapped around a slumped body. The other hand held his badge to identify himself. "You've got to help me. My partner's been stabbed. He's bleeding everywhere."

Adrenaline pumping, Gabi raced forward, the five years she spent as an emergency room doctor rushing back. "Kim, get Dr. Ashton in here right away and call Blakewood General. Tell them we'll have a trauma for them as soon as we get him stabilized. Sir, what's your name?" She addressed the wounded man.

"His name is Jim. He's only had his shield two months, but he's good at it. This guy just caught him off guard. There's blood everywhere. I couldn't see where he'd been stabbed, but then I saw your clinic sign. Can you help him?"

"We're going to do our best, Detective. Why don't you have a seat?"

An older man with steel-gray hair approached from the hallway, a worried expression on his face. "Gabi, what do you have?"

"Stabbing. We need to stabilize him. Kim is already on the phone with Blakewood."

Snagging a nearby gurney, Dr. Ashton rolled it forward and somehow, between the two of them, with a little assistance from the shaking detective, they managed to get the injured man onto the stiff mattress.

"Blakewood is waiting for him." Kim slid her hands into latex gloves as she relayed the message.

"Good. Let's get these clothes off him so we can see where we are." Dr. Ashton instructed.

"Kim, shut that door." Gabi barked the order, her stethoscope already pressed against the victim's heart.

The examining room door snapped closed, leaving the detective alone in the waiting room with the plastic chairs and outdated magazines.

* * * * *

"I should have trusted my instincts on this one," Quinn berated himself, pressing the accelerator to the floor. "Jim wasn't ready to take cases yet. I should have put him on desk duty or something, anything." He swerved to avoid a bicyclist and restrained himself from blaring the horn. "Get on the damn sidewalk."

"Quinn, Jim's a detective. He wanted to be out on the street. That's why he went after his shield to begin with." Wade pressed the button to lower the window.

"He's too damn young."

Wade flicked a cigarette out into the late afternoon sunshine and nodded his agreement. "Or maybe we're just too old." He brushed an ash off his tie.

Quinn drummed his fingers on the dashboard, a testament to his agitation. "Maybe, but I'm not going to sit idly by while my detectives get picked off one by one. The rookies are going back into training first thing tomorrow morning. Jim wasn't prepared for this."

"Aw, hell, Quinn! I've been doing this for sixteen, seventeen years, and I don't know if I would have been prepared for it. I'd like to think I would, but there's that split second when fear can paralyze you."

"And in that second, you're screwed."

"It happens to all of us."

Quinn didn't acknowledge his friend's anger. "It shouldn't have happened to Jim."

Wade threw up his hands in defeat. "Sorry, I didn't know you were his keeper."

"He's my responsibility." Guilt settled around his neck like a heavy cross.

"According to you, the entire population of North Carolina is your responsibility. Give it a rest. We've been working on this case for weeks now. We're all tired and cranky, and the last thing Sam needs is for you to go barging in this clinic making stupid declarations just because you feel responsible for Jim's injury."

The words earned the detective a steely look. "Do you ever remember that I'm your boss?"

"Oh, I remember. I just don't happen to give a shit."

The unmarked Chevy surged forward with a burst of speed while Quinn continued to mutter self-deprecating comments.

* * * * *

"Sam, how is he?" Quinn slapped the detective on the shoulder in a gesture of comfort.

"I don't know, boss. They won't let me see him. They said they were going to move him as soon as they stabilized him, but no one's come out yet." Sam's voice broke as he relayed the information.

Seconds later, a petite woman wearing a blood-spattered white overcoat stepped out of the examining room. She tore off the jacket and tossed the garment into the biohazard bin, removing her plastic shields before approaching the three men.

A strange gurgle escaped Wade's throat in time with the hiss of Quinn's breath.

"Gabrielle? What in the hell are you doing here?" Staring into the face of his ex-wife, Quinn felt the blood rushing through his body, the same blood which had stagnated the day she'd left town.

Gabrielle met his gaze coolly. "I've been working with your detective."

"That doesn't answer my fucking question. What are you doing back in town?"

"This is my hometown, too, Quinn."

A frustrated breath escaped his lips. "And you picked a helluva time to come back with your hair color."

Her lips thinned. "I've been back for about three months. Now, Captain –" There was no mistaking the emphasis she placed on the word, as if she had every intention of keeping their relationship purely professional. "– your detective sustained numerous stab wounds to the chest and abdomen. Dr. Ashton and I did everything we could to stop the bleeding. Unfortunately, his injuries were just too severe. I'm sorry."

"Oh, God." Sam's knees buckled and he hit the floor. "He was too young! I should have been watching him better. This can't be happening!" Dropping his head to his arms, he sobbed like a small boy in pain while his fisted hands pounded the cold tile.

"Wade, take him outside," Quinn's instructed sharply. "I want to see him." He made the request a demand.

Gabrielle nodded, but her hesitation was evident in her next words. "We haven't had time to clean him up."

He gritted his teeth. "You know how long I've been doing this job, Gabi."

"Then follow me." Her soft-soled shoes barely made a sound against the tiled floor as she led the way to the examining room. Pushing open the door, she motioned to Kim with her head. "We'll give you some time. Kim –" She lowered her voice to a whisper which Quinn could still hear. "– call the coroner's office."

"Dammit, Jim, why couldn't you have been happy walking a beat? At least you would have still been alive." Lifting the sheet, Quinn inspected the body with the same methodical approach he gave to all his cases. And that's what Jim Brock had become...a case...a homicide.

Chapter Two

“Hey, crime wagon’s on its way. We’ve already cordoned off the alley. Sam didn’t get a look at the guy. It happened too fast.” Wade approached silently and placed his hand on Quinn’s shoulder before sighing heavily. “Are we getting too cold, Quinn? I mean, what does it say about us when we don’t fall apart like Sam just did?”

Quinn grimaced and tugged the sheet back into place. “It says we know we have a job to do.” He pulled in a deep breath. “Did you know she was back in town?”

“Not until today.”

“She’s got to get out of here.” The last thing Quinn needed was to have to worry about his wife becoming the next victim. Ex-wife. The word was too distasteful. He touched Jim’s cotton-covered shoulder before spinning on his heel. “I’m going to talk to Gabi, see if she can tell me anything other than what I’ve seen here. Let me know when Dr. Saunders gets here.”

“You thinking Jim was killed by the same guy, aren’t you?”

“We’re not even sure our killer is a guy, Wade. Let’s not make presumptions.” Bitterness laced his tone.

Wade winced. “Try to keep things civil in there, will you? We may just need Gabi’s expertise.”

“The only thing we need from Gabi is her departure.”

“You can’t protect everyone.”

Quinn left the examining room without responding. Wade knew him better than to continue the discussion anyway. Quinn rarely talked about Gabrielle...or the reason she’d left him three years ago.

And the last thing he wanted to do was think about it now.

* * * * *

In the middle of pouring herself a cup of coffee, Gabi sensed another presence in the room. Whirling around, she stifled a scream. "God, you scared the hell out of me!"

"I'm sorry." Quinn moved forward to rescue the cup of coffee from her shaking hand. "I suppose I should have announced my presence. Your instincts used to be better."

"Yeah, they've gotten a bit rusty since I'm not married to a detective any longer." She didn't apologize for the remark, though she saw it hit its intended target.

"I'm not here to fight with you, Gabi. I just wanted to talk about Detective Brock."

Keep it all about business. Wasn't that what she wanted? She couldn't be sure. The last thing she'd expected today was to come face to face with the man she'd been married to for eight years.

He still stood behind her, his scent invading her senses. Licking her lower lip, Gabi indicated a chair with her hand. "I'm afraid there's not much I can tell you other than what you already know. The injuries he sustained were just too traumatic. There was damage to his lungs, his heart, and his liver. Not too many men walk away from something like that." She sat down opposite him, keeping her head low to avoid looking at him.

Quinn leaned back in the plastic chair, one hand raking through his thick, black hair. "I'm sure you've been watching the news. Any woman with your hair color has." His gaze flicked to the crown of gold before dropping back to meet her solemn gaze. The intensity of his gaze unnerved her, but Gabi responded to his question as calmly as she could.

"Actually, I haven't. That's what my mother's for, but what does that have to do with this?"

"I think the guy who stabbed Jim is the guy we're looking for."

"You're assuming a man stabbed him."

His lips twisted. "I saw the wounds. A woman wouldn't have the strength to do that kind of damage. Besides that, his partner saw a male running away from the vicinity."

"And you're basing your belief that this man is the serial killer you've been looking for on what?"

"A hunch," he responded flatly.

"It's nice to see our state's dollars so hard at work." Gabi stretched, rolling her shoulders to relieve the tension. It was a slight dig, but it caused barely a flicker in Quinn's eyes.

He studied her for a long moment before continuing the conversation. "Did you notice anything? Anything at all? Even if you think it's insignificant? Anything Jim said or did while you tried to help him?"

Gabi frowned, her teeth worrying her lower lip. "He was unconscious when he was brought in and never woke up." Her brow wrinkled as she tried to concentrate. "The weapon used was a knife with a serrated edge, very lethal. Whoever killed your detective wanted him dead."

He shook his head, his eyes clouded. "Damn."

The way Quinn's shoulders hunched activated her sympathy button. Leaning in, she touched her hand to his. "I'm sorry."

Unexpectedly, he turned his hand over, pressing his palm against hers. "Why did you come back?"

Her breath shuddered out of her lungs, and she tugged her hand free. "Dr. Ashton needed help at the clinic."

"Your med school mentor." He inclined his dark head as he pushed himself to his feet. "Nice to know someone had the power to bring you back."

"Quinn, please –"

He held up a hand. "Never mind. Now isn't the time. This place is going to be very busy for the next couple of hours."

She struggled to comprehend his words. Her focus had drifted to the breadth of his shoulders and the unruly waves of hair framing a bronzed face. Professionalism demanded she respond to Quinn's statement, but hormones objected loudly. It had been too long since she'd felt his touch, and her body still craved it. Could he see the evidence in her eyes?

She finally managed to formulate an appropriate response. "We were getting ready to close up anyway. I just normally hang around to finish up some paperwork."

"I'll let you know when we're clearing out then." He gave her one last long look as if trying to decide whether or not he should say anything more. Then with a low curse, he turned on his heel and strode out of the small kitchenette.

A little relieved he'd left her alone, Gabi drew welcome breath into her lungs. She'd felt herself leaning in toward him the entire time he sat across from her, her body searching for the heat emanating from his.

God, he still had the same effect on her. But then, how could he not? With the same hard body and sexy eyes, he made her forget about the past, even if for a brief moment, and remember the times she'd spent in his arms. All the long nights they'd shared, and the mornings when –

"Gabrielle?" Wade cleared his throat, waiting for her to acknowledge him. How long had he been standing there?

Gabi looked up, her cheeks flushing. "Wade. It's nice to see you again, though I wish it was under better circumstances." She leaned forward and kissed his cheek. "How are Jen and the kids?"

"They're fine." He looked over his shoulder. "I know that must have been tough seeing him again."

Her face threatened to crack from the strain of the smile. "We're both professionals. I think we handled it quite well."

The disbelieving look in the detective's eyes made her shift uncomfortably. "Stop analyzing me, Wade. It was difficult, but Quinn and I both know –"

"Wade, it's time to go." The bark of Quinn's voice squelched further conversation.

Giving her an apologetic look, Wade started to back away. "You should call Jen. I know she'd love to see you again."

"I'll do that." Gabi responded, knowing fully well she wouldn't. She couldn't pick up the pieces of the past because Quinn was in every piece. Seeing him today, even briefly, was enough to last her another few years. She couldn't trust herself around him any longer than a couple of minutes. He still had the same effect on her.

"Take care of yourself, Gabi." The words brought her face up, and she stared into Quinn's vivid blue eyes.

"I've managed to so far."

"Yeah, I know." She heard the disappointment in his voice or maybe she was mistaken. Either way, it wasn't worth the time it would take to decipher. Quinn left, and she was alone again.

Just the way she liked it.

* * * * *

"He's changing." Those were Quinn's only words to Wade when he rejoined him inside the Chevy Caprice.

Wade's eyebrows lifted. "How so?"

"He definitely killed Jim."

Wade froze, pinning his friend with a disbelieving stare. "And you're certain of this?"

"Unless there's another guy using a dagger as his weapon of choice."

"But are we sure it was a dagger? I mean, did you mention this to Gabi? Maybe she has another take on the weapon."

"Weapon with a serrated edge." Quinn patted the front pocket of his shirt, seeking his cigarettes. Damn. He'd picked a helluva time to quit smoking. He considered bumming one off Wade but didn't want to hear the "I-told-you-so" bullshit.

"Damn," Wade breathed out, two fingers pinching the bridge of his nose. "So he's expanding his horizons to include men with no rhyme or reason, and we're no closer to catching the bastard than we were twenty-four hours ago."

"He's going to get sloppy; he's going to screw up."

"Yeah, but the question is when? How many more women in this town must die before we get lucky or he makes a mistake?"

"If I knew that, I'd be raking in the bucks as a psychic, now, wouldn't I?"

"Gabi shouldn't be here." The statement only served to make Quinn's jaw clench.

"She's an adult. She can come and go as she pleases." Just like when she'd left him. Just as beautiful as the day she'd walked out, Gabi had taken him by surprise today. How could she have been back in town for three months without his knowledge? As small as this town was, people talked. Maybe he just hadn't been listening.

Wade whistled. "You'd at least think she'd dye her hair."

"Gabi's never been one to believe that bad things can happen to her." His crotch tightening, Quinn shifted in the seat as Gabi's perfectly framed face danced in front of his eyes. With soft waves the color of wheat, full lips with just the barest hint of gloss, and those damned green eyes – fuck! He flicked on the turn signal and angled the car toward the center lane.

"I still say she should haul ass."

Was there a nice way to say shut the hell up? Couldn't his friend see the last thing Quinn wanted to talk about was Gabi? "She's got a job to do, I guess."

"She needs to think about her life," Wade muttered, retrieving the pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket.

"There are a lot of blondes left in this town, Wade. Maybe she's considering her odds."

The detective lit the cigarette dangling from his lips and took a deep drag, exhaling a spiral of smoke that lingered in the air. "That's playing Russian roulette, and it's stupid. She should have bailed out of here two victims ago."

Quinn rolled down his window before returning his hand to the steering wheel. "We can't make decisions for people. If they choose to stay, they know they're taking chances with their lives." How cavalier it sounded, but inside, his heart was as jittery as a trapped bird.

"Don't feed me that line of horseshit." Another puff of smoke tainted the air.

He slowed the Chevy to a stop outside the station house and killed the engine. "Look, I know what you're getting at, so before you start dragging up the past, don't. Gabi and I are no longer married, in case you've forgotten, and she's no longer my responsibility." The words even sounded like horseshit once spoken aloud.

Wade opened the passenger door and stepped out into the late evening sunshine, banging his knuckles on top of the car. "You going back to see her again?"

Quinn unrolled his six feet plus frame from the sedan and leaned his arms on the roof of the car, sliding his sunglasses to the top of his head. "Is English still your first language? I said don't."

"I saw her watching you. She misses you."

Quinn's brows lowered into a scowl. "God dammit, Wade, I don't want to talk about this."

Stubbing his cigarette out beneath the heel of his loafer, Wade shrugged. "Okay, fine, but now that you know she's back, you can't avoid this."

"There's nothing to avoid."

Wade started walking toward the entrance, pausing to toss a questioning look over his shoulder. "You coming?"

"I mean it. I don't want to talk about this any more."

Hands lifted in a gesture of surrender, Wade spun around to watch Quinn walk toward him. "You have my solemn promise." He slapped his friend on the back. "Hey, why don't we go grab a beer tonight? With Jenny out of town, it's going to be a long night. Besides, Sam could probably use the company."

If the truth were told, the last thing Quinn wanted to do was to trade stories with the guys tonight, but he found himself responding affirmatively anyway. Sam was a friend and for a friend, he would do just about anything. Almost as much as he would do for a wife...or an ex one.

Wade reached the office first and as he pushed open the door, he tossed a look over his shoulder. "Gabi really did look good, though, didn't she?"

"Too damn good," Quinn growled as he brushed past.

* * * * *

"Here ya go, fellas." The petite waitress wore too much makeup and not enough clothes as she leaned across the table and placed three frosty mugs of beer on the table. "Enjoy. And if you need anything else, my name's Lisa." With a coy smile and a suggestive wink, she sauntered away.

Quinn's elbows scraped the table. "How do you find these places, Wade?"

"Another one of my gifts."

Sam scooted his chair back as he slid his beer back and forth in front of him. "The doctor said Jim couldn't have suffered much." His voice broke. "She said it was quick." Swiping a hand across his face, he gave an abrupt laugh. "Did you notice how pretty she was? I did." As he stared off into space, he continued to talk. "How could I notice a beautiful woman when my partner is dying in my arms? What the fuck kind of man does that make me?"

Quinn leaned across the table, staring at the young detective he'd trained and mentored over the last three years. "What happened to Jim wasn't your fault."

"Yeah, I've been telling myself that for the last couple of hours. It hasn't worked yet."

"Hell, man, we've all gone through this at one point in our careers. Something tragic happens, and we blame ourselves." Wade lit another cigarette and exhaled before adding,

“Even though Jim was a rookie, there wasn’t anything you could have done to prevent this. From what you told us, it happened so fast, none of us could have protected him.”

“But I should have been watching him more closely.” Sam took a long swig of his beer before slamming the empty mug down on the scarred tabletop. “I know you guys are trying to help, but I really don’t think anything can help right now. I guess I just need some time to get over this.” The chair scraped away from the table as he pushed himself to his feet. “I appreciate the beer and the effort. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Why don’t you take the rest of the week off?” Quinn’s voice halted his exit, and all three men knew the question wasn’t really a question.

“I’d feel better if I could just work.”

“And I’d feel better if you took some time off. You have to go see psych anyway.”

Sam groaned heavily. “Oh, come on! I know it’s going to take me some time to get over this, but I’m not a head case.”

“I didn’t say you were, but it’s policy. Report to psych tomorrow morning at eight a.m. That’s an order, Detective.” Quinn hardened his voice.

Sam looked like he was about to argue then thought better of it. With a disgusted look on his face, he dropped back down into the empty chair. Lowering his voice, he met Quinn’s gaze. “How long have you known me?”

Quinn narrowed his eyes. “Almost ten years. Why?”

“Then you know me well enough to know I don’t deal very well with tragedy, but I do snap back eventually. Can’t you talk to psych and let them know I’ll be fine, that I don’t need –”

“No.” The word sliced out, the commanding officer talking to a detective under his command, not a friend talking to friend. “You heard my order, Detective Myers. You will report to psych tomorrow morning, and if you’re not there, I’ll personally haul your ass in. I’ll also collect your badge and your weapon while I’m doing it.” Then, relaxing his voice, Quinn leaned closer. “Sam, come on. Don’t make me do it like that. Show up, get it over with, and move on. You can’t fight policy. If I were in your position, I’d have to go, too.”

“He’s right.” Wade finally gave his two cents’ worth. “I’ve had to go through it, too. It’s not as bad as you think. Hell, it might even help you.”

Sam gave a derisive snort and got to his feet once more. “Fine, whatever. I’ll go, but make a note that it’s under duress.”

Quinn inclined his head. “Duly noted. I’ll make sure I jot that down in your personal file. Now, I’ll see you back at the station the first of next week.”

The young detective gritted his teeth. “Is that an order as well?”

“Do I need to make it one?”

“No, sir. See you next week, Quinn, Wade.” Spinning on his heel, Sam strode away.

"He'll get through this." Wade tried to sound positive.

"I hope so. I'd hate like hell to lose another good cop."

Wade's head came up with a jerk. "You wouldn't fire him over this."

"Only if he doesn't give me any choice." A long pause followed. "Just finish your beer. I'm ready to go home."

* * * * *

Gabi sank down onto the overstuffed sofa, leaning against the plush cushions with a sigh of relief. What a day. She really should call her mother. She hadn't heard from her all day, and the message light wasn't blinking on her answering machine.

Her hand lifted, reaching for the cordless phone. It rang, startling her so that she jerked her hand back, holding it against her body as if burned. Good grief, she was getting as jumpy as her mother. Allowing her heart a brief moment to return to normal rhythm, Gabi then answered the phone in what she hoped was a normal tone of voice. "Hello."

"Gabrielle, I'm sorry to bother you at home." Dr. Ashton's deep voice made her sit upright on the sofa.

"Is something wrong?"

A slight hesitation set Gabi's nerves on alert. "Is Kim with you?"

Gabi propped her feet on her coffee table. "No, I haven't heard from her or seen her since I left the clinic tonight. Why?"

"Her mother called me and said she hasn't come home yet."

She checked her watch, and though the time showed a little past ten, she pushed aside the little twinge of worry. Since the killings had begun, Kim had taken special care in protecting herself. "Maybe she's with Brad. He usually picks her up after work now."

Dr. Ashton gave a little sigh of relief. "Yes, that's probably it. Kim usually calls home, if she's going to be out late. Perhaps she forgot this time."

"I'm not surprised her mother would be worried, but I'm sure she's fine." Ringing off a few seconds later, Gabi replaced the receiver and slumped against the sofa, emotionally and physically drained. It had been a long day. And seeing Quinn hadn't helped.

Now she knew why her instincts had told her to remain in Nashville.

* * * * *

Quinn rolled over in the bed, one hand reaching for the snooze button. He jabbed it repeatedly, but the annoying sound didn't stop. It felt like he'd just gone to bed. Opening one bloodshot eye, he squinted at the digital clock. One a.m. He *had* just gone to bed. And the noise didn't belong to his alarm clock. Stretching across the bedside table, he flicked on the lamp and answered the phone. "Logan."

"We've got another victim," came Wade's gritty greeting.

Suddenly wide awake, Quinn pushed himself to a sitting position, the sheet dropping to his waist. "Where?" Snatching a pen, he jotted down the information. "I'll be there in ten minutes."

A light rain had just begun to fall when he reached the crime scene. Lifting the collar of his leather jacket closer around his neck, he ducked his head against the moisture and headed toward the taped area. "What have we got?"

"Same M.O. Young, beautiful blonde...except this one is a bit younger than his usual victims." Wade greeted his friend with a cup of coffee.

Quinn accepted the liquid sustenance with a relieved look, taking a healthy swallow before inclining his head toward the victim's body. "Anyone around?"

"She was in the park at one in the morning. There was no one around but the killer." Wade spat out a curse and waved one of the detectives over. "Bailey's gotten a better look at the body. Anything new?"

The young detective shook his head negatively. "I'm afraid not. Same as the last one."

Quinn didn't reveal his belief that the killer's last victim wasn't a blonde female, but he tossed his partner a look that shared volumes. "Thanks, Bailey. We'll see you back at the house." Hands wrapped around the Styrofoam cup, he moved away from the gathered group of law enforcement officers and medical personnel.

As expected, Wade followed. "Okay, so now he's gone back to his original plan, targeting blonde women. But why kill Jim to begin with?"

Quinn drained the last of the coffee and crushed the cup, frustration in every movement. "I don't know, and he *knows* we don't know. Was it just a means of saying, 'I can do this and you can't catch me?' Or is he going to start going after the men who are trying to catch him?"

Brushing a lock of damp, blond hair out of his eyes, Wade cursed. "Well, there's nothing quite like being clueless and a target. I don't know about you, but I don't intend on sitting idly by while this guy decides the best way to pick me off." He ground his teeth together. "Whoever this bastard is, he's good."

"Yeah, but even the best screw up every now and then. And when he does, we'll nail him and no, I don't intend on becoming his next victim. I've been doing this too long to die in the line of duty now," Quinn said stonily.

"Yeah, I know what you mean." Wade shivered as a cold drop of rain found its way inside the collar of his dress shirt. "In just a few short years, we'll be able to collect our measly pension and sit around wondering if what we did really make a difference."

"It didn't make a difference to her." Quinn's chin pointed toward the victim. "But it can make a difference to any potential targets. We *will* catch him. There's no doubt in my

mind about that. It's just all a matter of when and how many more women must die before it happens."

"Or men," Wade added under his breath.

Quinn heard. "We need to keep that to ourselves. We aren't sure if Jim's death was just a fluke. God knows the reasons this guy could have had for taking Jim out of the picture. Maybe he got too close."

"Or maybe he knew too much."

Chapter Three

Gabi didn't know what time she had actually crawled between the sheets. She only knew that it felt like a year since she'd gotten a good night's sleep. And now, at two in the morning, her phone rang again. Grappling for the receiver, she didn't even bother to sit up. Her eyes remained firmly closed. "Hello?" Her voice sounded husky and clearing her throat, she tried again. "Hello?"

"Gabrielle, it's Jack."

The ominous sound of Dr. Ashton's voice pushed Gabi up in the bed. All thoughts of sleep disappeared. "What's happened?"

"They've found Kim."

"They? Who's they?" An invisible fist squeezed her heart and in her mind, Gabi knew whoever *they* were, they didn't carry good news.

Dr. Ashton's voice cracked. "Kim."

"Oh, God." Gabi sank back against the pillows, clutching the phone against her breast for a brief moment before returning the receiver to her ear. "She's..."

"Dead."

The one word reverberated around in Gabi's brain while nausea twisted her stomach. "Dead? How? When?"

"The police just notified her mother, and Mrs. Abrams called me." He cleared his throat.

"Are they sure it's Kim? There are hundreds of women who look like her. They could be mistaken." Wild thoughts spun in Gabi's head as she desperately fought against the truth.

"They're sure. She had her driver's license."

Swallowing hard, Gabi gripped the phone tightly in one hand. “Have they...” Her voice broke, and she tried again. “Where was she found?”

“In the park.”

“Was it...was it the same guy?”

“From the looks of things, yes. Listen, I’m going with Mrs. Abrams since her husband is out of town.”

“I’ll go, too.” Gabi rolled out of the bed, the phone tucked next to her ear.

“Absolutely not! It’s not safe for you to be out now, Gabrielle.”

He was right, but that didn’t make the knowledge any easier. “I can’t just sit here.”

“Once I’ve brought Kim’s mother back home, I’ll call you. It will probably help if you come see her.”

Gabi’s knuckles whitened. “Yes, of course. Tell her whatever she needs...well, you know what to tell her.” Hadn’t they both used the same speech time and again when confronting families who’d just lost loved ones? They knew all the appropriate words, the expression of sympathy. It was ingrained into them in medical school, during their internship, and intensified when they lost their first patient.

“Gabrielle?”

“I’m sorry. I’m just –”

“I know. So am I. Look, I need to get going. I’ll call you.”

Gabrielle didn’t remember if she responded or not before she disconnected the call. Numbly, she sat on the edge of her bed and stared at the wall with its picturesque painting of Paris. Kim had always wanted to go to France.

“Damn!” She slung the phone at the picture just as the tears began.

* * * * *

Just past eight. Gabi flicked another glance at the old-fashioned clock hanging above her desk. The clinic had closed an hour ago, but she couldn’t bring herself to go home just yet. She’d moved through the day in a daze, putting one foot in front of the other, while, inside, a part of her soul cried out.

The knowledge of Kim’s death had reached the neighborhood by the time Gabi had opened the clinic, and all day long, she’d been fielding questions from concerned patients. The lobby overflowed with flowers and plants – the outpouring of love and grief.

A loud tap sounded on her door, and she jumped, bumping her knee against the corner of her desk. Muffling a curse, she nursed the sore spot. “Come in.”

Dr. Abrams poked his head inside. “Hey, it’s past quitting time. Why aren’t you on your way home?”

She flicked the edge of a file folder. “Oh, you know. Paperwork.”

His shrewd gaze fell to the top of her neat desk. "I know. It doesn't feel the same."

Swallowing hard, Gabi shook her head. "No, it doesn't." Forcing herself to stand, she managed a smile. "You should be home by now yourself."

"I'll walk you out."

"No. That isn't necessary. I won't be here much longer, but there are a couple of more things left I'd like to do before I leave."

A frown marred Dr. Abrams' face. "I don't like the idea of you leaving alone."

She could see by the set look on his face he wasn't about to go anywhere until he was sure she was safe and sound. With a brisk nod, she lifted her purse. "You're right. There's nothing here that can't wait until tomorrow."

He breathed out a sigh of relief. "Great."

Walking past the tiny area that served as the nurse's station brought a lump of grief to Gabi's throat. She and Dr. Abrams had considered closing the clinic that day, but ultimately, had decided Kim wouldn't have wanted that. She cared for the neighborhood and its poverty-stricken citizens.

Gabi slid behind the wheel of her Camry and sent her colleague yet another weak smile. "Well, I guess I'll see you tomorrow."

He gave her a two-fingered salute before walking away.

Moving on autopilot, Gabi put the key in the ignition and started the engine. But she didn't move. Instead, she rested her head against the steering wheel and allowed the tears she'd been holding back all day to trickle down her face. A sudden rapping on the driver's side window brought a scream, and she shrank back against the leather upholstery.

"Gabi, it's me. Roll down the window."

Quinn's thunderous voice lowered her blood pressure marginally. Pressing the button to lower the window, she leaned forward to blast him with her anger. "What in the hell are you doing sneaking up on me like this?"

"What in the hell are you doing here this late at night?"

"It's eight o'clock. That's hardly late, Quinn."

"Well, I thought you had better fucking sense than this! Didn't you learn anything when we were married?" His voice rose another octave, and he yanked open the car door. Reaching inside, he hauled her to her feet. "You've got no business being out at night by yourself."

"Regardless of what's going on, I still have a clinic to run."

"Let doctor whatever-his-name-is run it. I'm sure he can handle it by himself, and considering he's not a blond, he's got nothing to worry about."

She focused her attention on Quinn's face, and the full brunt of her anger sparked in eyes the color of polished emeralds. And for a brief moment, he lost his train of thought. She'd always been able to do that to him. Just one look, and his insides melted. Fuck. They shouldn't be melting now. They were divorced, for God's sake.

"These people here depend on me. No matter what you may think of this free clinic, it's necessary. My patients couldn't survive without it."

"They can for a few days."

"Oh, you have a timeline for catching this killer then?"

The remark brought the blood flow back to his brain. She could always get under his skin. "I'm just saying you shouldn't be out and about."

"So are you going door to door telling all the other blondes in town to stay inside, or am I just the lucky one?"

"I shouldn't have to tell you. There is a killer out there stalking blonde women, and here you sit in a dark parking lot by yourself!" He let out a sharp breath and scrubbed the back of his neck with one hand. "Look, you might think you're safe, but all this psycho sees is that gorgeous blonde hair of yours, and I doubt he'll stop to check your driver's license for your age."

Gabi's eyes narrowed. The snide remark hadn't gone unnoticed. "You always were such a gentleman, Quinn. How could I have forgotten that about you?" One foot hooked inside her car, she angled her body toward the seat, but his hand clamped down on one of hers, holding her captive. "Stay home, Gabi. I mean it."

Her eyes iced over, and she peeled his fingers away from her hand. "Thanks for the tip. I'll try to remember that. Maybe you should write a pamphlet for helpless women. God knows you've helped so many of us."

His jaws ached as he ground his teeth together. "I know you're grieving right now, but you have to think smart. You can't set yourself up to be this asshole's next victim. There's nothing you can do for Kim now, but there is something you can do for yourself. Get yourself out of the line of fire."

"I will." She straightened her skirt over her knees and turned toward the steering wheel.

"Be careful." He lowered his voice, the words a quiet warning.

For a brief moment, anger warred with uncertainty on her face. She opened her mouth to speak, but Quinn's next words had her clamping her mouth shut fast. "I'd hate like hell to have to zip a body bag over that beautiful face."

"Bastard."

He tipped two fingers against his temple in a mocking salute. "Call me what you want as long as you're alive to do it." He stepped away from the car, allowing her to slam the door.

Quinn returned to the car where Wade sat waiting. "You don't really think she's in danger, do you?"

"I'm not sure, but something didn't feel right out there." Quinn started the ignition, allowing his hand to rest on the gearshift for a brief moment before shifting into reverse. "But then, maybe all this has made me paranoid."

"Hey, there's nothing wrong with a little paranoia if it saves your ass." Wade's gaze slid toward the window, and he managed to stifle a shiver. "This fucker's making us all a little jumpy." He flicked an ash out the window.

"We've got to find this bastard." The words didn't need to be said. "I just hope Gabi goes straight home, but just to be on the safe side..." He picked up the receiver.

"If she finds out you checked up on her, she'll turn your balls into granola."

Quinn lifted one shoulder in a shrug. "That's a chance I can take."

* * * * *

Gabi sensed someone following her long before she saw the headlights illuminating her rearview mirror. A prickly feeling of unease tiptoed down her spine. Stepping on the gas, she urged the car forward and into her driveway, pressing the release on the garage door opener. She felt somewhat safer as she slowed to a stop inside the two-car garage.

Bright headlights slid across the floor of her garage, and she could just make out the silhouette of a man behind the wheel before the older model Chevy screeched down the road, disappearing around the bend in the road.

"I might have known," she mumbled aloud, feeling some satisfaction as she watched the garage door slide down to meet the concrete. "Quinn. Arrogant ass."

Inserting the key into the lock, she pushed open the side entrance door just as the telephone rang. She answered on the fourth ring. "Hello?"

The dial tone sounded in her ear.

She shivered as she lowered the receiver back into the cradle. Damn, she was getting paranoid. Helped, no doubt, by Quinn's ominous words of warning.

* * * * *

The lights went out. She must have gone to bed. The man lowered the night vision goggles and smiled, one hand pushing a lock of thick hair away from his face. He didn't kid himself. She would treat him no differently than the rest of the women in the world. She wouldn't give him the time of day if she passed him on the street. He deserved respect, dammit, but none of them would give it to him. Well, she would be next in a long line of women that would be sorry they hadn't noticed him.

Chapter Four

Gabi sat on the edge of her bed, the .357 Magnum resting on her thigh. She didn't move until the doorbell pealed, resounding throughout the house. She jumped, leaping to her feet. The gun clutched against her breastbone, she made her way down the stairs. Reaching the front door, she leaned against the side panel. "Who is it?" Cold, clammy fear clawed its way up her spine as she waited for the answer. Surely, the killer wouldn't be so bold as to ring her doorbell...would he?

"Quinn." The deep voice reassured her, and she swung open the front door, barely resisting the urge to fling herself into his arms. He looked so strong, invincible, and he'd been the first person she knew to call after the phone call that morning.

His dark gaze dropped to the weapon in her hand and he took a step back. "What are you doing with that?"

Her gaze followed his, and she stared at the gun, as if noticing it for the first time. "Oh, I didn't even realize I had carried it downstairs. Come in."

"I will, but could you just let me hold that for now?" Hand extended, Quinn extracted the loaded Magnum from her grasp. He deftly removed the clip and tucked the gun in the waistband of his jeans. Then, he ushered her back into the house, kicking the door shut behind them. "I meant, what are you doing with the gun at all? What happened? My sergeant said you didn't make a lot of sense on the phone." He slid the deadbolt into place.

Gabi bit her lip, debating how much information she should give him. He would try to make her leave her home. Maybe she should leave. But then, it came back to the question she'd been tossing around in her mind for the last hour or so...where would she go? She wouldn't put her family in danger. Presenting her back to Quinn, she clutched her hands in front of her and took a deep breath. "I got a phone call earlier."

He caught hold of her shoulders and turned her to face him. "From?"

"It was him." The moment she said the words aloud, she felt the blood run through her veins as cold as a mountain stream, and for a brief second, she swayed on her feet. Only Quinn's hands kept her steady.

"How do you know it was him?" No emotion filtered into his voice, and were it not for the flash of anger Gabi saw in his eyes, she would wonder if he really believed her.

"It's on the tape."

"The tape?"

Cold fingers curling into fists, she nodded. "I still use an answering machine. I know most people use voice mail, but I like to be able to screen calls. Sometimes, being a doctor, I can get strange calls, and I like to be able to –"

Quinn took hold of her shoulders and gave her a slight shake. "Gabi, where's the answering machine?"

"It's on the table in the hall." She indicated the general direction with a toss of her head. "Listen to it if you want." Not wanting to hear the sinister words again, she hurried into the living room.

* * * * *

Quinn wasn't sure he really wanted to hear the voice that would confirm his suspicions that Gabi had become the killer's next victim of choice. But his badge overruled his indecision, and he pressed the rewind button. As the tape whirled back to the start, he tossed a glance in the direction Gabi had gone. "You all right?" No answer. The machine clicked on, and the ominous words flowed into the room. Though brief, the message rang unmistakably clear.

The killer had chosen his next victim.

With a low curse, Quinn stopped the tape and spun around. "Gabi?"

She sat curled on the sofa, legs tucked beneath her. She'd crossed both arms over a pillow that was pressed tightly against her chest. "I was right, wasn't I? It was him."

Protect her at all costs. The words resounded in his brain before he could speak. "I...can't be sure of that. It could be a copycat, someone who knows you and is trying to scare you. We don't have the killer's voice on tape, so there's not really a sure way to know. What I *do* know is that I want to get you out of here...now." He approached her, watching the conflicting emotions crossing her face.

He softened his voice. "You can't stay here now. You know that. Even if this is someone playing a sick game, we can't take chances that this guy doesn't know where you live. I'm going to take the tape to our lab, and on the way, I'm taking you to a safe house. You'll be protected until we can catch –"

"Quinn, stop." Gabi pushed herself to her feet, tossing the pillow aside. "I'm not going to hide from him. If it's really the killer, that's what he wants...to send me into hiding. Well,

he's not going to win. I'm going to live my life, and when and if he strikes, I'll be ready for him."

"How? How will you be ready? You think because you have a gun that makes you ready to face a killer? How do you know those other women weren't armed? He doesn't strike face to face, Gabi. He comes from behind you when you're least expecting it. You aren't trained to deal with a killer, and no amount of kickboxing, armament, or determination will help you when he attacks. He knows when and how to catch you." Quinn sharpened his voice to convey the urgency of his explanation.

"I know what you're saying, but please try to understand. I can't run from him."

"I'm not asking you to run from him."

"You're asking me to hide."

"No, I'm telling you to hide." Three steps brought him to her side, and he took hold of her arms. Her skin felt so soft beneath his palms. "This isn't a game of chance. You're getting out of here."

"I'm not going anywhere." She refuted his statement with a stubborn toss of her long, blonde hair.

"Dammit, Gabi. I don't want you to be his next victim."

"Yes, I suppose that wouldn't look good on your statistic report, would it?"

A harsh expletive told her exactly what he thought of those reports. "I don't care about the paperwork. I care about what happens to you."

"I can't let him change my life."

"Would you rather him end it?" He knew he had a small window of opportunity to make her see reason, to understand this was more than just a threat.

Gabi sucked in a sharp breath. Her hands clasped his forearms, and her face paled. "I've never been a target before."

"I won't let anything happen to you."

"Don't make promises you might not be able to keep."

His arm snaked around her waist, pulling her tightly against his lean frame. "I can keep it. Trust me."

"It looks like I have no choice but to trust you." She melted into his arms, resting her head on his chest, and for a brief moment, Quinn allowed himself to remember the past. And the memories this time were welcome.

"That's not such a bad thing, is it?"

Nimble fingers toyed with the buttons on his shirt. "I have to continue with things as normal...for my own sanity."

He released a sigh that was part irritation and part acceptance. She'd always had a stubborn streak. Years hadn't diminished it. "If you won't leave, I'll place an officer inside your house and two outside."

"Knock it off. You don't have the manpower for that."

"I'll do it anyway." Quinn's voice brooked no argument.

She tilted her face upwards. "But why? Why would you do it anyway? Don't tell me you do this for every person whose life is in jeopardy. This can't be standard procedure."

"I don't want anything to happen to you." His hands cupped her face, his thumbs stroking her cheeks. Though he knew the words would cost him, he said them anyway.

"Quinn, don't. What we had –"

"You mean our marriage?" Yeah, he should have kept his mouth shut.

"No, I mean our feelings for each other. Stop putting words into my mouth."

His hands fell to his side, clenching into fists. "It's called love, Gabi, not feelings. Feelings is the word people use who don't really give a shit about each other any more, but they're trying to pretend they do."

She swallowed hard. "I don't want to talk about this."

"Of course you don't. That's why you walked out."

"I walked out because you pushed me away!" The words ended on a shout which brought instant silence. For a long moment, they simply stared at one another, each trapped in their own memories of the past.

Quinn inhaled slowly, reaching out for the composure which eluded him when Gabi was anywhere near. "Look. It's not doing us any good to talk about this now. We need to focus on keeping you safe."

Hesitantly, Gabi reached out and placed one palm against his chest, exactly over his heartbeat. Just as she used to after they'd had an argument. He'd never asked her why. It didn't matter because the action soothed him as much as it did her. "I know, but –"

"Good." He interrupted her with a quick, gentle kiss. "Now –" He looped his arm around her waist and guided her toward the sofa. "– why don't you have a seat while I call Wade? It'll only take me a minute or two."

"And then what?" Out of the corner of his eye, he saw her touch two fingers to her lips, and his body betrayed him.

On a muffled curse, he presented his back to her. "Let's just take this one step at a time."

"Are you planning on staying here all night?"

Sweet Jesus. She wasn't making this any easier. The thought of night brought images his mind didn't need to encourage his body. *Focus, Logan. You have a job to do.* But right

now, career instincts warred with his masculine instincts. He wanted to stay and not simply as the role of protector. "As a matter of fact I am."

She stared at him, nibbling on her lower lip. "You can't be serious."

"Do I look serious?"

"The manpower you were talking about was yourself?"

"Why not?"

"Because you can't babysit me."

"I don't look upon it as babysitting, and –" He raised a hand. "– before you try to talk me out of it, you might as well know my mind is made up. I'm staying here tonight."

Gabi sat back down on the edge of the sofa and folded her hands in her lap. "I don't think I've ever been this scared before."

He would never say aloud he was scared for her, too. His mind shut out images of Gabi's lifeless body lying on the cold, wet ground. Retracing his footsteps to her side, he knelt down in front of her. An unsteady hand lifted to brush her soft, blonde hair. "Try not to worry. I'll take care of you."

She lifted her head, the touch of a smile playing about her lips. "You always knew how to bully your way into a yes, didn't you?"

He returned the smile. "It's one of my many gifts."

"You might regret this hasty decision later. Someone once told me I was high maintenance."

Quinn winced a little. "Proving that women really do remember everything." He dipped his head and tasted her lips before their words could dredge up any more of the past. "In case you've forgotten, I don't make hasty decisions, just informed ones."

"Are you sure this is a good idea...your staying here tonight?"

His body responded with a resounding yes. "There's no way I'd leave now."

"This is just for tonight, though, right?"

With a wink, he climbed to his feet. "Trust me." In those few moments, the last few years fell away, and they were together again, man and wife, their lives united. The memories damned him to a sleepless night, which was a good thing considering he was the only guard in place.

"You know, I've never really doubted your ability to do your job." Her voice lowered. "Just your dedication to anything else."

Damn. There came the torpedo. His choices were limited. Ignore it or reenact the battle they'd had time and time again during the last year of their marriage. This time, he needed a clear head. No emotion. In fact, he needed to be exactly the type of man Gabi had always labeled him. A cold, arrogant bastard.

Her life depended on it.

“Why don’t I make some coffee? It’s going to be a long night?” With those words, the situation diffused, and Gabi got to her feet, an apologetic smile on her face.

“I’ll do it.” As she walked around him, she slid her hand over top of his, a familiar gesture which tightened his gut.

Suddenly, he wasn’t so sure this was an informed decision, after all.

* * * * *

As night closed in and settled around the house, Gabi found herself pacing back and forth in front of the floor to ceiling windows, her mind racing. What if he was out there? What if he was watching her, could see everything she did, hear everything she said?

“This isn’t going to help.” Quinn walked into the living room, a snifter of brandy in each hand. “I brought you something to drink. As edgy as you are, you could use something stronger than coffee.”

The thick carpeting muffled her footsteps as she crossed the distance to him. She reached out, one hand closing around the stem of the snifter. Her fingers connected with his, and a tingle of awareness skated down her spine. Like always. Quickly, she lifted the glass out of his grasp. “Thanks.”

He rested a hand on her shoulder for a quick moment, the touch meant to reassure. “You’re welcome. Why don’t you sit down and try to relax?”

“Easy for you to say.” Her free hand curled into a fist.

“Look, I get paid to pace and be on edge. You don’t.” His hand at the small of her back, he guided her toward the sofa. “Besides, my presence is supposed to reassure you. So sit.”

She obeyed. “I just keep thinking there’s someone out there.”

Settling in beside her, he rested his hand on her knee. “I’ve already checked the perimeter of the house, Gabi. No one’s out there.”

“But what if you missed him?”

“I didn’t.”

She gritted her teeth. “How can you be so damned confident?”

“I’m surprised you have to ask that.”

“Here it comes.”

Muscled shoulders lifted in a shrug. “I won’t deny I’m good at what I do.”

“Then you’ve never made a mistake?”

He tilted his head. He looked deep in thought, as if trying to recall a specific time when he might have actually made an error. Then, his face relaxed and he shook his head. “Nope. Not on the job.”

"Thanks for adding that clarification." Fear tightened her nerves and fed her need to strike out.

"Marriage takes two, Gabi." She sucked in a sharp breath, but he silenced her retort with a lifted hand. "Before this becomes World War Three, why don't we talk about something else? Preferably something to take your mind off all this."

Gabi took a sip of the brandy, her face contorting with a grimace. "I'd forgotten how much I dislike this stuff."

"You never were much of a drinker."

Just that one sentence snapped her out of the present and into the past. "You used to tease me about not being able to hold my liquor."

He made a rumbling sound in the back of his throat that sounded like laughter. "I remember, but –" He rolled his head on the sofa to look at her. "– I did like you drunk."

"Because I was quiet?"

"No." His teeth flashed in a grin. "Because alcohol always made you horny."

A burst of laughter split the tension. "Trust you to remember that." Still laughing, she settled the snifter on the table next to the sofa. "I haven't told Mom and Dad about this."

"How about Jake?"

A busy architect with a family of his own, Jake had always been her tower of strength...until Quinn had come along and usurped the position. "No. He would just storm over here and try to protect me. It's better this way. Knowledge could put him in danger."

"True." Quinn settled back against the cushion. "But sometimes, a lack of knowledge can be just as dangerous."

"I don't want any member of my family involved." Climbing back to her feet, she resumed her pacing.

"I didn't say I was going to tell them. For now, we'll keep it between us and the police department."

She accepted his promise at face value, relaxing only marginally. "So now that we're talking about innocuous subjects. Have you seen Sandy or Ben lately?"

Covering a yawn with the back of his hand, Quinn nodded. "Just saw Ben a couple of months ago. You know he and Beth have three kids now, don't you?"

His words created a little ache in the pit of her stomach. Once, she'd been very close with his brother's wife, but once her marriage to Quinn had ended, loyalty had reduced the friendship to little more than stilted conversations on the phone at Christmas and an occasional birthday card. "The last time I talked with her, she was pregnant."

He sat up straighter. "I didn't know the two of you still kept in touch." His head dropped as he twirled the brandy snifter between two fingers. "Beth never told me."

"It was probably best she didn't." She took a deep breath and expelled the truth. "And I never asked about you."

"That's brutally honest."

"Did you ever ask about me? I know my parents have said they've missed seeing you."

"Yeah, well, I've been busy."

Gabi stopped at the window. "You don't have to explain. We shouldn't have to explain our lives to one another. We've both moved on, and that's what divorced people are supposed to do."

He pushed himself to his feet. "Gabi." He moved to stand behind her. "You're going to be all right."

She shivered. When had she become a victim? "He's out there somewhere."

"Yes, he is, but he's not here."

She turned, her gaze flickering to his face. "But if that really was him on the tape, he will be."

"And I'll be waiting for him."

She touched his cheek with her fingertips. "I want to believe that."

His eyes darkened to a smoky black. "If you can't believe anything else, believe this. I will protect you." His knuckles drew a line from her cheek to her chin. "Trust me when I tell you that the only way anyone will get to you is through me, and call it cocky if you want, but that's not such an easy thing to do."

She managed a shaky smile before standing on tiptoe to brush his lips with hers. "I'd better go make sure the guest room is ready." Slipping out of his embrace, she hurried away.

She'd wanted to say more, but the longer she stayed in the same room with him, the more likely her chances of yielding to the desire building between them. Though they'd had a rocky marriage at the end, sex hadn't been one of their problems.

As she carried a handful of blankets into the guest room, she almost groaned aloud when the cool air peaked her nipples, pushing the aching tips against the fabric of her blouse. Just standing in a room with Quinn was enough to make her hypersensitive. Knowing he would be sleeping two doors away would be torture.

Leaning her head against the door frame, she cursed. She wanted her simple life back – the daily routine of coffee and bagels, driving to the clinic, working too many hours, before coming home to collapse on the sofa until she fell asleep before the eleven o'clock news. Life before she'd run into Quinn again – the very reason why she'd resisted Dr. Ashton's request to return to begin with.

Because she could resist Quinn Logan three hundred miles away, but three feet away was another story altogether.

* * * * *

If Wade thought Quinn crazy for spending the night with Gabi, he hadn't said so. But as Quinn settled down for the night in the spare bedroom, he began to think so himself. What had he been thinking? Did he actually believe that he could lie just two doors down from her and sleep?

Instead, his damned fine memory was recalling exactly what it was that Gabi wore to bed each night. Nothing. Bare skin. And his cock had maintained an erection since he'd slipped beneath the sheets that smelled like fresh rain.

Punching the down pillow for what must have been the tenth time, he rolled to his side and squeezed his eyes tightly shut, determined to give it an honest effort. Seconds later, they popped open in perfect synchronization with an ominous creak. Instantly, he rolled to his feet, stuffing his legs into his discarded jeans. Then, with 9mm in hand, he crept to the door. Releasing the safety catch, he flattened himself against the wall, his free hand turning the doorknob.

As he stepped out into the hallway, his peripheral vision caught the faint glow of a light. His finger tensed on the trigger. "Gabi?" He kept his voice soft so as not to alarm her.

"Quinn?" She rounded the corner, a glass of milk in one hand, the remote control in the other. Her gaze landed on the gun in his hand, causing her to release a scream and the cup of milk. "What is it? Did you hear something? Is he here?" Her head whipped around as she fired the questions at him.

Hastily tucking the weapon in the waistband of his jeans, he hurried toward her. "It's all right. He's not here. I heard a noise and just came out here to check it out. Unfortunately, you were the noise." His hands found her arms, squeezing slightly for reassurance.

"Well, you checked it out all right, and you scared the hell out of me in the process." Pulling away from him, she retreated to the kitchen, dropping the now empty cup into the sink. Tearing several paper towels off the roll, she returned to the puddle of milk and stooped down to mop up the spreading stain on the carpet.

Quinn squatted down beside her. "What are you doing up at this hour anyway?" His hands stilled hers.

"Sometimes, when I can't sleep, I watch television until I get sleepy. Is that all right with you?" She pushed herself back to her feet and stalked back into the den.

"I don't remember that about you before," he called after her, scooping up the paper towels. He carried them into the kitchen and tossed them. The faint scent of vanilla tickled his nostrils. Gabi had always loved that smell, but the familiarity of it now caused his gut to clench.

"Some things have changed."

He barely heard the words and wondered if she'd meant him to. "You never were a very pleasant insomniac. I do remember that." Following her, he watched the sway of the

silky robe around her legs as she crossed the floor to retrieve the remote from the top of the entertainment center. Instincts told him to run like hell. He ignored them.

Gabi plopped down onto the sofa, her legs tucked beneath her. Aiming the remote at the big screen television, she resumed surfing channels before finally settling on a classic black and white romance. "No one asked you to endure my company," she finally responded.

Quinn recognized the defense mechanism. "You don't have to be afraid, Gabi. That's why I'm here."

She gave a short laugh. "Yeah, right. I've got a lunatic killing out on the streets, and now he's telling me I'm next. You're waving a gun at me at three in the morning, and I'm not supposed to be scared?"

Placing his 9mm on the table to the side of the sofa, he seated himself on the lower end, scooting her legs out of the way. "What are we watching?"

"We aren't watching anything. *I*, on the other hand, am watching a movie. Shouldn't you be asleep? You should be at your best just in case the big, bad wolf decides to make his move tonight." Lifting the remote, she muted the television to glare at him.

Quinn rested his head against the plush cushion, the grin still curving his lips. "I'm at my best ninety-nine point nine percent of the time."

"And I guess you're sleeping the other point one percent."

He shrugged. "Actually, I didn't want to appear too confident, so I knocked off a tenth of a point."

"God, I should have made you go home."

"You couldn't have made me go home."

Her gaze shot to his face before dropping down to his naked chest, and heat rushed up her cheeks. Had the sight of his body always caused such riotous urges? "Go back to bed. As you can see, I'm perfectly safe."

His hand caught her feet, drawing them into his lap. "Well, not perfectly safe." One fingertip traced an indelible pattern in the sole of one bare foot. She shivered and tried to pull her leg up, but his hand was quicker, already making its way up her calf.

He heard the slight intake of her breath. "Is this part of your plan to keep me safe?"

White teeth flashed in a grin. "No, but I've always been one to improvise." His hand had made it to her thigh.

Her breath caught again, and she shifted restlessly on the sofa. "You should stop that."

"Really? Why should I?" The husky rumble of his voice sent a tingle down her spine. He lifted her leg, pressing warm lips against the sensitive skin just above her knee. "Have I ever told you how beautiful your legs are?"

Gabi struggled to breathe, and he wanted her to think?

His lips traveled farther up her leg, his hand pushing aside the afghan. He paused to press a kiss against the diamond-shaped birthmark on her thigh before continuing his journey. He reached the band of her French-cut panties. His lips followed the lace, moistening the golden skin. "I want you, Gabi."

Was she still breathing? "I know." And she wanted him. No, it was much more than want. She craved him, desperately needed to feel his hands sliding over every inch of her skin, quenching the gnawing ache between her thighs.

His fingertips grazed her mound. "Do you really want me to stop?"

Gabi's hands dropped to his head, her fingers sliding through the thick expanse of ebony hair. She knew a myriad of reasons why he should stop, why she should make him return to the guest bedroom, but for the life of her, she couldn't think of one.

Rational thought ceased as his fingertips hooked in the waistband of the creamy silk. She didn't know why she lifted her hips. Her lungs ached from lack of oxygen. Every inch of her skin was on fire. In the far corners of her mind, her conscience told her to stop him, but she heard her lips form another response, a thickly murmured "no."

The panties slid over her hips, down her thighs. His lips moved over, grazing her abdomen, the tops of her thighs. The remote control dropped to the floor with a dull thump neither noticed. His hands grasping her hips, Quinn tugged her down flat against the cushions. His hand skimmed up her knee, and he caught the edge of her panties, freeing them from her ankles. They followed the path of the remote control.

Quinn rested his forehead against her stomach, and the heat of his mouth caused her to squirm. She fisted her hands in his hair and waited, anticipating. He raised his head slightly to catch a glimpse of her face. "I want to eat you," he whispered.

The words shot down her spine like an electrical spark. She knew her eyes widened to the size of dual satellite dishes. No other man had ever made such a bold statement to her, both announcing his intentions and asking for permission at the same time. This was the Quinn she remembered. Demanding. Exciting.

He didn't wait for a response. Instead, he drew one finger up her thigh, grazing it over the folds of her damp pussy.

Gabi sighed and adjusted her hips on the sofa, giving her more room to open her legs. He dropped his knees to the floor and draped one of her legs over his shoulder.

She braced herself, the muscles of her abdomen clenching in anticipation. His tongue slid over her crease, and her breath escaped her lungs in a long exhale. Still another lap and Gabi began to squirm.

Quinn pushed his face closer, and his tongue went wild, both torturing and tantalizing her clit. He feasted on the delicate morsel of flesh, making her back arch off the sofa. Her thighs quivered, and she felt his fingers sinking deep into her cleft while he suckled her.

The orgasm punched her, making her gasp aloud and cry his name. She bucked and rocked while Quinn made animal noises in the back of his throat. Even when the release waned, he didn't stop, licking every inch of her sheath until the second climax tore through her.

Gabi twisted the thick strands of his hair around her fingers and began to pull. "Fuck me," she demanded. "Fuck me now." It had been too long since she'd felt his body sinking into hers, his cock stretching her, filling her. If there was one thing their marriage had, it was great sex.

He slid up her damp body, taking his time to examine her belly button with his tongue and tease her nipples with his teeth. By the time his mouth touched hers, Gabi felt the fire spreading through her limbs again. Her hands skated across his spine, kneading the firm skin. One fingernail traced each vertebrae, and she felt a shiver go through his body.

He caught her face in his hands, ebony eyes searing into hers. Heat flashed between them, and he slanted his mouth across hers, the kiss possessive, intense, robbing both of breath and thought. His tongue boldly challenged hers, swirling across the sensitive buds.

She tasted her own essence, the kiss seducing her into a mindless trance. She wanted to touch him, hold him, feel him possessing her. Her hands found their way down to the waistband of his jeans, deftly releasing the button. Her knuckles grazed the flat plane of his stomach, and his muscles tensed.

Lifting his body away from hers, Quinn shook his head. "Not yet."

Gabi gave him a look of confusion. "What?" She couldn't imagine what else he had in mind until he turned her over on the couch. The cushions shifted, forcing her ass higher into the air. As she lay there exposed, she closed her eyes, fisted her hands, and waited.

He edged his way back down her body without answering her question. His tongue glided over a seemingly endless expanse of creamy skin, bequeathing a glistening wetness soon kissed by the heated air. His hands framed her thighs, kneading the firm muscles beneath the callused palms.

Gabi burned, her breaths coming in short, staccato puffs of air. Her toes dug into the cushions, and then she felt the first touch of his lips on her ass. She shivered. He licked the crease between her cheeks, and she moaned. Then, he parted those full globes and began a delicious assault on her self-control. He stabbed at the tiny opening before gliding his tongue down to sip at more of her juices.

She buried her face in the cushion, pleading silently. Her mind whispered his name over and over, and with one more stroke, she shattered, the powerful climax encompassing her, seeming to rend her into millions of tiny pieces. Sweet perfection. Like never before.

With a shaky gasp, she rolled, his hands assisting her. She was hot and weak, her body no more than a pool of melted wax, and before she could regain her breath, Quinn rose up over her body again.

He climbed atop her, the roughness of his jeans chafing her sensitized legs. With irritation, she pushed at the denim material, wanting it gone. Her hands struggled to find him.

“Hold on, baby,” he whispered, the glow of the television screen casting a faint light over his taut features. Rolling to his feet, he quickly removed the offending jeans before rejoining her.

The weight of his body pressed hers further into the sofa, but Gabi didn’t care. Her hands were now free to roam at will, taking a leisurely tour of streamlined muscles, lingering on the tiny indentation at the base of his spine before moving downward to cup the firm, male buttocks.

She felt his cock, hard and heavy against her thigh, and her pulse quickened. Though she recognized the insanity of the situation, there was no turning back now. From the moment they’d seen each other again flames had ignited. It had always been this way – like oil to a match.

He kissed her again, sipping at her lips with slow, gentle nibbles. His tongue learned the contours of her mouth while his hands learned her body. Lifting her slightly with one hand, he bunched the material of her nightshirt in the other and dragged it over her curves. It landed in a crumpled heap next to his jeans.

She lifted her hips in silent invitation, wondering what was taking him so long. Didn’t he know she just wanted him inside her? Irritation made her squeeze the flesh of his hips, silently urging him to fuck her.

Quinn captured her face in his hands. “I know what you want, but I want to watch your eyes as I fuck you,” he whispered.

The erotic words created a knot in the pit of her stomach, but she kept her eyes open. She lifted her hands, entangling her fingers with his.

He raised her arms over her head and held them with one of his. He took hold of his cock with the other hand. Gabi felt the thick head brush at the opening to her pussy. She wiggled her hips. “Please, Quinn.”

He began to push into her, stretching her until her flesh tingled. “Ah, God,” he moaned. “You’re so tight. Sweet Jesus.” He started to pump, and she hooked her legs around the backs of his thighs.

They made no other sounds save their frantic breaths and the urgency of their bodies coming together. Gabi twisted and churned against him while his hand still held hers securely to the cushions.

“Look at me,” he commanded in a guttural voice.

Her gaze locked with his. She saw his lips form her name and then his jaw clenched. “I’m coming.” His words came out on a long groan, and she felt the heat of his juices shoot

deep into her pussy, coating the walls, uniting their bodies in the most powerful way imaginable.

As their worlds collided, spinning wildly out of control, Gabi's staccato pants filled the air, and Quinn nestled his finger against her clit. "Keep coming."

"No, I can't. I can't." She managed to finish the words seconds before she spiraled into yet another orgasm.

He withdrew his finger and brought it to his mouth, suckling it as thoroughly as he had her clit. Gabi couldn't take her eyes off the image. Then, he rested his damp forehead against hers, taking short breaths to fill his aching lungs. He rolled, positioning her body over his. "Gabi, I..." Before he could finish the words, the phone rang.

She froze, the sound of her heart drowning out the sound of his voice as he told her to stay put and sprang to his feet. He made it to the table in the foyer in a matter of seconds and punched the button on the speakerphone.

"Hello?"

"I know why you're there, Captain Logan. You want her as much as I do," came the raspy voice. "You might have her, but you can't protect her, you know. I *will* have her. Gabrielle was meant to be mine."

"There's not a chance in hell you're getting anywhere near her." Quinn's relaxed state faded, and Gabi scrambled to her feet. She saw him reach back for his gun, and then heard a soft curse as he realized he was still naked.

"How do you know how close I am now? I could be in the same house with you for all you know. I could have been listening to her cries as you made love to her. That *is* what you were doing, isn't it? I couldn't have been mistaken. I could have been watching her squirm on the sofa. Perhaps I saw you place your gun on the table before you sat down beside her. Did you press your body against hers, kiss your way down that golden skin? You don't really know how close I am now, do you?" The killer's voice rang with mirth.

Quinn whirled around. "Being inside the house right now wouldn't be a smart move on your part. I don't think you'd make such an amateurish mistake." He clenched his hands at his sides while motioning for Gabi to stay back.

"Oh, that's right. I'm much too smart for that." The dial tone sounded in Quinn's ear, and he whipped around, sensing a presence behind him.

"I told you to stay put."

The afghan wrapped around her like a toga, she moved forward slowly, her gaze fixed on his face. "I'm really his next target."

Holding up one finger, he picked up the phone again, punched a few buttons, and barked into the receiver. "I need a dump on this phone line ASAP. Call me on my cell." Clicking the off switch, he lowered the phone to its cradle. He rubbed the back of his neck. "Just because you're a target doesn't mean you'll get hit."

She bit her lower lip to stem the flow of tears. "He's been watching me."

"He's watching us," Quinn corrected, reaching out for her. He pulled her against the steel of his body.

She slumped against him, her hands searching for a resting place, finally settling on his biceps. "He's not going to give up, is he?"

"He won't have to give up. We'll catch him."

She didn't refute his words as she pulled away from him. Moving as if in a trance, she took two steps away from him. "I have to get ready for work."

Snatching hold of her arm, he stared down into her flushed face. "You can't be serious."

"I thought I'd already explained to you I'm not about to let this man control my life. I have a job to do, and I'm going to the clinic to do it."

"Like hell you are." Quinn's grip tightened. "I'm not going to let you put yourself in danger just because of some misguided sense of duty."

"Misguided?" She bristled. "I'm a doctor, Quinn. I save lives. How is *that* misguided?"

He exhaled slowly. "That isn't what I meant. I only meant that your devotion to this clinic is, well, you're placing it above your own safety."

"It's the only thing that's keeping me from falling apart right now." She neatly stepped around him. "I need to go take a shower, and please –" She held up one hand to halt his protest. "– don't try to stop me. Short of handcuffing me, you're not going to prevent me from going to work."

"Fine. Then, I'll go with you."

Irritation flavored her voice. "You can't go with me."

"Why not?"

"Because you're not my personal bodyguard. We both have jobs to do. Yours involves catching this sick bastard before he catches me. Believe me when I say I will feel a hell of a lot safer knowing you're out there looking for him than if you stayed by my side all day long."

Quinn folded his arms across his chest. "Why?"

She blinked at him. "Why what?"

"Why would you feel safer if I was away from you?"

Gabi frowned, trying to think of an appropriate response. "Maybe safer wasn't the proper adjective."

"So what is the proper adjective?"

Jamming her hands on her hips, she glared at him. "Now is not the time to go into this, and will you please put some clothes on?" She hadn't really meant to say that last part aloud, but he'd been standing there in front of her in all his naked glory without so much as a blush. It unnerved her.

He glanced down at his nude frame. "My lack of clothing didn't seem to bother you a few minutes ago."

Her face flamed even more. "That was different. I couldn't see all of you."

"Your eyes may not have seen much, but your hands would have done a blind woman proud." He returned with a cocky grin.

Her breath escaped her in a strangled gasp. "I knew I shouldn't have slept with you." Hitching the afghan up higher, she made her getaway, her head held high, back ramrod straight. Quinn's husky chuckle followed her down the hallway.

Chapter Five

Quinn banged on the wooden door, calling Wade's name. "Come on, I know you're in there. Open up before I wake the neighbors."

Wade, wearing nothing but boxer shorts, flung open the front door, giving his partner a bleary-eyed stare. "Do you have any idea what time it is?" Holding his hand aloft, he squinted, trying to get a fresh view of his watch. "It's six a.m. Six a.m. I was hoping to sleep in until at least seven. What in the hell are you doing here so early in the morning? What could possibly be so important that it couldn't wait one more hour?" He broke off, cocking his head to one side to survey his friend with a suspicious gaze. "I thought you were with Gabi, or did she kick you out already?"

"Could we talk about this inside?" Quinn held a bag aloft along with two Styrofoam cups. "I brought coffee and donuts."

Running a hand through his already tousled hair, Wade moved aside. "You're halfway forgiven for being here at this godforsaken hour. Give me a coffee." He accepted the offering and stumbled his way to the recliner. "Did you answer my question yet?"

"Which one?" Quinn grinned.

"Which one? Knock it off. It's too early. Why are you here?"

"Gabi got another call this morning." Quinn settled down on the sofa, placing the bag of donuts on the table in front of him.

Wade's coffee never made it to his lips. "Our guy?"

"Yeah." Exhaling loudly, Quinn dragged his fingers through his uncombed hair. "She's going to work. Says she doesn't want her routine to be disrupted." In a few additional sentences, he detailed the telephone call.

Wade managed to take a sip of the steaming brew this time. "So we'll put a watch on her." A yawn punctuated the words.

"That's what I was thinking." Getting to his feet, Quinn began to pace.

"Okay, so you woke me up for a reason. What is it?" One hand dropped to his abdomen, his fingers splayed across the hair-roughed skin.

"I need your help."

Wade straightened in the recliner. "I'm listening."

"I can't watch Gabi twenty-four hours of the day."

"Who said anything about you watching her? We have enough guys who can take turns." A sharp glare winged its way across the room, making Wade grunt. "Right. So what you're saying is you want to split shifts with me, right?"

"I knew there was a reason why you and I are partners. Great minds really do think alike. I'll take tonight. You can spell me tomorrow morning. I called the station and asked for a phone dump. While I'm at the clinic, why don't you check out her house? I got her out of there as quickly as I could, and the crime scene investigators are there. But I'd feel better if you were there, too." En-route to the door, he stopped when Wade called his name. "Yeah?"

"You had sex with her, didn't you?"

Quinn whirled. "That's none of your business." The tone was sharp enough to slice through six inches of steel.

The detective nodded sagely. "I knew it. No denial. In our line of work, that's as good as an admission." Another yawn. "I guess that explains why you want the night shift." Silence. "Thought so. I just hope you know what the hell you're doing."

"So do I." Quinn slammed the door on his way out.

* * * * *

Quinn folded the newspaper in his hands, stretching his long legs out in front of him as he attempted to find a comfortable position in the uncomfortable chair.

The receptionist, who'd introduced herself as Krissy with a "K," sent him another bright smile. "I'm sure Dr. Reddick will be right with you. She's been really busy this morning. The temp agency didn't tell me things were going to be so hectic here. I'm not used to answering so many calls," she leaned forward, "or talking to so many weirdos."

Straightening, she twirled a lock of bright orange hair around her index finger. "There was one guy who was so insistent about talking to Dr. Reddick. He creeped me out."

Quinn's instincts went on alert. He hadn't been away from Gabi for long, but what if something had happened in the interim? Something she didn't want him to know. "Why's that?" He kept his tone neutral, as if only mildly interested in the woman's next words.

A hand with rings on every finger waved in the air. "Because he was all, I need to talk to her, and I was all, well, she's busy, but then he was all, I'll wait. And it was just like something out of *Psycho*."

Quinn leaned forward, all pretense of mild interest dropped. "Tell me exactly what he said."

"I just did."

He bit back a sound of irritation. "Did Dr. Reddick speak with him?"

"Oh, that. Yeah, she did, but she was so calm, said it was a grumpy patient. So it wasn't a big deal. But after that call, well, she just got so quiet, and then you came in, and that's the last time I've talked with her."

Quinn picked out the parts of the woman's speech he wanted to focus on. "Do you think you would recognize this guy's voice again?"

Krissy squinted as if trying to remember. "It's hard to say. It was a really busy morning, and I was trying to concentrate on work and everything. I remember he sounded like he was a heavy smoker, if that helps, you know, with the raspy voice. I've never been really good at identifying voices. In fact, I could never tell my dad's voice from my uncle's voice. It made for some pretty embarrassing moments when I told my mom that Dad was on the phone."

"Okay, thanks." Quinn quickly intercepted the receptionist's flow of conversation as he got to his feet.

"Oh, no problem. I guess I should get back to work. Give me a call if you need anything." She headed back down the hallway.

"Grumpy patient, my ass," Quinn muttered to himself, striding toward Gabi's office.

* * * * *

Gabi walked back to her office, exhaustion in every step. Her shoulders slumped, she ached in every part of her body. Pushing open the door, she kicked off her shoes and headed toward the couch. She gave a startled cry of dismay as a figure caught her peripheral vision. One hand clutched her throat as her heart thrummed loudly against her chest. "Quinn! Do you like to make a habit out of scaring me to death?"

He moved forward, kicking the door shut. "Sorry. I was waiting for you to finish work so I could drive you home. Wade will take over tomorrow morning."

Her casual attitude belied her anxiety as she rounded her desk. "Do you really think that's necessary? I mean, nothing has happened. Maybe he's just trying to make me crazy."

"Nothing has happened?"

She found a piece of paper requiring an inordinate amount of attention. Her reply was a distracted, "Hmm? No, nothing."

His hand shot out, slapping the top of the desk so violently that a glass paperweight scooted several inches toward the edge. "Dammit, Gabi! I thought we'd been over this before. This isn't some kind of game! It's real, and it's happening whether you want to believe it or not."

One hand fluttered nervously across the papers while the other returned the paperweight to its original position. She sank down in the leather chair behind her, grateful for its support. "Why are you so upset? You know everything I know, Quinn."

He leaned across the distance separating them. "Yes, I do, but only because I had to learn some of the information from the temp out there."

"Krissy?"

"Yes, Krissy. Do you have any other temps working for you right now?"

"Could you tell me what you're talking about in a lower tone of voice? There's no need for anyone else to hear our conversation." Gabi's own temper started to rise.

Quinn's breath hissed out between clenched teeth. "The phone call you got today. It was him, wasn't it?"

She looked away. "It might have been; I couldn't be sure. That's why I didn't say anything right away."

He released a harsh expletive that told her what he thought of her supposition. "I am trying to protect you! I can't do that if you don't tell me when something happens."

"I can protect myself!" She surged to her feet, her face now scant inches from his. "I told you this morning I don't need a bodyguard! All this guy has done is make telephone threats. Does your office normally offer armed guards for a few telephone threats or is this just something I've earned by sleeping with you?"

"Have you forgotten how many women have died at this man's hands?" He came around the desk in three short strides, his arms gripping hers, his eyes flashing fire. "Your protection has nothing to do with our sleeping arrangements. If you'll remember correctly, I was spending the night before we ever made love."

She gave a short, abrupt laugh. "We didn't make love, Quinn. We had sex. There's a big difference. And before you say anything, no, I don't regret it, but I just believe in calling a spade a spade. Love isn't something either one of us feels now. You and I both know that what happened last night was a fluke brought on by old feelings and the tension of the situation."

Quinn's hand snaked around behind her neck as his gaze bore down into hers. "I don't believe you, Gabrielle. You've never been the type of woman to *have sex*. There was more to it than that."

She struggled against his grasp. "Look, I wanted last night as much as you did. But let's not kid ourselves. We're both adults, and we should be able to recognize sex for what it is."

His free hand gripped her hip, forcing her against the hard planes of his body. "I still don't believe you."

She tossed her head back haughtily. "Believe what you want, but this conversation is over. Take me home."

With a low curse, he released her. "Fine, but this isn't over. Nothing is over."

She didn't ask him what he meant. She didn't think she wanted to know the answer.

* * * * *

"What is that?" Gabi noticed the overnight bag sitting by the door.

"I brought clothes for tomorrow morning."

She sighed. "I don't think it's a good idea for you to spend another night."

He smiled. "Why? Are you scared we'll have sex again?"

Tossing him a look of pure frustration, Gabi threw her bag down onto the kitchen table and brushed past him. "I'm going to take a shower."

"That's a good idea." One hand loosened the knot on his tie.

She stopped, hands planted on her hips. "Alone."

"You don't know what you're missing." He tossed the silk neckwear in the general direction of the sofa. "I think I've gotten better since we last showered together."

Swallowing the lump, she looked toward the stairs. She didn't need the reminder of his abilities with soap. "I'll take my chances."

"And that's what's going to get you into trouble."

"They're my chances to take," she reminded him somewhat flippantly.

"Not as long as I'm around they're not." Without warning, he swept her into his arms, his mouth slashing across hers in a possessive kiss that marked her as his.

Gabi didn't try to fight him. She didn't want to stop him. She'd been thinking about this all day, the feel of his hard muscles beneath her palms, the spicy scent of his aftershave, the rasp of his jaw against her cheek. Everything. Just like before only different.

Rational thought sped away as the kiss turned forceful, almost savage in intensity, ravaging her thoughts. His hands were everywhere, pushing beneath the barriers of her clothing. His palm found the soft skin of her abdomen before diving beneath the waistband of her skirt. Her hands fisted in his hair as his tongue swept across hers.

With short, desperate movements, their clothing fell to the floor. She moaned his name as he lifted her, pressing her hips against the wooden door. His head lifted. Their gazes locked and whispering her name, Quinn pushed his cock into her with one sensual thrust.

Gabi clung to him, tearing her lips away from his to feast on the salty taste of his skin. This was passion, hot and wild, uncontrolled, unleashed with hurricane strength. Sweat glistened on their bodies as the untamed tempo carried them away with cyclonic force.

He gripped her waist, whispering her name against the thickness of her hair as the tension built within him. Her hands traveled the length of his spine, caressing, kneading, her small, white teeth nibbling on his shoulder, his ear, and the small nub of flesh hidden in the dark whorls of hair on his chest.

Reality faded, and they were locked together in a fantasy world where hunger was only satiated by this wild, primitive mating.

Her legs locked around his hips, her head tossed back against the door, allowing easy access to the graceful column of her neck. The door felt cool against her back, the skin beneath her fingertips hot and damp. Entwining her hands with his, she groaned his name in a sensuous liturgy, writhing beneath the strain of his body as he drove her to a shattering climax. As the waves crested, Quinn followed her over the edge.

Still holding her against the door, he took several deep breaths before he spoke. "For future reference, *that* was sex."

Gabi sucked in a sharp breath before she began to struggle against him. "I should have known you were out to prove a point. Now, let me go."

"I don't think I'm ready to let you go." The words carried a double meaning that had her gaze whipping up to his face, but it was stoic, no sign of emotion. Now this was the Quinn she recognized.

Lowering her legs to the floor, she pushed against his broad chest. "I knew this wasn't a good idea."

"My staying tonight or this?"

"Is there a difference?" Her voice dripped acid.

"You could have said no."

A small smile curved her lips. "What makes you think I wanted to say no?" Without bothering to pick up her clothing, she padded down the hallway, wondering if her words had any affect on him at all. Deep down inside, she sensed this wasn't the same Quinn she'd left three years ago.

* * * * *

He'd watched them together. The detective and his new little whore. Sure, she had plenty of time for the captain, but none for him. He could meet her, strike up a conversation, but he'd lay odds that she would give him the brush off eventually. They all did. The pretty, blonde bimbos with their tight, little bodies and sexy eyes. They knew just how to move, just what to say to turn a man on and then, once they'd gotten all the enjoyment out of the game, they walked away. It had happened more than once and he'd be damned if he'd let it happen again.

Straightening from this crouched position by the window, the man placed the binoculars neatly back into the carrying case and snapped it shut, his ears and eyes ever alert for the possibility of danger. Then, he pressed a kiss against his fingertips and touched the window pane with a longing look before he turned and disappeared into the evening mist.

* * * * *

The unmistakable sound of leaves crunching beneath booted feet caught Quinn's attention. He whipped the 9mm out of the holster and released the safety catch, stealthy steps carrying him toward the door. At Gabi's stunned expression, he pressed a finger against his lips and quietly turned the knob.

He walked around the house, adrenaline pumping. He couldn't have been hearing things. There had been no mistaking the sound of footsteps. He'd heard someone outside the window, maybe not their guy, but someone. Ducking low, Quinn searched the ground below the window that led into the foyer. "Damn." His body tense, he dropped to one knee to get a better look. Someone *had* been here, but instinct told him they were now alone. "Gabi?" He should have known she wouldn't be far behind.

She stepped out onto the porch, her trim body framed in the soft interior light. "Is everything all right?"

"I want you to call Wade. His number is in my wallet opposite my badge. Tell him to get over here."

Bare feet carried her toward the window where he still knelt. "He was here, wasn't he?"

He swore softly. "Could you please just do what I told you to do?"

"He's really watching me." She breathed the words shakily into the night air. Casting one more unblinking look at the window, she obeyed.

Quinn watched her walk away, mentally cursing himself, the situation, the man behind the situation, and his own lack of self-control. Maybe, if they hadn't been involved in something they shouldn't, he might have heard something sooner. Maybe he could have caught the bastard. Maybe.

"Wade's on his way." Gabi didn't venture any farther than the door.

"It's all right. He's not here now."

"But he was here." Her voice sounded wooden, almost unemotional.

"Yeah, he was here." Quinn knew better than to even try to lie to her.

"God, he could have been inside the house."

He got to his feet, turning to face her. "We don't have time for 'could have beens' or 'what ifs,' Gabi. Right now, we're going to get you out of here." The unusual harshness of his voice hid the fear wrapped around his heart.

The guy had been too close and it scared the hell out of him. The images filtered through his brain again – images that had been successfully erased from his mind until now. He couldn't, no, he wouldn't think about what could happen. He had to focus on what was going to happen – getting Gabi to safety and then finding this bastard.

"Wait a minute." The tone of her voice told Quinn he didn't want to hear her next words. "I want to help."

He frowned. "You can help by getting out of here."

She waved a hand impatiently. "That's not what I meant."

He folded his arms, waiting for her to continue.

"I want to help bring this guy in." Gabi rushed on before Quinn could protest. "We already know I'm his next target. Why can't you set him up? We'll lead him to believe I'm terrified, too scared to do anything against him, powerless even. And when he makes his move, you can be right here to catch him."

If Quinn's scowl could have grown any deeper, it would have. "That is, without a doubt, the most insane idea I have ever heard in my life. Do you think this guy is stupid enough to fall for a trap? He's bested us at every turn so far. Never consider him stupid." A nondescript sedan pulled into the driveway, and he spared it a glance. "There's Wade. Wait for us inside the house."

* * * * *

Gabi knew by the look on Wade's face that Quinn had passed along her idea. And by the animated waves of hands, she knew neither man thought the idea was such a good one. Well, she couldn't just hide out while this lunatic hunted her down. He could be anywhere right now. At another window, at the clinic, at her parents' house. Her eyes swept the night, searching for any signs that the killer was nearby.

"Gabi." Quinn's voice made her jump.

"What?"

"The crime unit is on its way over here. They'll get a cast of the footprint and maybe give us some more to go on. Meanwhile, you need to go get packed. We're taking you to a safe house."

"I said I wanted to help."

She saw Wade and Quinn exchange glances. "I'm afraid I have to agree with Quinn on this one. It isn't a good idea. You're a civilian. You're not trained in dealing with murderers."

"I'm not a helpless victim. Besides I don't have to deal with him. I only have to make sure he thinks I've let down my guard. Dealing with him is your job." She leaned against the doorjamb, her gaze sweeping the two detectives with something akin to displeasure. "That shouldn't be that difficult given your 'training.'"

Quinn gave Wade what Gabi considered to be an "I told you so" look and stepped in front of her. "The answer is no."

"The decision isn't just yours to make."

"In this case, I'm afraid it is. This squad works for me, not you. They follow orders."

"Then I'll stay somewhere else, a hotel. Just not at a safe house. You can decide what you want to do next." Stepping back inside the house, she closed the door in their faces.

Wade swallowed a laugh and rubbed a finger over his top lip. "I, um, think she's serious."

"That's too damn bad," Quinn growled. "Wait here." He barreled into the house like an angry bull, storming down the hallway. "Gabi, this is ridiculous! Where the hell are you? Answer me!" He pushed open her bedroom door without knocking and then came to a standstill, taking in the frozen form in front of him. "Gabi?"

She stood by her bed, one hand pressed against her throat, the other tightened into a fist. Every ounce of color drained from her face as she looked at Quinn. "He was here." The whispered words rang through the room like a shout.

He made it to her side in one stride. "What are you talking about?" He caught hold of her arm to force her to face him.

She pointed toward the bed. "That. It's not mine. It wasn't here before." A white rose lay nestled against a blue throw pillow...a piece of paper curled around its stem.

Quinn moved her aside, removing his handkerchief to lift the flower. Carefully, he unfolded the note, his eyes scanning the contents. Professions of adoration and promises of future meetings littered the page. Several, pungent curses rumbled in his throat before he shouted for his partner. His angry gaze pinned his ex-wife. "Still want to stay by yourself?"

"Give me a few minutes to pack."

Chapter Six

“We might have gotten a break with our latest victim.” Wade burst into Quinn’s office, waving a sheet of paper.

Sam, who’d spent the better portion of the past hour complaining about desk duty looked up. “There’s been another one? Where? When?”

“Last night behind the bowling alley,” Quinn responded, his gaze directed toward his chief of detectives. “Let’s hear what you’ve got.” Before Wade could speak, he held up one hand. “Sam, why don’t you check with the crime unit and see how they’re coming with the cast of the footprint they got last night from Gabi’s house.”

Sudden tension in the room became palpable. Sam got to his feet and stuffed his arms into his jacket. “I’m sick of being behind a desk and making phone calls, Quinn. From where I’m standing, you could use all the help you can get.”

“And from where I’m standing, you’re about four pay grades away from making those type of decisions.”

Jaw snapping audibly, Sam folded his arms across his chest. “I’m a good detective and –”

“Right now, you’re a benched detective. You know where your desk is.” Quinn turned his attention back toward Wade as the younger detective stormed away. “Okay, tell me what you’ve got.”

“We found a matchbook in the latest victim’s purse. It’s from some seedy little bar just outside of town, out of our jurisdiction. It’s possible she could have met this guy there. She was definitely dressed for a night on the town.” Wade trailed after Quinn, pausing long enough to snatch a hand-held two-way radio from the shelf above the log-in board.

“Great. Let’s head there first.”

“You know, I checked the computer, and Gabi isn’t logged in at any of our normal safe houses. Did you put her in a new place for some reason?”

"She's safe, and that's all that matters." Quinn reached the car and stopped to face his friend. "I think the less people who know where she is the better."

Wade's brows creased into a frown. "That includes your best friend? What...am I a suspect now?"

Quinn sighed heavily. "Of course not. Gabi just feels safer this way."

"Gabi feels safer or you do?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, come off of it, Quinn. You think you're the only one who can protect her."

"I never said that."

"You didn't have to. It's written all over your face." He shook his head sadly. "Holding onto something or someone so tightly doesn't necessarily guarantee their safety, friend."

Quinn stuck the key in the driver's side door. "That's not what I'm trying to do."

"Right." Wade's voice carried his disbelief, and he moved away to climb into the Chevy. "By the way, you did a real good job in there of making Sam feel useless."

"Aw, hell, I wasn't trying to make him feel useless. I just don't think he's ready to jump right back into the thick of things."

"And God knows you always know best."

Quinn settled himself behind the wheel of the car. "When it comes to my detectives, I do."

"Must be nice to know everything."

"You're starting to irritate me, Donovan."

Wade's only response was an unrepentant grin.

Quinn didn't start the engine right away. "All right. I'll give him a break." His feet hit the ground. "I'll be right back."

Wade stuck his head out the window. "Hey, where are you going?"

"To give Detective Myers his new assignment."

"Oh no. Is this something I'm not going to like?"

"You're the one who wanted me to make him feel useful."

"I only meant that he's a good cop."

Quinn rounded the car. "You're right. Now, just sit tight." He disappeared inside the station.

* * * * *

Gabi paced the confines of the house, her frequent trips taking her to the picture windows. It was a beautiful spring day. The flowers were in full bloom, and the sun climbed high in the sky. She knew if she stepped outside, she would hear the birds singing. But she

couldn't step outside. She couldn't even open a window. Quinn left her with strict instructions. Captain's orders and all that. She wasn't to leave the house at all, not even for a breath of fresh air.

Fear became her constant companion, enveloping her like an old coat two sizes too big. She kept a frequent lookout over her shoulder, watching and waiting for the next strike.

Dragging her thoughts away from the terror clawing its way up her spine again, she tried to focus her attention on the house itself. She'd already surmised this wasn't the usual safe house. It was much too nice of a place.

Mahogany furniture settled on polished, hardwood floors while bright rugs added splashes of color. Obviously a man's house but asking questions about the owner had gotten her nowhere. None of the detectives now protecting her were very talkative. In fact, she could have gotten more conversation out of stones than these guys. Quinn picked the right men. They wouldn't tell her anything, and that was exactly what he wanted.

Quinn had surprised her by calling her with the announcement she would have round-the-clock protection by chosen detectives and irritated her by demanding she obey. Stuck out in the middle of nowhere, she didn't have a choice. The first detective arrived precisely twenty-five minutes later, and Gabi wondered at Quinn's choice of Sam Myers. He seemed too young to hold a badge much less offer the protection she would require should the killer show his face.

Heading toward the sofa, Gabi flopped down, tucking her legs beneath her. She reached for the remote when a voice spoke her name. Her head whipped up, and she placed a hand over her heart. "Detective Myers, you scared the life out of me."

The boyishly handsome man stepped into the living room, an apologetic smile on his face. "I'm sorry, Dr. Reddick. I just thought I'd check to make sure you were all right. It was awful quiet in here."

"Well, I was just about to turn on the television set to break the boredom. Would you like to join me? I could really use the company."

The detective shook his head regretfully. "I wish I could, but the boss would have my hide if he came back and caught me watching television. He and I are friends and all, but well, he's kind of a stickler for rules."

Pasting an understanding smile on her face, Gabi replied, "You don't need to explain." She didn't go into further detail, but she knew more than anyone about Quinn and his regulations. "I wouldn't want to get you into any kind of trouble."

Detective Myers turned to leave then stopped. "You know, I never got the chance to thank you for trying to help my partner."

Gabi blinked at him. "Your partner?"

He glanced down at the floor, shuffling his feet in embarrassment. "Yeah. You probably don't remember me, but I brought my partner to your clinic when he was stabbed a few days ago." He rubbed a weary hand across his eyes. "He didn't make it."

Comprehension dawned. "Oh, I'm sorry I didn't recognize you. These last three days have been long and horrid. My memory seems to have deserted me."

Sam smiled his understanding. "That's all right. You can't be expected to remember everyone. It's been a tough few days for all of us. In fact, it shocked the hell out of me when Captain Logan gave me this assignment. I was supposed to be on grief leave or something like that. I forget what they call it."

"I'm really sorry about what happened to your partner."

"So am I." He gave her one more smile before he left once more.

Gabi found herself alone again. A prickly feeling of unease skated down her spine, and she wrapped her arms around herself, covering her legs with a brightly colored afghan she'd discovered draped across the back of the sofa.

"Come on, Gabi. Calm down. You're safe. Get a hold of yourself. You can't see a bogeyman around every corner." But the uneasiness didn't recede, and she found it difficult to concentrate on the old black and white movie playing on the screen.

Where in the hell was Quinn? The urgency to see him tightened her muscles. No matter how much she moved around, she couldn't find a comfortable position. Her marriage was over, had been over long before she'd even walked away and yet, it had only taken one touch from Quinn to reignite the old flame.

* * * * *

He watched every move she made, his mouth watering as the sheer perfection of her body captivated him. He couldn't have asked for a better choice for the coup de grace. The game had almost played itself out...at least in the small town of Cody Springs.

And this one, well, it had special meaning. His hand touched the window pane. Dr. Gabrielle Reddick, ex-wife of Quinn Logan. Fingers curling against the cool glass, he ground his teeth together.

He didn't know how much longer he'd wait before he made his next move. The more time that elapsed the closer Captain Logan came to discovering his identity, and that couldn't happen...at least not until he was ready.

Lowering himself away from the window, he dropped to his knees and closed his eyes, his lips moving in muted prayer – not for redemption of his own soul but for the woman who'd become the pawn.

* * * * *

"Yeah, she was in here. Saw her leave with a tall, brown-headed guy close to midnight." The bartender made another swipe down the counter with the damp rag, his head never lifting from his chore.

"And what did he look like?" Wade persisted.

The man shrugged. "I told you he had brown hair."

"That doesn't give us a whole lot to go on. Do you know how many guys have brown hair in this town?"

"What am I? A barber?"

Quinn slapped the top of the bar with an open palm. The action brought the desired results. The bartender's gaze flew upwards to meet his. "You're someone who's about to get himself in a lot of unnecessary trouble. Hindering a police investigation is a crime. So if we go our merry ways and find out later that you knew more than you told us, well, we'll have to come back. And next time, you'll come with us, and there will be a cell with your name written all over it. I don't know if you've ever been in jail before, buddy, but it's not really the place to be for guys like you...if you get my meaning."

Folding his arms, he watched the man with an expectant look on his face.

The bartender cursed low in his throat. "Look, I don't like to get involved. I've always kept my nose out of other people's business. It's safer that way. Never have been one to stick my neck out."

"What's your name?" Quinn bit out each word.

The man took a visible step back, one hand going to his chest. "What?"

"Your name. You do have one, don't you?"

"Well, of course I got one. I just don't see why you need to know it."

"Because I'm a detective and I asked you for your name. Now, what is it?"

"Jack, my name's Jack, and that's all you're getting from me unless you arrest me."

Quinn leaned back across the countertop, his face inches away from the bartender's. "Well, Jack, do you have a sister? A wife? A girlfriend?"

"Huh? What does that got to do with anything?"

"Any one of them could be next."

The man swallowed a lump in his throat and twisted the rag between nervous fingers. "Are you saying this guy is the one who's been taking down all those broads?"

Feeling his temper rise, Quinn forced himself not to smash his fist into the bartender's face. "They were women, and he doesn't just take them down. He brutally murders them. Now, do you want a member of your family to be next?"

"Okay, okay. I get it. I've seen him in here a couple of times."

"Did he ever leave with a woman before?"

"No, not that I can remember. He always left alone." The heavyset man's eyes crinkled with confusion. "Until that night, but look, that girl was bad news from the start. I mean, the way she was dressed, I knew she'd be trouble."

"Well, she won't be anymore trouble to anyone. She's dead," Wade responded in a cold voice. "And now, being the good police detectives we are, we're trying to find her killer."

The bartender's eyes widened. "Oh, Rick didn't kill her! He would never do anything like that."

Quinn fixed the man with a steely gaze. "A second ago, you were acting like you didn't even know the guy and now, all of a sudden, you can testify to his character?"

Jack lifted the rag to mop his perspiring forehead. "I only meant that, well, he seems like a nice enough guy. He's kind of lonely, if you ask me. That girl wasn't his type. I don't know why he even left with her."

"Yeah, sure. You got anything else? Like a guy's last name." Wade moved toward the counter.

"I don't know him!" The words came out squeaky with desperation.

"But you've seen him in here before, you know what he looks like, that he's lonely, and that he 'seems' nice." Quinn pointed out with just enough ice in his voice to make the bartender flinch. Smacking his palms down on top of the counter, he leaned in, making sure he had solid eye contact. "Do we look like dumbasses to you? Give us a name."

"Bannon. Rick Bannon. That's all I know." More furious scrubbing accompanied his words.

Quinn exchanged looks with Wade and jerked his head toward the door. "Now that wasn't so hard, was it?"

* * * * *

Gabi slid beneath the bubbles, deep into the warm, soothing water. Giving a sigh of pure pleasure, she attached the headphones to her ears and let the soothing strains of Bach relax her. The scented candles shadowed the tiles and with a quick look at the door to insure the lock was turned, Gabi closed her eyes. A smile playing about her lips, she luxuriated in the feel of the heated water sloshing over her skin. The loofah sponge slid over her scented body, making her tingle. Her mind drifted, replaying scenes that hadn't been very far from the front recesses of her memory. For the last two weeks, her mind had focused on one person...Quinn.

She'd never stopped loving him, and each night, when she went to bed, she still remembered the last words he'd ever said to her. "Walking away doesn't solve the problem." He'd been right, but she'd needed to walk away, had needed space.

Now that she was back, the same feelings had returned. She was drawn to him, craving both his touch and the sound of his voice. Though just as arrogant, stubborn and unyielding

as he was during their marriage, he still made her fantasies come to life. Drawing in a deep, shaky breath, she sank lower into the tub until only her head was visible above the white froth.

It could never work between them, again. Quinn was too committed to his job, and she had to admit, so was she. They didn't have time for one another. That's why, once this was all over, she'd leave again. Now that she'd seen him, made love with him, there was no other way. She couldn't stay in the same town with him and not want to be close to him.

His presence would always win over common sense.

* * * * *

Quinn rubbed the back of his neck and paced back and forth in front of his desk. The door to his office banged open, and he whirled. "Well?"

Wade shook his head. "Nothing. No arrests, no warrants."

"I still want to talk to him."

"I'll get the uniforms to bring him in." He started to shut the door and paused. "How's Gabi?"

"She was in the tub. Sam said she's fine. A little grumpy."

"Can you blame her?"

Stiffening, Quinn shot his friend a glance. "You have another way to save her life?"

Holding up his hands, Wade backed away from the door without saying another word.

Fuck this waiting. He had to see Gabi. He needed to be with her, to reassure himself that she was okay. And then he needed to tell her he still loved her.

* * * * *

Humming along with the soft sounds of *Unchained Melody*, Gabi's hand played along top of the bubbles. This was the most relaxed she'd been in days. Maybe Quinn was right after all. Though she didn't like the idea of hiding out until the killer was caught, she certainly felt safer. Lulled into a semi-sleep, she welcomed the pseudo-dreams floating in and out of her consciousness.

The music ended and giving a reluctant sigh, Gabi pushed herself to a sitting position. Stifling a yawn, she stretched luxuriously, opened her eyes and promptly froze. Soundless screams bubbled in her throat. Shrinking to the far side of the tub, her eyes stared at the roses. Dozens of them. White roses, filling the tub and in the center, one blood-red rose. The symbolism wasn't lost on her, and she began to shake uncontrollably. She tried to scream again, but her throat wouldn't cooperate. She couldn't breathe. Fearful eyes darted toward the door. It now stood ajar. Cold teardrops slid down her cheeks, and she drew her knees to her chest as the sobs overtook her.

* * * * *

The call came over the radio when Quinn was still three miles out.

“Captain, I’m at the secure location, and we’ve got a problem here.”

His foot lowering to the accelerator, Quinn’s fingers curled around the receiver until his knuckles turned white. “What kind of problem?”

“I think you’d better come see for yourself.”

“Is she hurt?” Panic curled in the pit of his stomach.

“We’re not sure what’s going on. She won’t come out of the bathroom.”

The Chevy careened around the corner, barely missing the curb. “I’m right around the corner.”

For the first time in a very long time, he prayed.

* * * * *

Gabi knew she should move, but she’d seen the detective minutes ago. Help would arrive any minute. He’d probably called Quinn. She hoped so. He’d know what to do. The water grew cold, and she started to shiver. The shock of the situation subsided slightly. Drawing in deep, shaky breaths that filled her lungs to capacity, she stirred, keeping her gaze averted from the rose petals floating atop the water. “Quinn, where are you?” she whispered to herself.

* * * * *

A uniformed officer met Quinn at the front door. “Dr. Reddick had been in the tub for awhile, so I knocked. When I got no response, I unlocked the door and went in, and she’s curled into a corner of the tub, frozen. She won’t move or speak, just keeps crying.” The officer jogged up the stairs alongside his boss. “And the tub is filled with rose petals.”

Quinn’s blood ran cold, and he took the stairs two at a time. “Dammit! How in the hell could this have happened?”

“I don’t know, sir.”

“Well, you’re supposed to know! That’s why you’re here! Why *are* you here anyway? I didn’t assign any uniforms to this location. If she’s hurt, I’ll have your badge.” Holding up one hand to hold the officer back as they reached the master bedroom, Quinn entered the bathroom without knocking.

“Gabi?” Moving forward in one long stride, he captured her in his arms and lifted her from the tub.

She didn’t speak. She just clung to him, holding him. Her head dropped to his shoulder, and the tears resumed, rolling down her cheeks in long, clear ribbons of moisture.

Wade stood at the bedroom door, and Quinn didn't question how he'd known to come. "Is she all right?"

"Go look in the tub," came Quinn's biting response as he lowered Gabi to the bed. Wrapping the comforter around her trembling form, he sat down beside her, holding both of her hands in his. "Sweetheart, did he hurt you?"

Green eyes met his, and she slowly shook her head. Her lips moved as she tried to formulate a response, but her teeth chattered. She shook her head once more and sought the safety of his embrace.

Resting his chin atop her golden hair, he closed his eyes and willed his heartbeat to return to normal. "Wade, I –"

"Crime scene is already on its way here." Wade intercepted Quinn's train of thought. "Just stay here with her. I'll go talk to the guys and find out what happened."

His hands stroking her back in soothing circles, Quinn murmured words of comfort, telling her she was safe, that she would be all right. And all the while, fear coursed through his veins like a potent drug, drowning out everything but the need to protect her.

He didn't know how long he sat holding her until she finally fell asleep. Easing her back against the mattress, he made sure she was completely covered before leaving her. Fury coiled within his abdomen as he descended the stairs.

Spying Wade, he walked toward him. "So what in the hell happened? I left Sam and Stan here, not Officer Robbins. Where in the hell was Sam when all of this was happening? And what about Stan? Did he just not report in? I should have known Sam wasn't ready for something like this yet. I should have kept him on light duty, but I was trying to make him feel useful. So tell me where he was, and I'm warning you, it had better be good."

Wade held up a hand to stop the barrage of threats. "Officer Robbins came to relieve Stan because he got sick."

"No one else was supposed to know where she was." The clipped words came from between gritted teeth.

"Yeah, I know, but Sam thought it would be okay since Stan was so sick."

"It wasn't Sam's fucking decision. Robinson claims he only left his post once and that was for a five minute bathroom break in the downstairs bathroom."

"Five minutes was all this son-of-a-bitch needed. Where in the hell was Sam when all of this was happening?"

"Officer Robinson claims he couldn't raise Sam on the radio."

Fury tensed every muscle in his body. "They're both fucking fired."

"Wait a second." Wade headed him off at the pass. "I know you're upset about this, but think about what you're saying."

Quinn's brows lowered into a scowl. "She could have gotten killed. That bastard could have killed her!" His hands clenched into fists, and he looked around the room as if searching for something or someone to punch.

"But he didn't!"

"That's not the point!"

"I know what the point is, Quinn, but if you hadn't been so bull-headed about keeping this cloak and dagger, I might have known what the hell was going on myself and been able to help! The detectives report to me first. I should have been kept in the loop. The fact that Gabi is your ex-wife and you still have feelings for her shouldn't have affected proper procedures."

"You're out of line, Sergeant!"

"Don't pull rank on me! First of all, I don't give a damn if this pisses you off. You need to hear it. I'm in charge of these men. I should know their schedules before you do, but *you* chose to assign these duties without filling me in, and that's not going to work any more. From here on in, I know the details before they do."

"You're dangerously close to trouble yourself, Donovan."

"Do you think I'm scared of a written slap on the hand? Go ahead, write me up, but you know I'm right."

Quinn pulled in several steadying breaths before replying. "I wasn't talking about putting you on report. I was talking about knocking you on your ass."

The sergeant's shoulders relaxed slightly. "Yeah? You've never been able to before now. Are you so sure you want to try it when you're not at your best? Listen, what matters now is that Gabi is safe. We can hash the rest of this out later."

"Do you know how close he was to her?" Quinn looked away to hide the anguish in his eyes.

Wade dropped a hand to his friend's shoulder. "I know, but right now, you need to think like a detective and not her lover."

The assumption wasn't denied. Instead, Quinn released a long breath. "That scared the hell out of me."

"I know. I would have felt the same way had that been Jenny in there. But you can't let your emotions run this investigation. We have a killer to catch, and maybe," he hesitated before plunging in, "Gabi's earlier suggestion wasn't such a bad idea after all."

Quinn's gaze pinned the blond man to the wall. "Don't finish that thought, Wade, not if you value your teeth."

Never one to be intimidated, Wade forged onward. "Look, she's already in the line of fire. What could it hurt to use what we have at our disposal?"

“Because she’s not ‘at our disposal.’ She’s been traumatized enough, and if you think I’m going to put her in further danger by allowing this bastard to get even closer to her, you’re about two beers shy of a six-pack. He’s gotten as close to her as I’m going to allow and even this has been too damn close.” As Wade opened his mouth to speak again, Quinn’s hand sliced the air. “End of discussion. I’m getting her out of here.”

Wade rubbed the back of his neck wearily. “All right. That’s probably a good idea.” He followed his friend back toward the stairs. “There’s one more thing you should know. Robinson said Sam has been pretty much incommunicado today.”

Quinn whipped around. “So what was Sam’s excuse when you talked to him?”

“I haven’t had the chance to talk to him yet.”

“Well, get him in here. He should have some answers.” Pausing en route, Quinn’s heartbeat accelerated. Mind racing with possibilities, Quinn began tossing out the facts as well as the unanswered questions. “This fucker had to gain access to the house, and I want to know how. He couldn’t have jimmied a goddamn door lock in broad daylight.”

“I already know what you’re thinking, but our guys were the only two who had a key.” Wade blew out a loud breath. “And the look in your eyes tells me you’re not so sure about either one of those guys right now.”

Lowering his voice, Quinn leaned closer to his friend. “Well, think about it. Robinson wasn’t supposed to be here, and shortly after he arrives, this happens.”

“He’s a good cop, Quinn, and before we jump to any conclusions, we need to talk to Sam first.”

Quinn shook his head. “If he knows anything, he would have told us first thing. No doubt he’s staying out of my way right now.” He scrubbed one hand over his face. “Put a tail on them for the next twenty-four hours.”

“A tail? On our own guys?” Wade patted his pocket for a cigarette, but came up empty. “So everyone’s a suspect now?”

“Until I find out how someone got into that bathroom without two cops knowing about it, yeah.” Quinn angled a glance toward the living room and saw Sam approaching. “I’m going to make sure this doesn’t happen again.”

With a brusque nod, Wade spun around, then, stopped. “Do you want me to assign a new team for Gabi?”

“No. I have a better idea.”

“Hey, boss, you wanted to talk to me?” Sam approached Quinn and Wade, trepidation stamped across his young face.

The urge to push the detective up against the wall was so strong, Quinn clenched his hands into fists. “Where in the hell were you when all of this was going down?”

Taking a deep breath, the detective replied, "I was following standard procedure, checking the perimeter outside. Robinson didn't tell me he was going to the can, or I would have come back inside."

"He said he tried to raise you on the radio." Wade folded his arms across his chest and waited for the response.

"Well, my radio's working just fine, and I didn't get a call." Unhooking the two-way from his belt, he passed it to the sergeant. "You can check it yourself. It's at full volume, and I logged my ten-twenty with base before I went outside. Robinson knew where I was. It wasn't that he couldn't raise me on the radio. He just never called me."

A muscle worked in Quinn's jaw. "And why do you think that is?"

"Who knows? He probably forgot, and now he's trying to cover his ass. Look, I know I should have called to clear Stan's replacement, but Robinson was available. I've worked with him, and he's pulled watch duty before."

"Did anything happen before Dr. Reddick took a bath, anything of any significance?" Wade, pen in hand, awaited the detective's answer.

Sam's shoulders lifted in a hesitant shrug. "Nothing of any real significance."

"Define 'real,' Sam." Quinn's cold voice made Sam's shoulder's hunch.

The young detective exhaled loudly. "You're probably not going to understand this..."

"Just spit it out, Detective." It wasn't the voice of a friend to friend. It was commander to subordinate.

Sam took a deep breath and plunged in. "I let her make a call."

Muscles drawing taught, Quinn took a step forward. "You did what?"

"Son-of-a-bitch!" Wade growled.

"She said she had to call her family. They would worry about her if she didn't."

"So you broke the rules because she asked you to?" Wade inserted with disbelief etching his voice. "You know better than that! People in protective custody have no contact with the outside world for a reason. You're acting like you're a first year rookie."

"I know, I know." Sam held up his hands as if to ward off any potential threat to his person. "It was just that she was upset, and I was only trying to help her."

"And you're attracted to her," Wade finished with disgust.

A blush crept up Sam's neck and suffused his face. "I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to."

The detective stiffened. "I don't know that my feelings for Dr. Reddick have anything to do with this, Sergeant."

"Like hell they don't. You're not the first man to think with something other than his brain, Sam." Wade's expression measured his disgust while Quinn's temper reached the boiling point. He could easily snap Sam's neck at the present moment.

“Well, it isn’t like I would do anything about the attraction. She doesn’t even see me.” Sam angled a gaze at his boss. “Especially when he’s around. Besides, I’m not the only man in this squad who happens to think the doctor is attractive. Any man in his right mind would. Even Robinson was saying that he’d like to –”

“That’s enough!” Quinn interrupted the conversation with a roar. “We’re not going to discuss Dr. Reddick like she’s a piece of meat. You’re released from this assignment. Go back to the station.”

“What happened to Dr. Reddick wasn’t my fault.” Sam stood his ground.

“I didn’t say it was, Detective. I just said that you’re released from this assignment. You will, however, be on report first thing tomorrow morning.”

“Because of this?”

“I shouldn’t have to spell it out for you. You went against policy, and friend or not, I won’t shut my eyes to this. Now, get your ass back to the house immediately.”

“Yes, Sir.” Sam clipped a salute and spun on his heel.

“Don’t you think –” Wade began.

Quinn’s hand sliced the air. “Don’t. His feelings are the least of my concerns right now.” Pivoting, he ascended the stairs.

* * * * *

Gabi stood by the antique dresser Quinn’s grandfather had given him. Dressed in jeans and a cropped T-shirt, she’d swept her hair up away from her face in a ponytail, and her face was devoid of any make-up. Her movements were controlled, deliberate, her steps slow and sure. She revealed none of the earlier fear that had immobilized her.

Standing in the doorway watching her, Quinn couldn’t tell she was the same woman who just an hour ago had clung to him in terror. Softly, he spoke her name and she turned, even managing a smile.

“I woke up.” She responded to his unspoken question.

“You have to leave again.”

“I know. Why do you think I’m folding my clothes? Where to now?”

Quinn strolled into the room, his hands stilling her movements by settling on her shoulders. “Some place that only I know.”

Her eyes lifted to his face. “We’ve already been through this before. You can’t become my personal bodyguard.”

“Well, I don’t trust anyone else with the job now.”

Gabi pulled in a deep breath. “Quinn, it was a fluke. It could have happened with anyone. This guy is so good. He could have even gotten past you.”

He didn't comment on the assumption. Instead, he steered her toward the bed. "I'll get your suitcase down." He glanced at his watch. "Can you be ready in fifteen minutes?"

She didn't answer his question, choosing instead to pose one of her own. "What's going to happen to those two detectives? Are they in trouble?"

Quinn's eyes frosted. "More than you know, Gabi."

Her hand touched his arm. "They tried to protect me."

"They failed."

"I didn't get hurt."

"Their purpose here wasn't just to keep you from getting hurt; it was to keep that bastard from coming anywhere near you as well. They didn't do their job."

"He's just too good." Gabi continued to protest.

Quinn raked a hand through his hair, tousling it even more. He fixed her with a baleful glance. "Nothing you can say is going to change this. They will be reprimanded, and they'd better be damned grateful that's all that's going to happen to them."

"And would you reprimand them if this had happened to any other target or just me?"

"What's going on between us does not change how I do my job, Gabi."

She stepped away from him, her hands dropping to her sides. "Doesn't it?"

He moved toward her then, pulling her into his embrace in one fluid movement. "Dammit, do you know what went through my mind when I got that phone call this afternoon? I thought you were dead, and for a brief moment, my world stopped." His arms tightened, his chin rested atop her golden hair. "I don't want to lose you again."

Her hands found their way under his jacket to slide across his back. "You're not going to lose me." She didn't comment on his last word, and he didn't push it. Now wasn't the time.

He moved back to see her face. "I'll get your suitcase." Instead of moving away, his hand caught her chin as he pressed his lips to hers. It was a quick kiss, but powerful enough to expose emotions he'd long kept hidden. But only to her. Only with her could he show the side of himself that no one else had seen in a very long time. His hand shook slightly as it brushed the hair away from her face. Then, giving her a crooked smile, he retreated, returning seconds later with the suitcase. "I'll wait for you downstairs."

He couldn't look back. At present, he wanted to make the world stop and simply hold Gabi until the danger passed. He wanted, no, he needed, to know she was safe. He would protect her this time, and before it was over, Quinn would put a bullet between the bastard's eyes.

"She ready?" Wade waited at the bottom of the stairs.

"In about fifteen minutes. I told her that I –"

“Quinn?” Gabi stood at the top of the stairs, a single sheet of paper clutched in her hand.

His head whipped up, and he raced up the stairs, wrapping one arm around her waist. “What’s wrong?” His other hand captured the note, but he guided her to safety before he read it. The words were simply but deadly. *Looking forward to meeting you soon, my sweet.*

Quinn released another string of invectives before passing the sheet of paper to his partner.

“Under the pillow that was beside me, he left a dagger,” Gabi added, only the wobbling of her voice revealing her terror.

Quinn shoved her behind him and released the catch on his holster. “Where did you find the note?”

“In the pocket of my robe.”

He withdrew his 9mm and held it lowered to his side. “The bastard could still be in the house.” Tugging his radio free from the clip on his belt, he barked instructions. “2155 central to base. We need all available units to 107 Oakview Circle.”

Once the summons ended, Wade jerked his head toward Gabi. “Get her out of here.”

“Lock this place down.” His hand curled around Gabi’s wrist. “Stay close to me.” He pulled her close to his side with one arm.

His own weapon at the ready, Wade followed, keeping his back to Quinn’s to intercept any possible danger. “Let the crime unit take a look at the car first.”

“Yeah, all right, but tell them to get a move on.” Quinn guided Gabi toward the front door. A trio of units rolled onto the grass, blue lights blazing. Officers emerged with weapons drawn, keeping low to the ground.

Wade gave them a quick run down and spread them out. “I want every inch of this house checked. Bathroom, closets, everything.”

Keeping his voice low, Quinn leaned toward Wade’s ear. “Tune your radio to channel nine. Just you and me.”

“Absolutely. Let me know when you’re safe.”

With the all clear from the crime unit, Quinn pulled Gabi to the Chevy and pushed her into the passenger seat. They were on the road in a matter of seconds.

Chapter Seven

Gabi rested her head back against the seat, closing her eyes. The gentle hum of the engine should have been enough to lull her to sleep, but she was wide-awake, her mind spinning out of control. Quinn sat behind the wheel, his gaze focused intently on the road ahead. His white-knuckled grasp on the steering wheel did little to reassure her. Since she'd mentioned the dagger, he'd changed. His entire demeanor reverted to the stoic cop sitting beside her now. Even the night in the motel room hadn't made a difference. He hadn't touched her. Instead, he'd sent her to bed like a child while he sat beside the window, staring out into the night, his gun resting on the table in front of him.

Leaning forward, Gabi switched on the radio, scrolling through the stations until she found classical music. She settled back against the seat.

Quinn's hand moved across the wide expanse of seat separating them to come to rest on her knee.

Her gaze lifted swiftly, meeting his expression.

"You're going to be all right."

She appreciated his efforts to reassure her. "I know." She hoped her voice sounded stronger than she actually felt. "We won't let him win."

"Especially not when his win means your loss."

"I am getting tired of running, though."

"There's a big difference between running because you're scared, and running because it's the best thing to do. Until we have more evidence, get closer to catching this guy, you're much safer leaving town."

Her nails drummed out a rhythm on the dash. "I wish I could be so sure of that. I'm almost to the point where I'm ready to stand and fight."

He shot her a dark look. "You can't fight something you can't see."

"Then how do you propose to fight him?"

He removed his hand. "I'm trained to fight invisible enemies."

She allowed him that one, choosing to change the subject instead of beating a dead horse. "I haven't thanked you yet, Quinn, and I..."

"Gabi, don't. This isn't about gratitude and you know it. This is more than me just doing my job."

"I know what it's about. Does that mean I shouldn't thank you?" She prompted with a quick squeeze of his forearm.

He slanted her a quick look before focusing his attention on the road ahead once more. "I've never been good at dissecting relationships. To me, they just happen and you roll with the punches. As long as the ride's good, you stay with the traffic. Once you run out of road, you both take separate detours. That's what happened with us."

She didn't particularly care for the automotive analogy. "No, it's not."

His hand dropped back down to massage her knee. "You don't think we ran out of road?"

"I don't think either of us was prepared for marriage. We both thought we'd get married, and our lives wouldn't change."

He drew his hand away quickly as if the touch of her burned him. "There's no sense in reliving the past."

"Quinn, not talking about it won't make it go away."

"Jesus, Gabi, I'm just saying we don't have to analyzing every fucking thing."

"It isn't every fucking thing. It's our marriage."

"It was our marriage." The words bounced off the dashboard, and Gabi resisted the urge to recoil.

She fell silent, not knowing how to respond. He'd made it clear that, in his opinion, they were over.

The two-way radio squawked to life, calling for Quinn's attention. He responded immediately.

"Captain, there's been an accident."

"What kind of accident?"

"It's concerning Sergeant Donovan, Sir. He's been hurt."

Quinn whipped the Chevy to the side of the road before barking into the receiver. "What happened? How bad is he?"

"He was...stabbed, Sir."

Gabi felt the blood leave her face, and she clutched Quinn's arm, offering reassurance as much as she needed it.

"Where is he?"

"Cody Memorial, Sir."

"I'm on my way." Ending the radio traffic, Quinn spun the car around in the opposite direction and stomped the accelerator. "I'm going to drop you off at the station. You'll be safe there. I'll be back to pick you up as soon as I know what's going on."

"I'm going to the hospital with you."

"Like hell you are."

"I'm going to see Wade." Gabi made her voice forceful to emphasize her determination. "Besides that, I'm a doctor. I won't sugarcoat anything."

Quinn shot her a dark look. "It's not safe."

"Right now, I don't think anywhere is safe, but I do think I'm a hell of a lot safer with you than I am with the entire police department. Isn't that what you've been telling me all along...that you could protect me better than anyone else?" She returned her hand to her lap. "So I'm going with you."

He exhaled, but didn't argue further. Gabi figured he needed her with him as much as she needed to stay by his side.

* * * * *

Quinn had never seen Wade so still in his life. Leaning forward, he touched the edge of the bed, careful of the tubes and wires that connected his friend to the monitoring machines.

Wade's eyes blinked open. "Quinn."

"No, don't try to talk." Placing one hand on the blond man's shoulder, he gave him a look that carried a wealth of meaning. "I'm sorry, buddy. This wasn't supposed to happen."

"You're not looking at a corpse. He just grazed my side." Wade shifted on the bed.

Quinn grinned as relief flowed through him. "Yeah, I can see now you're going to be okay. I have to ask you, I know it's not a good time, but –"

"I didn't see the guy." Wade gave him a regretful look. "Bastard just came out of nowhere, or maybe I wasn't paying attention."

"We both know that's not likely. He moves in the shadows, but," Quinn continued with a shaky, yet somehow, reassuring smile, "he's getting nervous. And when killers get nervous, they get caught."

"I put the tail on our guys, and we've got a lead on that guy, Rick."

"I'll handle it."

"But Gabi..." Wade began to protest.

Quinn silenced him with another hand to Wade's shoulder. "Will be fine. I can protect her and do my job. Trust me. I'm not going to let anything happen to her."

Wade drew in a deep breath. "You still love her." His legs moved restlessly underneath the stark-white sheet. "Then don't let her get away."

"You need to rest."

"I'm being serious. You'll have some time with her. Tell her how you feel." A cough took the sternness out of his words. "If you don't, you're a fool."

"Since when did you become such an expert on relationships?"

"Hey, I'm a happily married man, remember?" Wade's gaze slid to the door. "Is Gabi here with you?"

Quinn smiled. "Yeah. She refused to stay away. She's talking with the doctor now."

"You shouldn't leave her alone."

"This place is like a mobile police unit out there. Nothing's going to happen to her. She...wants to see you."

"Then send her in." In a gesture of levity, Wade licked his hand and smoothed back his hair, drawing a grin from his partner.

"Nice try, partner, but she'll be looking at you as a patient."

"Yeah, I've noticed that she's only got eyes for you." Wade's laughter ended on a fit of coughing that drew Gabi into the room without invitation.

"You shouldn't be talking," she reprimanded him, sending Quinn a reproving glance. Coming to stand beside the bed, she lowered her hand to his shoulder. "You should be resting quietly, but I'm sure you don't know what that means." Her hand squeezed lightly. "I'm sorry this happened."

Wade waved away her concern. "I count myself lucky that this was all the damage he did." He glanced down at his bandaged side. "The doctor said I'd probably only have to be here overnight. Like I just told Quinn, it wasn't much more than a graze."

"Well, when you get out of here, you'll need to take it easy. There's plenty of time for you to recover, and if you rush into things, you could have a set back. You need to make sure you take care of yourself." Gabi insisted.

"You still need to get away from here."

"I'll take care of her." Quinn's hand caught hers and drew her to his side. "I'll be back to see you in a little while. I'm going to run down to the station, see if they know anything I should know."

Wade's lips curved into a sneer. "How in the hell can they have a lead when I didn't give them anything to go on? I was walking to my car in broad fucking daylight. The guy came out of nowhere. Before I even knew what had happened, he stuck me in the side and hauled ass. Good thing I turned when I did or he might have gotten an important vital

organ.” Neither Quinn nor Gabi smiled at his attempt at humor. Lifting a hand attached to an IV, he dragged it through his hair. “Anyway, all I saw was a black mask and a black T-shirt.”

“You just rest and get better.” Quinn’s voice brooked no argument, and on the way out the door, he paused to toss one last command to his best friend. “Oh, and, one more thing. I don’t ever want to see you in the hospital like this again.” Though he tried to inject a note of authority in his voice, the words came out with more than a little nervousness.

Wade shifted in the bed with a painful grimace. “I’ll certainly try not to get stabbed again. God knows I hate to screw with your plans.” Before Gabi and Quinn could leave the room, he called to them. “Hey, the two of you need to get out of town.”

Quinn glared at him over his shoulder. “I’m not leaving with you in this position.”

“Weren’t you just listening? I’m only going to be here overnight. You gotta do what needs to be done, and Gabi needs to be protected.”

“Don’t talk about me like I’m not in the room,” she protested. “And I’ve made it this far. What’s a few more days?”

“How long do you think it took that bastard to kill those other women?” Wade bit out the reminder, and Quinn took hold of Gabi’s arm. “I’ll post a guard outside your door. No one gets in or out without my knowing about it.”

“You can’t stay in touch with the department if you’re taking Gabi to a safe location.”

Quinn tugged open the door to the hospital room. “Please. I was doing this job while you were still in diapers. I know what I’m doing.” Though it was a running joke about the six-year age difference, Wade didn’t laugh.

“Get her out of town,” he instructed in a hard voice which told Quinn he wasn’t going to be a cooperative patient without the promise.

He inclined his head. “Gabi will be safe. That I can promise you.”

Wade relaxed against the pillows. “Great. I don’t want any witnesses around to see me grope the nurses. After all, I am a happily married man.”

Facial muscles straining from holding the smile in place, Quinn held his hip against the door to allow Gabi to leave first. “Follow the doctor’s orders. Don’t make me have to kick your ass when you get out of here.”

Eyes closed, Wade barely smiled. “Not even on your best day, Captain.”

* * * * *

“Dr. Reddick, you have a telephone call.” The nurse behind the desk passed the receiver across the countertop and released the hold button.

With a quizzical look at Quinn, she accepted the call. “This is Dr. Reddick.”

“I’ve been waiting to hear your pretty voice again, Gabrielle.”

Cold fear raced down her spine like Jeff Gordon at full throttle. “How did you know I was here?”

Quinn reached for the phone, but she held up one hand to stop him.

“You’re not that difficult to find. I always know where you are. Did you like the roses I left for you in the tub? You looked so beautiful lying there that I wanted to wake you, but it wasn’t the right time.”

“So when is it going to be the right time?” She gripped the receiver so tightly her hand ached. “Am I supposed to just keep looking over my shoulder?”

This time, Quinn succeeded in taking the phone, but only because she released it.

“He’s gone.”

After dropping the receiver to the counter, his hands gripped her shoulders. “What did he say to you?”

“The usual. He’s watching and waiting.” Her breath hitched in her throat. “He’s going to kill me. Nothing new.” The words rang with dull acceptance.

“He’s *not* going to kill you.”

“We’re only postponing the inevitable, Quinn.”

He caught hold of her elbow. “Come on. We’re leaving here now.”

“You really don’t intend to leave with Wade in this shape, do you?” Gabi looked over her shoulder, muscles tensed and gaze flicking back and forth between the door to Wade’s room and the black phone sitting atop the counter at the nurses’ station.

“He was right about getting you out of town. In the meantime, I’m going to call in a few favors. It’s time to bring in more manpower.”

She took hold of his arm to bring him to a halt. “You should be here, Quinn. You’ve been working on this case from day one. No one knows it better than you do.”

Something flashed in his eyes, an unidentifiable emotion. Quinn was always good at hiding what he felt, but at least this time, she managed to get a peek behind the armor.

“We can talk about this in the car.” Quinn tugged her toward the exit. His 9mm cleared the leather holster and nestled in the palm of his hand as he walked her toward the car.

She eyed the weapon as he placed it beside her on the seat. “Do you really think that’s necessary?”

He gave her a look that spoke volumes, but didn’t reply.

Snapping the seatbelt into place, she closed her eyes. “So who is this back-up?”

“Just some friends who owe me a few favors.”

“Why doesn’t that surprise me? You always had a finger in every pie.”

“Nothing like staying informed.”

"I don't think I should run any more, Quinn. It's obvious this guy can find me whenever he wants. So why run?"

"The decision has been made. It's not up for discussion." The clipped tones infuriated her and she rounded on him as far as the seatbelt would allow.

"As long as it concerns my life, anything should be up for discussion."

"You're in police custody, and that's where you're going to stay."

"Weren't you just listening? This guy has been at the clinic, my house, the safe house. He can go anywhere he wants to go, and no one can catch him. Why can't you accept that?"

"Because I don't accept what I can change."

She gritted her teeth. "It must be nice to be so in control. I just wish you would talk to me instead of dictating to me. After all, I *am* the one this guy wants. You would think my opinion would matter to you."

Quinn jammed the brakes so hard she felt herself pitch forward and with a squeal of tires, he angled the Chevy toward the side of the road.

Gabi caught hold of the dashboard. "What in the hell are you doing?"

He killed the engine with a turn of the key before his head whipped around to fasten his blistering gaze on her face. "What am I doing? I'll tell you what I'm doing. I'm trying to save your life and you don't seem to realize that this maniac is making it more difficult with each passing day. You want me to talk to you. Fine. I'll talk to you. What do you want to know?"

His hands twisted around the steering wheel until Gabi thought he would rub the leather down. "Do you want to know what goes through my mind each time he leaves you a note, a rose, or calls you? Fear. Plain and simple. This scares the hell out of me. I don't want to lose you, and I'm doing everything within my power to prevent that from happening. But you want to talk." He broke off and dragged a hand through hair in desperate need of a cut.

"Okay. What else do you want to know? Do you want to know how hellish my life has been since this shit started? I can't sleep at night because I'm picturing you on the wrong end of this bastard's knife. And during the day, I have to restrain myself from calling just to make sure you're safe, which is exactly why you're not going to leave my sight from here on out. If you think that's up for discussion, you're sadly mistaken." Releasing her seatbelt, he gripped her shoulders, hauled her into his lap, and fastened his lips on hers.

She started to drown in the intensity of his fear and because her own emotions matched his, she clung to him with an almost desperate hunger. Her hands fisted in his hair, holding him, taking him with her over the edge.

* * * * *

All too soon, sanity returned, and Quinn drew back, taking in deep gulps of air. Pinning her with an almost accusing look, he returned her to her seat. "We don't have time for this."

She didn't remind him that he was the one who'd started it. Instead, she focused her attention on the window, seeing her own reflection in the shiny glass. Her eyes were huge orbs in her face, tousled blonde hair dripping over her shoulders. She felt his hands beneath the heavy weight of her hair, massaging her neck. It wouldn't take much of an effort to convince him to make the time.

In her mind, she saw him easing the seat back, pushing her against the leather. His hand dipping between her legs to find her moist center. He would massage her clit while his lips silenced any sound she could make.

"Gabi?" Quinn's voice broke into her erotic thoughts.

Slamming her eyes shut, she willed the images away. He was right. They didn't have time for this. She cleared her throat. "So what do we have time for? It seems like all I've done the last few days is run and hide. I've stopped living."

Shifting in drive, Quinn took the Chevy back out onto the open road. "No, you haven't. Right now, your life is just on temporary hold until..."

She held up one hand. "I know, I know. Until he's caught." Her words revealed her quiet acceptance. "I'm just beginning to wonder if he's going to win." She caught his stony profile. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't be taking this out on you. You're only trying to help." Reaching across the seat, she touched his leg, and the muscles tensed beneath her fingertips. "No matter what I say, I really do appreciate everything you've done."

"Don't." The word shot out like a discharged bullet.

"Don't what?" She held her breath.

"I don't want your gratitude."

"Then what do you want because honestly, I don't know any more."

Quinn lowered his hand to the radio dial. "Why don't you just try to relax? Once I make sure you're out of harm's way, I'll radio the station and get an update."

"You were always good about that," she whispered, his abrupt change of subject stinging a little.

"Good at what?"

"Avoiding a topic of conversation." She grew silent for a moment before continuing. "Too good as a matter of fact."

"Good enough to ruin our marriage?"

She slid across the bench seat and rested her head on his shoulder, needing to offer comfort as much as take it. "Our marriage ended for a lot of reasons, Quinn, and we both were at fault. I could never blame you for what was an inevitable end."

"Was it inevitable?" Though his tone of voice sounded merely conversational, Gabi wondered just how much her answer would mean to him.

"At the time I thought it was."

"And now?"

"Now I find myself trying to remember why I left."

He didn't respond, and she thought about thanking him. No doubt, he remembered why she left quite well...his job had come between them.

* * * * *

He felt her fear. It wouldn't be too much longer before he made his move. Logan couldn't hang around her twenty-four hours a day. He would have to leave her eventually. And when he did, well, then it would be his time with the beautiful doctor. And in the end, Captain Quinn Logan would suffer for his crimes.

* * * * *

Gabi fell asleep on the uncomfortable couch in Quinn's office, her legs tucked beneath her. Oblivious to the activity going on around her, she didn't notice Quinn's watchful gaze or hear his whispered curses. He hadn't had time to get her to safety before he'd gotten the call from the department.

Rick Bannon had been located and was now being brought into the office for questioning. As he watched Gabi sleep, he could only hope this was the man they were looking for, the one man who would put an end to Gabi's fear.

"Captain?"

Startled, Quinn jumped up, turning toward the sound of the voice. "Sorry. I was out in left field for a minute. What's up?"

The fresh-faced, young detective handed him a stack of papers, leaning over his shoulder to point out a highlighted line. "Here's the rundown on Bannon. Thirty-five, an investment broker. Very ho-hum existence until you factor in his membership in *The Medieval Times*, a society specifically catered toward wealthy individuals who just happen to have a yen for..."

"Let me guess...anything medieval...especially weapons of war." Quinn flipped through the papers. "Do we know where he was the night the last victim was killed?"

"Not yet. He's in interview one when you're ready."

Quinn watched the detective scurry away and sank back down into his chair. Could this be the break they'd been looking for? It almost seemed too easy. Meeting a victim in a bar wasn't the killer's usual MO, but then again, he could have changed. Damn. So many

questions. The answers still hung in the air like helium balloons, but they were way out of his reach. Slamming his hand against his desk, he winced as Gabi stirred.

She rolled over on the sofa, catching herself before she fell. "Quinn?" Her gaze strayed to the wall clock. "Is something wrong?"

Giving her an apologetic smile, he came around from behind his desk, kneeling in front of her. "No, nothing's wrong that hasn't been wrong for the last few weeks." He pressed a gentle kiss against her lips. "Just go back to sleep."

She touched a hand to his cheek, and he heard the rasp of his five o'clock shadow scrape against her palm. "And when is the last time you slept?"

He grinned. "I can survive for days on caffeine and adrenaline."

"That's no way to take care of yourself. You need to rest."

Turning a kiss into the soft skin of her palm, he released her hand. "I appreciate your concern." In fact, it had been a long time since anyone worried about him like Gabi. She'd always been the one to make sure he ate right, got as much sleep as possible with his crazy hours, and then those nights when he was particularly stressed, she would stay up as long as he needed to listen to him. It didn't matter how long it took for him to get the worries of the day off his chest, she listened. He'd never forgotten that, and now, as she lay there looking up at him, he realized he didn't want to let her go this time. It would be her choice, but he'd be damned if he'd let her go without a fight.

"Just go back to sleep, baby. I'll wake you if anything happens." He told the lie with too much practiced ease.

Sam knocked on the doorjamb and poked his head inside. "Uh, Quinn, could I talk to you for a minute?"

Quinn motioned him back out into the hallway, casting one more glance over his shoulder at Gabi's relaxed form before following the detective. "What's on your mind?"

Arms folded, gaze skating to the wall just over his boss' head, Sam was the picture of anxiety. "Look, I just wanted to say I'm sorry...about everything. I was wrong for letting Dr. Reddick make that phone call, and you had every right to put me on report. It just hurts, you know? I mean, we're friends. You've known me for years. Hell, you spent ten years working with my father, and sometimes, even though I know it's not right, I guess I expect more than what you give me."

"You mean special favors." It wasn't a question.

Sam winced. "Well, put that way, it sounds wrong, but I guess I just see it in a different light."

Quinn glanced down at his shoes, rocked forward on his toes before pinning the detective with a steely glance. "You expect me to go easy on you because we were friends before I became your boss, and I knew your father. Am I close to what you're talking about?"

"Not easy, exactly, but easier. I just don't think you would have been as hard on another detective as you were on me."

"Have you spoken with Officer Robbins?"

Sam shook his head slowly. "No, I haven't had the chance."

"Well, you should. You should ask him how easy I went on him for leaving his post. Compared to what he just went through, your reprimand was a cakewalk." Quinn took a step toward the door, pausing to add, "Oh, and I took your grief into consideration before I issued the reprimand. I also took our friendship into consideration. But then, I decided that the job comes first...over anything. It's why we wear these badges."

His hand lowered to the gold shield clasped to his belt. "If you expect favoritism from me because of our long-standing friendship, then, maybe you'd better transfer out. And you should probably think about talking to Wade when he feels up to it. He could probably shed a lot of light on working for a friend. He and I have been friends for a lot longer than you and I have, but that friendship takes a backseat to this job. It has to. People's lives depend upon that kind of tunnel vision." Quinn's hand curled around the doorknob.

Sam's own hand dropped to Quinn's shoulder, stilling him. "I'm sorry. I was wrong. I hope we can get past this."

Quinn angled his body toward the young detective and extended his hand. "As far as I'm concerned, it's over. Everyone makes mistakes...even stupid ones." He grinned as the sandy-haired man accepted the handshake.

"I'll try to remember that, boss. So can I take this to mean you'll be canceling the tail that's been dogging me since last night?"

Quinn smiled. "You saw them."

"I'm a detective. Trained by the best."

"It was procedure, Sam."

"I didn't question why you did it. I just asked if you would be calling off the tail."

"Yeah, I'll cancel them."

"Thanks." The young detective inclined his head slightly before turning to leave.

"Oh, Sam?"

"Yeah?"

"You're a helluva detective."

"You're a helluva teacher, Cap."

* * * * *

Rick Bannon didn't look like a killer, but then, that didn't surprise Quinn. Serial killers rarely looked the part. Normally, they had the appearance of your everyday next-door neighbor. Bannon looked like a Boy Scout leader with his neatly styled light brown hair and

hazel eyes blinking from behind wire-rimmed glasses. Attired in crisp navy Chinos and button-down white shirt, he sat with his hands curled around a cup of coffee.

Quinn watched him through the mirrored window, assessing the man's demeanor. He noted the sheen of sweat dotting Bannon's forehead and the frequent nervous glances toward the door. He gave him a few more seconds to stew before he headed toward the door of the interview room.

Bannon's gaze lifted and connected with Quinn's before he lowered it back to his hands. "I presume you're the cop in charge. I asked to speak to the cop in charge." The man's voice held a squeaky quality.

"I'm Captain Logan." Identifying himself, he leaned against the wall, arms folded, keeping his stance casual, almost as if he didn't care what the man had to say. "We brought you in, Mr. Bannon, because you were last seen with a woman who is now missing."

"Missing? Who? I wasn't with anyone. That is, I haven't been with anyone, not in a long time." The chair squeaked beneath him as he shifted.

Instincts told Quinn the man wasn't lying. "Define long time."

"Two years."

Quinn straightened, pushing away from the table. "Well, I'm sure this can all be straightened out with your cooperation. We have a few questions for you, and if everything checks out, you might even be home in time for dinner."

Bannon's shoulders relaxed for the first time since his arrival in handcuffs. "I'll do what I can to help."

"Great. Have you ever been to a bar on Eighth and Rose called..." Quinn made a show out of scanning the opened folder on the table, even though he knew the name of the bar. "Rocky's?"

More perspiration appeared on Bannon's upper lip. "Yeah. I go there to have a few drinks before going home sometimes. I have a very stressful job and..."

Quinn waved away the remainder of the explanation. He could care less why the guy thought he needed to go there. "And were you there three nights ago?"

"I-I can't really recall." One hand swept up to wipe across his forehead. "It's kind of stuffy in here. You think we could open a window or something?"

"In a minute." Quinn practically barked the response. "When you left that night, did you leave alone?"

Breath hitching in his throat, the investment broker cast a nervous glance around the room as if searching for an escape.

"Mr. Bannon? Could you answer the question, please?"

"I'm sorry. What was it again?"

Teeth clenched, Quinn leaned forward. "Did you leave Rocky's alone?"

"Umm...no...I don't believe I did."

"Who did you leave with?"

"A woman."

"Two years, huh? So what was her name?"

Bannon sat back in his chair and clamped his lips together tightly. His hands twisted against the wooden chair arms, and his feet shuffled against the tiled floor.

Slapping the scarred table with an open palm, Quinn drew even closer, his face inches away from the one suspect whose odds of arriving home in time for dinner had just diminished. "Give me her damn name."

Uncertain, nervous and scared, Rick blurted out the response. "Sara. She said her name was Sara!"

"And what did she look like...this Sara?"

"Tall, leggy blonde with big..." Rick broke off helplessly, allowing Quinn to use his imagination for the remainder of the description.

"And when was the last time you saw her?" Quinn's voice went deceptively quiet.

"I left her apartment the next morning. We spent the night together." He flashed a worried grin. "She made me promise to be out of the house before seven, though. I think she was married." He paused, hazel eyes filling with a sick fear that was almost palpable. "Sara's the one who's missing?"

"Oh, she's more than missing, Rick. She's dead."

"Oh, God." Rick dropped his head into his hands and took several, deep breaths. "You think I had something to do with her death."

Quinn scraped a chair away from the table and seated himself. "You catch on quick. I'm impressed."

Bannon tugged at the collar of his shirt, his face reddening. "I didn't kill her. I only slept with her. When I left, she was still very much alive."

"I wasn't expecting a confession out of you. You've given me all I need for now." Quinn got back to his feet and headed for the door.

"All you need? All I said was that I'd slept with her. I didn't do anything else to her."

Quinn lost interest in listening. Lowering his voice, he spoke to the cop on guard. "Put him in the cage. I'll be back as soon as I've run the warrant." Pausing, he tossed over his shoulder. "You'd better pray to whatever higher power you believe in, Bannon, that I don't find anything in your house that's going to piss me off. Oh, and I wouldn't count on being home in time for dinner, after all." He slammed the door behind him.

Chapter Eight

Quinn opened the door to the interview room, slow, measured footsteps carrying him toward the cage. He leaned against the cold metal bars, a predatory gleam in his eyes. “Either your power wasn’t hearing your prayers, or it’s just not your lucky day, Bannon. Did you actually think you could keep souvenirs, and I wouldn’t find them?” Releasing the slide lock, he opened the metal door and motioned the man out. “I *know* you don’t think I’m that stupid. And really, hiding these little tokens of your accomplishments in your dresser drawer? Can’t give you much for originality.”

Though he’d tried to convince himself on the ride back to the station that they’d finally found the killer, the knot in his gut hadn’t gone away. He could only hope Bannon would slip up and say something that would convince him.

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

“Of course you don’t. That’s the way to do it. Proclaim your innocence even while they drag you kicking and screaming to the state penitentiary. Do you know how many inmates are ‘innocent,’ Bannon?” Shoving the trembling man toward a chair, Quinn barked, “Sit,” before seating himself opposite him. “Do you know how many ‘innocent’ men I’ve helped the district attorney convict over the last twenty years? But you,” he jabbed a finger at the broker’s chest, “I’m going to take great pleasure in helping to ship you off.”

Relaxing back against the wooden chair, Quinn stacked his hands behind his head and gave the man across from him a pitying look. “If I were you, I’d be looking to help myself out as much as I could. I damn sure wouldn’t be sitting here declaring my innocence when the detective seated opposite me has a whole bag full of trinkets collected from each victim he found in my apartment.”

Rick went several shades of white. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Slapping the table so violently it rocked on its unstable legs, Quinn pushed himself to his feet. "Oh, that's good. That'll help when you're sitting in an airtight cell awaiting your trip to meet the Grim Reaper. You *did* know that North Carolina has the death penalty, didn't you? Yes, we believe in executing bastards like you. Do you have family, Rick? Because I've known it to be really difficult on family members. You know, the watching, the countdown and the final wait, and praying for the governor's pardon which usually never comes. Our governor isn't big on pardoning scum, which makes my job a helluva lot easier."

Quinn retrieved the bag of collectibles from his suit coat pocket. "Now, why don't we talk about these? I'm sure you have a story to tell about each one of them." He opened the bag and brought out the first damning piece of evidence, a solid gold chain, worn by the very first victim. "Did you get a lot of pleasure out of tearing this off of her neck? Was she still alive when you took it, or do you always wait until the woman is dead before you steal from her?"

A helpless gurgle escaped the suspect's thin lips and then, eyes rolling back into his head, Bannon passed out, his body sliding to the floor in an ungainly heap.

Quinn wasn't impressed. Motioning to the on-guard officer, he said, "Come and get me when he wakes up."

* * * *

"I know you're probably not going to want to hear this, but I don't think Bannon's the killer." Quinn pushed the half-eaten sandwich away from the edge of the table and folded his arms across the wooden top.

Wade, looking marginally better since his release from the hospital, lifted his gaze from the packet of ketchup in his hands. "And you're basing this on? Oh, let me guess, another hunch."

"More than that. When I showed him the stuff we'd found in his apartment, he passed out. Just fucking dropped over. That sound like a killer who's proud of his work to you?"

"No, not really, but then, how can you explain the stuff?"

"I'm not sure yet." He tapped his finger against his chin. "But I get the distinct impression that someone's gift-wrapping this bastard for us. We've gone for weeks without one single, concrete clue, and now all of a sudden, we've got this guy, an eyewitness description placing him with the last victim, and a bag full of the victims' belongings. It's too easy."

Wade nodded. "Too neatly tied. That's for sure."

Quinn smacked his knee and stood. "Glad you agree with me, but listen, there's no need for you to worry about it. I'll take care of this. You're still on sick leave, remember? You're supposed to be recuperating."

"If I recuperate any more, I'll go stark, raving mad." Wade pushed himself to his feet. "Wherever you're going, I'm coming with you."

"Like hell you are."

"Like hell I'm not."

Both men squared off, hands on hips, eyes glaring. "I'm your commanding officer," Quinn said with just enough fury in his voice to let his friend know he meant business.

"Like that makes a difference to me." Wade rounded the table to snatch his leather jacket from the edge of the sofa. "I know I'm not one hundred percent better, but I started this with you, and I'm going to finish it."

"Look, I have to take Gabi away first. Once I know she's safe, I'll be back. Maybe then you'll be sensible."

"Don't try to blow me off."

"Like I could. I'll be back in a couple of days, tops. Once I'm sure she's okay there, I'll head straight back." He dropped a hand to his friend's shoulder. "Trust me."

Wade rolled his eyes. "Do I have a choice?"

Managing a laugh, Quinn left his friend standing in the center of the living room, knowing that it was for his own good. It was best that Wade stay as far away from the killer as possible.

* * * * *

"Sam told me you caught him. So why are we still leaving?" Gabi clamped the seatbelt around her waist and waited for the response.

"Just for precautionary measures."

"What kind of precautionary measures?"

"Even with airtight evidence, sometimes there can be glitches in the system. I want to make sure Bannon can't get anywhere near you for a long, long time. Until I'm sure he's safely behind bars, I'm not about to let down my guard." Quinn switched on the radio.

Gabi switched it off. "There's something you're not telling me."

"Gabi..."

"Don't even try it, Logan. I'm not about to give up now until you tell me the truth. So what is it? What aren't you telling me?"

"Did you even think about becoming a cop instead of a doctor? You'd make a hell of a detective."

"And you'd make a hell of a politician. So spill it." She angled her body on the seat so she could see his profile.

"There's nothing to spill. I just want to make sure you're safe." His hand slid across the seat to catch hers. "Plus, I wanted to spend some time alone with you."

Gabi allowed him to change the subject...for now. "Could you take me back to my house?"

"I thought we'd been over this. I'm taking you out of town."

"I just need to get a few things. Then I'll go peaceably."

He sent her a questioning frown, but switched on the blinker anyway. "Ten minutes, and I check the house first. I want to get to the cabin before dark."

The house still looked the same and as Gabi walked over the threshold after Quinn did a run-through. It still felt the same. She was home but different somehow. Wrapping her arms around her waist to ward off the chill of the air, she walked into the living room, allowing one hand to trail along the back of the sofa she'd bought from an antique store several years ago. Everything looked so familiar, and yet, nothing was the same.

"It's okay." Quinn's deep voice reassured her.

She gripped the upholstery. "I'm just feeling a little spooked."

His hands settled on her shoulders. "I know, but I'm here."

"Yes, but the question is, how long will you be here?"

"I'm not the one who left." The words hung in the air for a long moment before Quinn dropped his head. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that."

She pulled out of his embrace. "You were only saying what you feel."

"It's not what I feel, Gabrielle. It's just..."

Pressing two fingers against his lips, she shook her head. "Don't. Let's not do this here. Didn't you once say you didn't worry about where the journey ends as long as you were enjoying the ride?"

"Yes, I believe I did say that." His lips twitched.

"Are you still enjoying the ride?" She touched his face with the tips of her fingers.

He captured her hand, kissing the fingertips. "I'm not sure. It's been quite awhile since I've been in the saddle."

"We could remedy that." Standing on tiptoe, she pressed her lips to his.

"We don't really have time." He caught her hand in his.

Her mouth curved into a grin. "And how long does it take you to saddle up, Captain?" Her teeth nibbled at his neck. "If I remember correctly, you were always pretty quick."

His breath escaped his lips in a heated rush, and he caught her against him, his hands falling just below her breasts. Stumbling forward, Quinn guided her around to the front of the sofa. His hands sought the sanctuary of her warm skin, sliding down her shoulders to find the buttons on the front of her shirt. With the release of each, small, pearl button, he kissed a newly revealed section of skin.

Gabi's hands sifted through his thick, black hair. She tugged him closer in a frenzied movement, clamping her arms tightly around his neck. She hooked her calf around his and ground her pussy against his rising cock.

He muttered an oath and taking another step, lowered her down on the cushions, his breath damp against her throat. "God, Gabi, it feels like it's been forever."

"Too long," she agreed, with a hitch in her throat.

His hand slid across her denim-clad legs to settle between the V at the juncture of her thighs. His fingers dug into her channel and dampened the crotch of her jeans. She pushed against them, inviting him to continue the exploration.

Using his knuckle, Quinn massaged her clit until she squirmed and cried her pleasure. Frustrated, needing to feel his warmth against her, she tugged impatiently at the bottom of his knit shirt. He obliged her by whipping it over his head, tossing it to the floor. Her lips fastened on his bronzed shoulder, working their way down the broad expanse of his chest.

Amid fevered kisses, he managed to remove her jeans, his hands re-learning her curves, the feel of her body against his. Pressing her back against the sofa, he fastened his lips to hers, the kiss savage, demanding and taking. He reached down between their bodies and freed his cock.

Gabi worked her hands over his shoulders, his biceps, before making the leap to curl around his steely length. He cursed out loud this time and stilled her hands. "Wait a second."

"I can't wait," she responded with a shove. She caught him by surprise, her hands pushing against his chest. Quinn wrapped his arms around her waist before they toppled to the floor. He landed on his back, and dark eyes caught hers.

"What are you doing?" The words came out on a croak.

She held his gaze as she crawled down his body, feeling his chest rise and fall in anticipation. When she finally reached her destination and her tongue traced the tip of his cock, he shot up to a sitting position.

"Gabi, I don't think –"

"Then don't. I need to taste you." What man could resist such blatant seduction? He relaxed against the carpet while she took him for the ride of his life. She sucked him long and hard until his balls tightened, and she knew he was close to completion. Then, with a reckless laugh of abandon, she mounted him, pushing him deep within her damp pussy. She rode him carelessly, leaning down to jab her clit against his cock. His hands dug into her hips, bruising her tender flesh, but Gabi didn't care. She felt free.

"That's it. That's it," Quinn crooned. "Fuck me, baby. Fuck me."

She couldn't respond for the orgasm wrapped itself around her, and her muscles clenched. She gave a scream of pure delight before falling across his chest, exhausted, and liberated.

He jerked once more, and Gabi peeked up at his face as he came. He looked content, more relaxed than she'd seen in a long time. She stretched up and kissed his neck. "I've been wanting to do that for a long time. Even in the midst of all of this...terror, I've still wanted you."

"I know." He kissed her damp hair.

"Sometimes, when I'm supposed to be sleeping, I lay awake and think of this, of being with you like this."

One hand stroked her back. "I've never stopped loving you." The words resounded in the silence, bringing Gabi's face to his.

She didn't know how to respond so she remained silent, wrapped in the memories of the past. The chiming of the grandfather clock in the hall brought her gaze upwards. "We should probably get going."

"Yeah." He didn't sound too enthusiastic about the idea.

"I'm just going to grab a few things from my bedroom." She pushed herself to her feet and began to get dressed, avoiding Quinn's eyes.

With a low curse, he jumped up and dragged his pants on and up over his hips. "No regrets, Gabi."

She tucked a lock of hair behind her ear and started down the hallway, pausing to add, "No regrets."

He followed her into this bedroom, the tail of his untucked shirt flapping behind him. "Do you still keep your suitcases under the bed?" Yawning, he dropped to one knee beside the bed, his right hand slipping on the comforter covering the mattress.

It took Gabi less than a moment to realize something was wrong, and when she turned, her mouth fell open on a silent scream.

A small, lethal dagger lay nestled atop the fluffy white comforter, and Quinn stood looking down at it, holding the pillow in one hand. "Damn." His breath hissed out from between clenched teeth. "Crime scene's been over every inch of this house. This has to be recent."

Gabi took a step backwards, her spine connecting with the door jamb. "How many times has he been here? He keeps leaving these damn 'gifts' all over the place."

"This wasn't left as a gift. It was hidden." Quinn flipped open his cell phone and began to punch numbers.

"What are you saying?" Her horrified gaze sliced to his face. "Are you saying he was...he was...staying here? That he's been living here...in my house?" The edge of hysteria slipped into her voice.

With the phone next to his ear, he moved around the bed, catching her shoulders before she could bolt from the room. "Gabi, it's okay. You're okay."

"But he was living in my house! What else am I going to find of his here? He slept in my bed!" Pushing him back with the sheer force of her fear, she stumbled toward the door. "He made himself at home here!"

Quinn caught her before she could reach the door and pulled her into his arms. "I know. Just get what you need, so we can get out of here. Another unit will be here shortly." He shifted her into the crook of one arm and snapped short, succinct orders into the receiver before shutting the phone and clipping it back to his hip.

She shook her head. "I don't need anything from here any more. I can't...he might...I don't know what he did while he was here."

"All right. Then let's get out of here."

* * * * *

"Well." Wade hitched one hip on the corner of the desk and proffered a sheet of paper. "I don't know if this is good news or bad news. None of the fingerprints in Gabi's house matched Rick Bannon's."

"He could have worn gloves." Quinn accepted the paper and scanned the information before crumpling it into a ball.

"All day and night?"

"I thought about that, too."

"Just hold on. This isn't conclusive. Maybe he's just careful. Or maybe he wasn't living there. You know, that was just your assumption. You could be wrong."

"No. My hunch was correct. Rick Bannon isn't our guy."

Wade perched one hip on the edge of Quinn's desk. "Well, if Bannon isn't our guy, then I've got a score to settle with the real killer. After what he's done to me, I should get first crack at him." He placed a hand on his partner's shoulder. "Take Gabi. Get her to safety and stay with her. God knows she needs to feel safe for a while. I can only imagine what she's been going through."

"Hell," Quinn admitted.

"Does she still think we've got the guy?"

"I haven't told her any differently."

"Maybe you should keep it that way. She's had enough to worry about."

"Yeah, but I don't think she's really buying it. She knows me too well." Quinn moved away from Wade's prying eyes, avoiding the question he read there. "I should go see how she's doing."

"So have the two of you talked?"

Quinn whirled around. "About what?"

"Nice. Avoid the question. Did you ever stop to think about what caused your marriage to end before? You have to have honesty, openness, and trust. All of that has to be there. I mean, yeah, the sex and love are great, but without the other key ingredients, you're going to be setting yourself up for failure again."

"Great. My partner's turned into Dr. Ruth." The growl was tempered with humor.

Wade gave a bark of laughter. "I'm just worried about a friend."

Quinn returned to his side. "I appreciate it, but there's no need to be. I can take care of myself."

"Who said I was talking about you? I might have been talking about Gabi."

"I'm not going to hurt her."

Wade bobbed his head as if in complete understanding. "See, now that's dangerous territory when you start making promises like that. None of us know what we're going to do or even what we're capable of until we're faced with different situations. You say you're not going to hurt her, but you might. It could happen. I said the same thing to Jenny once." He winced at the memory. "Now, ask me if I've ever hurt her."

Quinn's eyes rose in question. "You've hurt her? How?"

"Let's just say I made a stupid mistake a few years back, a mistake that almost cost me my marriage."

"You cheated on her."

"Not exactly."

"I didn't know there was a 'not exactly' when it came to cheating."

"Look, what I did or didn't do isn't important. I'm just saying that if Jenny and I hadn't had a relationship built on more than just sex and love, we wouldn't have made it. It took awhile to rebuild the trust we had, but we're there now."

Clearing his throat, Wade gave Quinn a sheepish look before continuing. "And at the risk of sounding like the back of a romance novel, I'm trying to make you see that no relationship can last on just the surface love." He straightened and made his way to the door. "By the way, change of subject, but Sam has requested a leave of absence for a couple of weeks. Seems like this situation has gotten to him more than he thought. I told him I didn't see a problem with an approval. After the dressing down he got from his boss, I'm not naming any names, of course, and the formal reprimand on his record, well, I'm sure he just needs some time to regroup. I left the paperwork on your desk. I figured you wouldn't have a problem with it."

"You know the detectives better than I do...even Sam. So I'll go with whatever you think is best. And he deserved the dressing down, but I don't have time to get into that all over again." He dragged a hand through his hair and blew out a breath. "Well, thanks for the pep-talk. I'll give you a call once Gabi and I reach the cabin."

"Great. Talk to you in a few hours then."

* * * * *

He sat back against the plush cushions of the rented sedan, a smile on his face. So the captain thought he could take Gabrielle to some place “safe,” where he couldn’t find her. How typical. When all else fails, run away. Closing his eyes, he rested his head against the dark, gray upholstery and listened to the reassuring beep of the tracker.

* * * * *

“Sergeant Donovan, Bannon insists he’s gotta talk to you. I told him you weren’t interested, but, well, you know how these guys are.”

Wade looked up as the officer poked his head inside the door. “Did he say what he wanted?”

“No, just keeps bitching like an old woman. Want me to tell him he’s out of luck?”

With a sigh, Wade pushed himself to his feet. “No, it’s all right. I’ll talk to him.”

“Holding cell three.”

“You wanted to see me?” Wade approached the cell, doubting the man would have anything to say he wanted to hear. He’d spent several hours with Quinn. No doubt Bannon had already spilled his guts.

Bannon gripped the metal bars. “You have to believe me when I tell you I didn’t do this.”

“And why do I have to believe you?” His internal sensors began to beep. Maybe there was going to be something to this conversation after all. “We have evidence that says otherwise.”

“I know, I know, but I have never even seen that stuff until your captain brought it into the interview room. I would never hurt a woman like that.”

“Yeah, well, you’ll forgive me if I lean toward believing the evidence, won’t you? I’ve been doing this job for way too long, Bannon. I’ve never been one to take the word of a criminal over cold, hard facts. From where I stand, you’re guilty, and you’re just another panicked criminal who’s trying to talk his way out of a lethal injection.” He kept his eyes trained on the man’s face, watching, searching for a sign, something which would negate the evidence they had against him.

Bannon pressed his face against the bars, desperation making his voice an octave higher. “I can understand where you’re coming from, believe me. That’s why I wanted to talk to you. I think there’s someone you should talk to, someone who might be able to help.”

“And that would be?”

“My best friend.”

Wade snorted. "Yeah, right, Bannon. Every criminal I know has a 'best friend' who would be more than happy to lie for him. Not a chance. I'm not falling for your innocent routine." He turned to walk away, but the terror in Bannon's voice brought him to a halt.

"Please. Just talk to him. He'll tell you that I...I would never hurt a woman. I mean, yeah, I have a lot of one-night stands but usually it's because I pay for them. Look at me. Do I look like a killer to you?"

"There is no set appearance for a psychotic killer. I've seen them from all walks of life, from wealthy lawyers to street punks with attitudes. Your appearance doesn't change the facts."

Slapping his palm against the bars, the investment broker took a staggering step back. When he spoke next, his voice cracked with fear and more than a little hysteria. "I'm not guilty. I didn't kill those women. I just don't know what more I can tell you."

"You can tell me how all those little trinkets got into your apartment. If you're not guilty, you should have an explanation."

"I don't know!"

"And what about Sara? You were the last one to see her alive."

"And she was alive when I left!"

"No dice, Bannon. All evidence is pointing toward you. You're hooked on medieval weapons and blonde women. There's that magazine subscription of yours and..."

"No, wait!" He was back with his face pressed against the cold metal. "I'll admit I like blonde women, but I'll date a redhead just as soon as I would a blonde woman. As for the weapons, they aren't my thing. I was given that subscription for a Christmas gift last year. I'm not into those. My best friend did it as a gag."

Wade's heartbeat accelerated. This was it. "So who's your best friend, Rick?"

Chapter Nine

“Wake up, Gabrielle. I want you to see me, to finally see my face. You’ve been hearing my voice for quite awhile now. Aren’t you even curious as to what I look like?” The voice she knew so well purred in her ear.

Gabi struggled to pull away from the hand clamped around her wrist, but there was no use. He was just too strong. She tried to kick out at him, but he had her pinned against the car seat. “Let me go.”

“Let you go? Why would I want to let you go now that I have you?” He lowered his lips to hers as his hand slid up her hip to fondle her breast.

Gabi twisted her head to avoid the kiss. Her heart beat double time, and a cold, clammy sweat enveloped her. “No, I won’t let you do this. I don’t want you to touch me. Get off me!”

“You don’t have a choice.”

She punched out at him. “There’s always a choice.”

“Be still. I don’t want to have to hurt you.” His hot breath bathed her ear with the warning.

She continued to struggle.

“I didn’t want to have to do this. I wanted things to be pleasant for us.”

She felt the cold, serrated edge of the dagger against her throat, and she ceased all movement, the blood draining from her face.

“I didn’t want to have to hurt you yet, but you’ve not given me any other choice, Dr. Reddick. I’ll try to make this as quick as possible.” The weapon dug into her neck, and a trickle of blood eased its way down to the open V of her blouse.

“No!” Her struggles resumed. “No! Get away from me!”

"Gabi, wake up! You're okay." Quinn shook her, and she opened her eyes. "It's okay. It was just a bad dream."

Swallowing hard, she pulled away from him. "Just a bad dream."

He settled back against the driver's seat. "Want to talk about it?" His hands twisted around the steering wheel.

"Not really."

"This will all be over soon, and you can put your life back together now."

She swept her damp hair away from her face with shaky hands. "Soon? When exactly will that be?"

Leaning over, he grasped her shoulders and pulled her into his lap. "I've already told you this is just a precautionary measure."

"That's not answering my question." She looked down at her clasped hands. "I always hated when you did that when we were married."

"Did what?" He kissed her forehead, and for a moment, she forgot what she was going to say. The touch of his lips, so warm and soft, distracted her.

She cleared her throat. "Avoided my questions."

"Is that what you think I'm doing?"

"I think you know something you don't want me to know." The long silence spoke volumes. "That's what I thought." She slipped from his lap and returned to her position in the passenger seat. "We'd better get going."

"Gabi, listen..."

"Could we just go, Quinn? I'm sure you'll tell me what you think I need to know when I need to know it."

* * * * *

"Watch your step in here. It's been awhile since I've been up this way. Raccoons have a habit of finding their way in here and making themselves at home." The cabin door creaked open on rusty hinges, and Quinn stepped over the threshold as a wave of musty air greeted him. "I suppose I could have called Marge and asked her to come air the place out, but it's better this way. No one knows we're here except Wade. Just stand there until I can get some light in here."

Gabi followed him into the living room, waiting in the dark for him to find the light switch. She heard the distinctive click and then soft light bathed the room. "At least you have electricity."

He faced her with a wry grin. "It's away from civilization, but it's not uncivilized. Trust me when I tell you that you'll be safer here. I can hear a car coming from a mile away. No one gets up this mountain without me hearing it."

A gust of cold air swept through the cabin, and she shivered. "Is there heat?"

"I just turned it on. It'll take it awhile to warm this place up, though. Why don't you put your things in the bedroom? I'll build a fire and put some coffee on." He knelt down in front of the fireplace.

"Which room is mine?"

"There's only one." He straightened, brushing his hands down the legs of his jeans. "I hope you don't have a problem with sharing."

Heat splashed her cheeks. "No. No problem." The soft lamplight played across her porcelain features, bringing the vulnerability into stark relief.

Quinn couldn't stop himself from walking toward her, from taking her into his arms. "You're going to be okay, you know. I'll make sure of that."

Her cheek rested against his chest. "I know. Thank you."

"You don't need to thank me, Gabi. I would never let anyone hurt you." As he held her tightly against his body, memories resurfaced, the reassuring moments of the past. Once, they'd been happy together. He wondered if it was too late to salvage what they'd managed to recreate.

He pressed a kiss against her forehead. "Take your things into the bedroom. We can talk more after I build the fire."

"Just for tonight, Quinn, could we not talk about the danger I'm in or the fact that I could die tomorrow?"

He caught her back into his embrace, holding her tightly against his chest. "You're not going to die tomorrow, Gabi." His voice shook with the force of his emotions. "That's not going to happen."

She hooked one arm around his neck, and he heard her inhale against his skin. "I just don't want to talk about anything that has to do with...with..."

He shushed her by pressing a finger against her lips. "I know. We won't. I promise. Now, go on. I'll have it warm in here in a few minutes."

* * * * *

Moments later, wrapped in an afghan in front of the fire, Gabi nursed the cup of hot coffee as Quinn knelt back in front of the fireplace, stoking a fire that didn't need any further attention. The glow of the firelight swept across his face, and she caught her breath. Her love for him hadn't dimmed. She doubted it ever would no matter what the outcome of her situation. "Quinn." Her voice broke the stillness of the cabin.

His hands held a piece of wood, but he didn't attempt to toss it into the fire. "Yeah?"

"Aren't you going to sit down?"

"In a minute."

"I love you." The words slipped past her lips before she could stop them. She doubted she would have anyway.

The chunk of firewood hit the hardwood floor with a thunk. Slowly, he turned to face her. His gaze caught hers, held and with one fluid movement, he was at her side and she was in his arms.

"I'm sorry," she whispered against his cheek. "I shouldn't have said it like that."

He pulled back, cupped her face. "It doesn't matter how you said it, only that you did." He rained kisses over her face, her nose, before finally settling on her lips. "God, Gabi, these last few weeks have been...I can't even describe it."

"I know. You've wondered if I was going to be alive from day to day and then, when I was, you didn't know what to say to me."

He leaned back against the sofa, drawing her close to his chest. "It's hard to know what to say after all this time."

Gabi felt the steady beat of his heart beneath her palm. It reassured her. "Love isn't enough, is it?"

"No. Yes." He sat up, dragging his hands through his hair. "Love isn't all we have. We have a past, Gabi."

"Not exactly a rousing endorsement for the future."

His shoulders tense, he dropped his hands between his splayed knees. His voice cracked with emotion as he continued the story. "What if we make sure we don't repeat the past?"

"We can't guarantee that." Her hand ghosted across his cheek.

He shook his head. "No, we can't, but does that mean we don't try?"

Her hand slipped into his. "I need to know the truth about why we're here. Is the guy you have in custody the killer?"

Quinn's hands dropped to his sides. "We're not sure, no."

"And that's why you brought me here...to make sure?"

He laughed a little. "I think it was more to reassure myself you were okay." His fingers entwined with hers. "And I needed to be alone with you, to know you were all right."

Her shoulder bumped his. "I will be as long as I'm with you."

* * * * *

"Dammit! Where in the hell are they?" Wade shouted to no one in particular. "And why isn't he answering his cell phone?"

"Maybe he didn't take it with him, Sergeant."

"Quinn always has his cell phone with him. It's like a part of his anatomy."

"Out of range?" Another officer offered.

“Keep trying the number, and if you reach him, patch him through to my car immediately.”

“Yes, Sir. Uh, Sergeant, what’s going on?”

Wade strode to the door. “He’s not as safe as he thinks he is.”

* * * * *

There they were, all wrapped up cozily in front of the fire. He couldn’t hear their murmured words of passion, but he knew they were declaring their love for one another. Too bad it wouldn’t last. He felt no remorse for what he must do. Dr. Reddick and the captain had two very different destinies and tonight, with his help, they would find them.

* * * * *

Gabi rubbed her hand over his chest, smiling in the growing light. His heart beat as rapidly as hers. “You’re breathing heavily.” She noted with a wicked laugh.

Quinn chuckled, tugging her over until she rested atop him. “Gee, I wonder why.”

She shivered though she was wrapped in his embrace. “I think the heat’s out.”

He stuck one hand out from under the comforter. “Yep. It happens every now and then during the toughest winter months, but I wasn’t expecting it now. I guess I’d better get a fire started...unless you’d just like to stay in bed all day.”

Her stomach rumbled in response. Gabi tilted her face back with a laugh. “Sorry, but my stomach has other plans.”

Grumbling, he threw his legs out from under the covers and clamped his teeth tightly together to still the chatter. “Damn, it’s cold in here. Just stay under the covers until I get back in with some firewood.”

“I wasn’t planning on going anywhere, Captain. I expect breakfast in bed.” Tucking the blankets up to her chin, Gabi grinned at him.

Sliding into his jeans, he tossed her a heated glance. “I wouldn’t mind eating in bed myself.”

She laughed. “I don’t think we’re talking about the same kind of nourishment.”

“Well, all I know is that I could sustain myself for days on last night’s buffet.”

Rolling to her side, she presented her back to him. “Good, then you shouldn’t be hungry.”

“Actually –” He leaned forward to tug the blanket out of her unsuspecting grasp. “– we only got to the main entree last night. I could really go for some dessert.”

“Too bad there isn’t a supermarket around here, then.”

He smacked her on the rump hard enough to make her skin tingle. "I see you've regained the use of your sarcasm."

She tossed a pillow at his tousled head. "And I'm remembering those less than stellar qualities of yours."

Quinn caught the pillow with a flick of his wrist. With a wink over his shoulder, he secured the last button on his flannel shirt and grabbed his jacket. "You used to say they were endearing."

"I lied."

Coming back to the bed, he pressed one knee against the mattress, leaning down to catch her lips in a rough kiss. "Yeah, well, you better just get used to them again because there's no way in hell I'm letting you out of my sight any time in the near future." He cupped her chin. "And this time, I won't screw it up."

* * * * *

Gabi drifted in a dreamless sleep when the jangling of the phone beside the bed woke her with a start. Pushing the hair away from her face, she sat up, scrambling to reach the receiver to still the annoying sound. "Hello?"

"Gabi, I'm so glad I caught you. I've been trying to..." The connection crackled. "...reach you. Listen, you've...got to...I...will...send." The static intensified. "Just...start...get...out...there."

"Who is this? I can't understand you. You're breaking up."

"Wade..." The crackly voice came back.

"This is a bad connection. Why don't you try to call back? Or I can call you. Are you at the station?"

"Gabi, get out of there!" he shouted.

"What are you talking about? Get out of where?" The line went dead. "Wade? Are you still there?" An uneasy feeling took up residence in her stomach, and her hand clenched around the receiver in a white-knuckled grasp. "Wade?" She whispered his name in the silence, but the connection terminated.

Fear immobilized her, rooted her to the spot. Something was wrong. Quinn should have been back by now. Beyond the fear, panic seeped in, uncoiling her muscles. Desperately, she pushed the blankets to her feet and climbed out of the bed, racing to find her overnight bag...and the .357 Magnum nestled in the side pocket. She slid a clip into place and tucked the cold steel against her side. Stopping long enough to pull on one of Quinn's T-shirts, she walked to the door on legs as weak as water. "Quinn?" Her mouth dry as cotton, her voice rasped with the effort to speak.

The front door clicked open. Her heart raced within her chest. "Quinn, is that you?"

The door slammed shut, and she bit back a scream, forcing herself to put one foot in front of another. "Quinn, answer me!" A sob of hysteria slipped past her lips, and she pressed herself against the wall, inching forward. It wasn't Quinn. He would have answered her by now. She was sure of it. Cold perspiration dampened her body while the sound of her heart beat loudly in her ears.

"Hello, Gabrielle." The icy voice coming from behind her paralyzed her.

She turned as if in slow motion, expecting him to be right over her shoulder. Instead, he stood at least ten feet away from her. He wore a black ski mask to obscure his face, but Gabi didn't need to see his face to shoot him. She raised the gun, leveling it at his heart. "Don't come any closer."

"Come now, Gabrielle. You've taken an oath to save lives not take them."

"If I have to kill you to save my own life, that's what I'll do."

He shook his head. "Really. I expected so much more from you."

"How could you expect anything from me when you don't know me?" She took a step backwards, trying to judge the distance to the front door.

"Then why don't you go ahead and shoot me? Can you really kill me?"

"Just try me." Her voice carried much more bravado than she felt. Could she really pull the trigger, knowing that it would take a human life?

He lifted his gloved hands as if surrendering. "Okay, I'm trying you. Kill me. But then, you won't know what I've done with Captain Logan."

Gabi bit down on her lower lip, tasting blood. "You haven't done anything with him."

"No? Then why isn't he back yet?"

"He's getting some wood."

"It doesn't take that long to walk to the woodshed, even you know that. I see the worry in your eyes. You're wondering if I've done something to him. You're not very good at bluffing, you know. I don't suppose you're a very good poker player." He took a step forward. "Why don't you just relax? All I want to do is talk to you. I'm not going to hurt you."

She didn't lower the gun. "Is that what you told the other women?"

"The other women were just...toys to keep me occupied until I found the right one. You are the right one."

"Am I supposed to feel flattered?"

He laughed, clapping his hands in delight. "Well, I can see some of your true personality is returning. Is your fear receding?" He waved a hand toward the living room. "Why don't we sit down?"

She didn't budge. "I don't want to sit and chat with you while you decide when you're going to make your move. I know how you operate. You want me to lower my guard so you can move in for the kill."

“What a delightful play on words!” He took another step closer to her.

“Stop. I don’t want to have to shoot you.” Her hand began to ache from the weight of the gun.

“Of course, you don’t. You’re a healer not a killer, Gabrielle. In fact, I’d lay odds that even if you did shoot me, you’d try to save my life afterwards. Isn’t that who you are?” He sounded amused, as if he was patronizing a willful child.

“Where is Quinn?”

“So now you think I’ve done something with him? Well, which is it? I either put him out of the picture for a while, or I didn’t. So what do you believe? If you kill me, you won’t know the answer, will you?” His tongue clicked against his teeth. “Tough decision, isn’t it?”

Using her free hand, Gabi released the safety catch on the Magnum. “I don’t have to kill you. I could just make you suffer. I *am* a doctor. I know exactly where to shoot you to cause the most...discomfort. With enough bullet holes, you would, of course, eventually die, but you would endure tremendous agony while your life’s blood seeped out of you pint by torturous pint.” Her hand steadied. “Now, why don’t you tell me what you’ve done to Quinn?”

More applause. “Bravo! I’m proud of you. That’s the spirit I was looking for. But come, let’s sit down and talk. There’s no need for us to stand here like enemies. I want to get to know you.”

“We *are* enemies, and I’m not interested in getting to know you.”

“He could be out there now, you know, sick, bleeding, needing your help. You really should concentrate on helping him, and the only way you’re going to be able to help him is if you put that gun down. I’ll tell you where he is then.” His gaze lingered on the swell of her breasts before skirting down toward her hips.

Her mind flashed an image of Quinn’s broken and bruised body lying in the snow and for a brief second her hand wavered.

The attacker saw the opening and took it. He leaped toward her and gripped her wrist, bruising the flesh until she yelped with pain. He knew exactly which nerve to push to make her hand open. The Magnum tumbled toward the hardwood floor, but he stooped, catching it in his free hand. His arm slid around her waist. “You see, Gabrielle, now we’re really going to have some fun.”

The pressure of his hand against her lips stifled the scream building in her throat, and as he tipped her head back, she stared into the coldest eyes she’d ever seen. Cold and yet, somehow, familiar.

Gabi’s resolve strengthened as she listened to his heavy breaths. He might kill her in the end, but she wouldn’t make it easy for him. This was a game of survival, and she would do her damndest to be the survivor in the end. Closing her mind against the fear, she brought her heel down in a sharp arc atop his foot.

She didn't take time to enjoy his squeal of pain before she jabbed her left elbow into his solar plexus. The breath whooshed out of his lungs, and he struggled for air. Catching him off-guard gave her enough leverage to push back against him. Gravity drew him to the floor, but his hand caught her around the waist, bringing her down with him. With an easy turn of his body, he captured her beneath him. His breaths came hard and raspy against her ear.

Using all of her strength, and even more that she didn't know she had, Gabi fought him. Her nails raked his face; her feet kicked at the vulnerable spot which made him a male. Blinded by rage and desperation, she twisted and bucked against him, hearing his outraged cries of pain mingle with her own. His fist caught her under the eye. Her hand shoved against his nose. Then, another swift kick to the groin and she felt his hold on her release. Smelling victory, she tried to roll beneath him. Only the cold steel blade pressed against her throat stopped her.

He now panted against her ear while one hand snatched a fistful of her hair. "You see, Gabrielle, you can fight all you want, but in the end, I hold the trump card." He laughed mirthlessly. "That was quite a fight you gave me there. If I hadn't known that I was going to win eventually, I might not have enjoyed it as much." Standing, he pulled her to her feet. "But since you have such a strong desire to live, I think I'm going to give you that chance." At the stunned look on her face, he grinned. "Oh, don't think I'm going to make it easy, dear girl. On the contrary. This will be the hardest fight you've ever fought in your life. Now, come with me. I want to have you all ready for when your boyfriend returns. And don't look so surprised. I didn't hurt him. In fact, he doesn't even know I'm here. Won't he be surprised to return and find my little gift for him?"

"Quinn will kill you for this." Her voice rang with conviction although her knees shook with terror.

"Oh, I'm sure he'll try, but –" His shoulders lifted in a shrug. "– in the end, I'll win. After all, you've been running from me for weeks now and look who's victorious in the end?"

"Then why don't you go ahead and kill me? You've won. Just get it over with."

His empty hand stroked her cheek much as a lover would. "No, my darling. I can't do that just yet. I have so much more in store for you. I have to wait until just the right time."

Trying to buy time, Gabi twisted her head back to see his knit-covered face. "And when will that be?"

His eyes crinkled with his smile. "Oh, you'll know soon enough, my sweet. Now, hush. I have to get you prepared to meet Captain Logan." His arm still wrapped around her shoulders, the dagger barely brushing her throat, he guided her into the bedroom.

Chapter Ten

Quinn headed back toward the house, tossing a wave over his shoulder at the old man he'd befriended over two years ago. His booted feet made deep furrows in the snow as he neared the back door. Whistling, he shifted the weight of the wood to his biceps and twisted the doorknob. His whistling ceased abruptly.

Every instinct in his body told him something was wrong, and Quinn always trusted his instincts. The load of wood tumbled to the floor, making a loud clattering noise that echoed in the stillness. His hand patted the back of his jeans and recovered his loaded semi-automatic. "Gabi?" He whispered her name, praying she would call out to him, anything to let him know she was alive and well.

Dead silence was the only response, and the hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. He called her name again, louder and this time, he heard the distinct sound of a whimper. His heart thundered in his chest. Blood pounded in his ears, and throwing caution to the winds, he dove around the corner by the back door and saw nothing. "Gabi! Shit! Where are you? Answer me!"

Another whimper that sounded more like a plea. His brow covered in sweat, he made his way down the hallway, weapon trained and ready. The bedroom door pushed open with a creak and then, for the rest of his life, Quinn would swear, in that moment, for a brief span of time, his heart stopped beating.

Tied to the corner bedpost, her legs folded beneath her, Gabi stared up at him with green eyes red from weeping. A filthy rag stuffed into her mouth and a bruise that was rapidly changing colors covered her left eye. He saw the chafing on her wrists from the constant tug for freedom, and her scantily clad body was red from cold and abuse.

Quinn's next words were curses so pungent that even his partner would have cringed had he been witness. Then, he came to her side, the semi-automatic resting on the floor at

his knee. His hands made short work of untying the rope binding her before tugging the rag out of her mouth.

Collapsing against him, Gabi sobbed in his arms, the strength sapped from her body. "He was here," she murmured over and over as if trying to convince herself she wasn't going crazy.

Quinn's hands fisted in her hair as he held her, warming her, comforting her. "I know. I know. I'm sorry." His arms bracketed her slender body so tightly his muscles jumped.

"I fought him," she whispered brokenly. "I fought the bastard. I tried to win. I tried to hurt him, Quinn. I wanted to hurt him." Tears running rivulets down her cheeks, she buried her face in his flannel shirt.

"It's okay." He didn't know what else to say.

"I don't want to hurt anyone. I didn't want to hurt him, but I did. I scratched him. I saw him bleed and I wasn't sorry. Damn him, I wasn't sorry!" Lifting her head, she screamed the last sentence even as her fists pummeled his chest. "He was laughing. It was all some kind of a sick game to him!"

Resting his chin atop her head, Quinn sought the words to soothe her. "I know you don't want to hurt anyone, but what you did was self-preservation. Each of us has the instinct to survive inside. That's why people kill in self-defense, to protect themselves from harm. But you weren't trying to kill him, only to survive."

"But I could have killed him. I had my gun."

"You had your gun? Where?"

"It was in my bag. I found it in your desk drawer at the station."

"So where is it now?"

"He took it away from me."

"Dear God, Gabi, that's exactly why I didn't want you to have it! Do you realize how close you came to being shot?" His blood ran cold through his veins.

Suddenly, she pulled away, her hands balled into fists against his chest. "He wouldn't have been able to get close to me if you had been here. Where were you? I called for you! Why didn't you answer me? You were supposed to be here to protect me!"

"Oh, God, I was talking to Jim. He's an old-timer who lives up here. He gets lonely, and whenever I come up, I always make a point out of going to see him. I thought you were safe. Hell, I thought you'd probably go back to sleep and wait for me to get the house warm. I'm so sorry."

"So you were right about Bannon then. He's not the killer." She shivered. "He must have followed us. How? How could you not have seen him?" Recovering some of her rationality, she demanded answers, and the tone of her voice told Quinn she wouldn't settle for anything less than the truth.

"Just wait a second, Gabi. I need to call the department and get some guys up here." One hand resting on her arm, he used his free hand to lift the receiver. "And no one followed us. I would have seen him. Damn. No dial tone."

Still shaking, Gabi pulled the comforter over her body and nodded. "I know. Wade called earlier. He was trying to tell me something, but it was a bad connection. I told him to call back, and just before the phone went dead, he screamed at me, told me to get out of here." Sanity had almost fully returned, and she could think clearly. Pushing her tangled hair away from her face, she fixed her gaze on his face. "We have to get out of here. He's coming back."

Quinn stood, shoving his hands down into the pockets of his jeans. "I know. That's exactly why we have to be here when he gets here."

"What? Be here? Are you crazy?"

"This is it, Gabi. Now that he's here, we've got to end this." He looked around the room. "I'm going to find a safe place for you while I –"

"Why do you think he let me live?"

The interruption caused his brows to furrow. "Because he wants to use you as bait. This is more than just another killing to him. He wants to get something more out of it." Quinn began to pace the bedroom.

"He gave me another rose. This time, it still had the thorns. I wonder if it's supposed to be a symbol." She pointed to the forgotten flower on the floor.

Quinn kicked it aside with the toe of his boot. "Forget the damn flower and its possible meanings. He's coming back, and I'm going to be ready for him." He whirled around to face her. "You said Wade called. Did he say he was on his way?"

"We didn't get to have an actual conversation, and what do you mean you'll be ready for him? You're not going to hide me away, Quinn. I fought this bastard once, and I'm not about to back down now."

"You're not a part of this. I've got to make sure you're safe and out of his way."

Thrusting the blankets aside, she climbed out of the bed. "Like hell you do. He keeps changing the rules. That's the only way he knows how to play this sick game of his."

Quinn walked toward her, catching hold of her shoulders. "I'll take care of this." His gaze burned into hers. "I promise."

Pulling in a breath so deep it made her lungs ache, Gabi bumped her head against his chest. "Seeing him, being that close to him." She shivered. "I'm not going to let you do this alone. I saw his eyes, and this isn't just about me. He wants you, too."

His hands moved to fist in her hair. "Oh, he's going to get me. Just not in the way he wants." Giving her a quick, hard kiss, he took hold of her hands. "Now, let's get you out of here."

Removing her hands from his slowly, Gabi backed away. “Were you not just listening to me? I just spent about thirty of the most hellish minutes of my life with a madman who wants to claim me for his latest trophy. And I survived. If you think for one minute I’m going to play hide and go seek while you take this guy down, you are so wrong.”

“This isn’t about hide and seek. It’s for real, and you’re not trained to compete with a killer.”

“Obviously, you weren’t listening. I fought him, and I survived.”

“You almost became a permanent victim, but he let you live for a reason. We just don’t know what that reason is just yet.” His heart raced. Fighting back the image of Gabi’s blood-covered body, he turned his back on her. “Forget it, Gabi. It’s not happening.” He crossed the floor to the window and pushed the curtain away. “He’s not coming back today.” His kept his voice relaxed, as if he wasn’t concerned one way or the other.

“Why not?”

When had she moved so close to him? He hadn’t heard her, and in his line of work, that wasn’t a ringing endorsement. “He likes to feed on fear.”

Leaning forward, she pressed her body against his. “So if he didn’t follow us, how do you think he found us?”

Quinn shifted, settling her even closer to his large frame. “Probably a tracking device.”

She shivered. “And I guess we didn’t think to check the car.”

“I was more concerned with getting you out of town.”

“So we’ve already made a mistake, and now we’re in his backyard.”

He lifted her head with his hands at her cheeks. “That’s where you’re wrong. This is *my* backyard. I’ve been coming to this cabin for years. I know this territory like I know my own mother’s name, which is precisely why I wanted to bring you here.”

She eyed him quizzically, but didn’t ask the question on the tip of her tongue. He answered it anyway.

“I knew if something was going to go down I’d be able to even the odds here.”

“But you knew Bannon had been arrested. Why would you think something was going to go down?”

Silence.

“Quinn?”

He pressed her head down in the crook of his neck. “Why don’t you go take that shower now?”

Her head popped back up. “Right. Nice try, Logan, but that’s another one of your classic moves. Hedging. Now, do you want to tell me what’s going on?”

“Not really.”

“Do it anyway.”

He didn't want to, but odds were good she wouldn't back down. "I never thought Bannon was the guy."

Gabi pushed away from him, wrapping her arms around her waist. "So you let him sit in jail while you let me believe that the killer was arrested...why?"

"Because a hunch isn't evidence. Our justice system tends to want cold, hard evidence. All of which pointed toward Bannon. The real killer did a helluva frame-up job on him."

"Do you think Bannon knows the killer?"

"Probably, and so does Wade. That's why he tried to warn us." Impatient, Quinn strode out of the bedroom, talking more to himself than to her. "More than likely, he'll wait until dark and kill the electricity."

"The electricity?" Gabi followed him into the living room.

"Don't worry. I have a generator."

"A generator. There is a lunatic out there who we both know is pretty good at dicing people. He also has a bad attitude and deadly aim. And all you have is a generator?"

"Well, a generator and a semi-automatic. But with this guy, the generator is everything." He stopped in front of the sofa and beckoned her with one hand. "See, as long as he's in control, he's happy. When something goes wrong to screw up his plans, then all hell breaks loose. If I shake him up, he's going to fall apart. He cuts the phone line, probably already knowing we don't get cell phone reception up here. We're stranded without access to the outside world. He kills the electricity, and we're supposed to be helpless and in the dark. He's not expecting the generator. That will throw him off-balance."

Before he could continue, three successive blasts interrupted, and glass shattered, littering the carpet below the window. Quinn threw his body over top of hers and rolled with Gabi, dropping them both to the floor. Two more booms followed, hitting the solid oak wall with loud thunks.

Gabi ended up on top, staring down into his unyielding features. "Those aren't just ordinary gunshots, are they?"

He shook his head, motioning her to silence. Withdrawing his gun, he waved her to stay still. Then, he began snake-crawling forward toward the window. Rolling to a sitting position, he used his legs to guide his body up the wall until he was level with the broken pane.

Taking aim, he popped off a couple of rounds. The response came in a volley of gunfire that didn't sound as loud as the initial ones.

"This is out of character. Guys like him don't just pepper the air with bullets. Stay down." He leveled off another volley of shots. "Fucker's trading weapons." Coming up to one knee, he aimed and fired again.

A startled cry of pain followed the sound of retreating footsteps crunching against the fresh snow. "I got the bastard."

"Is he dead?" Gabi scrambled to her feet.

"No! I told you to stay down. He's just wounded. Probably just in the shoulder. He'll come back when he's patched up the bullet hole."

"I might have known it wasn't going to be that easy."

"It never is." He crawled back toward her, sliding the safety catch back into place as he returned the weapon to its holster.

Gabi sat beside him, her hand resting on his thigh while she trembled. "Did you get hurt?"

He held his arms away from his sides, giving her permission to take inventory. "Nope. Still have all my moving parts in perfect working order."

"How can you joke at a time like this?" Her lower lip wobbled.

He rolled his head over to look at her. "This situation is tough enough as it is, Gabi. We can't let the fear control us."

"You mean control me." She wrapped her arms around her waist and stared off into space. How could he be so glib? Could he not see the fear in her eyes? Hear her teeth chattering? While a long string of gunshots might be just part of the job for him, to her, it had sounded like death.

"No, I meant us."

"You aren't that scared."

"When those bullets started flying, I was scared enough."

His words caught her off-guard, and she assessed with a quick gaze. "You were?"

"A dagger is one thing. A sawed-off shotgun is another. With a dagger, you have to be pretty close to take someone out unless you have damned good aim and a strong throwing arm. With a shotgun spitting bullets, you just have to point it in the general direction of your target. He was pointing in our direction in case you didn't notice." He caught her hand, entwined his fingers with hers. "We are going to make it through this."

She squeezed his hand, not sure if she could agree with him just yet.

"And when we do make it through this, I think we should get married...again."

Her mouth fell open. "What?"

"You heard me."

"Yes, I heard you, but I don't think I believe you. What kind of a marriage proposal is that? We're in the middle of a life and death situation, and you ask me to marry you. No, correction, you didn't ask me to marry you; you just gave me your opinion, what you thought we should do. That was, without a doubt, the strangest proposal I've ever heard."

Quinn lowered his head to smother a grin. Changing the subject had worked. It had taken her mind off the problem at hand, distracting her. As she continued to rattle on about the inappropriate proposal, he concentrated on formulating a plan, a survival guide that

would save their lives. His glance strayed to the shattered window, eyes narrowed as he tried to gauge the distance the bullets had traveled.

Gabi tilted her head to one side, watching him. "You're not listening to me, are you?"

He shook his head. "Not really, but I thought it did you good to talk about something else besides this fucker." On his hands and knees, he made his way back to the window. He pushed the curtain aside and peeked out. Nothing moved, and all he saw was a wide expanse of landscape. Satisfied that they were alone once more, he allowed the chintz drapery to drop back into place.

"Round one is over. Time to get ready for round two."

Chapter Eleven

Quinn caught the faint glow of firelight as he stood by the kitchen window. Night had fallen, sweeping over the landscape, giving the killer a place to hide. The bastard was probably toasting marshmallows. Well, if he had his way, he'd send the lunatic someplace he could toast them permanently.

Gabi's hand touched his shoulder, and he turned, focusing his attention on her. His hands lifted, framed her face. Even with the lack of color to her cheeks, she was still beautiful. The blonde hair, the killer's magnet, surrounded her face in a golden halo. Her lips were moist and parted, almost as if waiting for his kiss. Her green eyes were tinted with pain and a desire to believe they would walk away from this. His heart ached to reassure her.

She stepped into his arms, her head against his chest, her heart communicating with his. No words were spoken. They couldn't say anything that hadn't already been said. Time drew closer. They both knew that in a matter of hours or even minutes, they would face the toughest battle any human being could ever face...the fight for their lives.

Quinn tilted her face to his with one finger under her chin. With a smile that was slow in arriving, he reassured her, his eyes carrying promises his lips didn't.

Standing on tiptoe, Gabi pressed her lips to his. He drank from her lips, needing to taste her. Her heart clattered loudly against her breast as his hands settled around her waist, drawing her in closer to the heat of his body. She whispered his name as the kiss deepened. They drank from one another's strength, leaving the weaknesses behind...at least for a few moments.

Stepping away from her, Quinn allowed his hands the pleasure of one last touch before dropping them to his sides. "Go get the bag out of the bedroom, the black one I told you about."

Nodding, she turned to do as she was bid. Locating the bag, she tossed the strap over her shoulder and carried it back into the kitchen. She smiled up at him, communicating without words. She couldn't say what was in her heart, but she didn't need to. Quinn knew the fear, the dread of what was to come. He saw it in her eyes, heard it with every breath she took.

He gave her one more, short kiss. They were running out of time. He sensed the killer's presence, knew he was near, close enough probably to see them, maybe even hear what they said. His hands settled across her shoulders, giving them a gentle squeeze before he stooped to retrieve the black gym bag.

She swung back toward the living room, her steps slow, reluctant. Her breath caught audibly as Quinn gave the harsh command to stay low.

The warning she gave him was just as intense. "Be careful."

He gave her the thumbs-up signal as he slipped his arms through the holes of the bulletproof vest.

* * * * *

Gabi sat beside the front door, her back to the wall, a small .28 in her right hand. She kept her left hand tucked beneath her for warmth. Her gaze followed Quinn's every movement as he went from room to room, securing windows, setting traps and closing off the rooms they wouldn't need for the final showdown. She bit back a hysterical laugh. God, it sounded like a scene from an old spaghetti western.

Quinn approached her, his finger against his lips. His head tilted to the side, he listened. With a sudden burst of speed, he drew his weapon, flung himself against the wall beside her and dropped to one knee. His face was inches away from the broken window, the muzzle of the automatic brushing the painted wood at the corner.

Gabi climbed to her knees behind him. "Is he out there?"

He gave her a brief, succinct nod.

She'd known the answer before she'd even voiced the question. His response was anticlimatic. She swallowed the hard lump in her throat and closed her eyes, praying for strength and safety. Would God even hear her?

Quinn slid back the chamber. It made an audible sound that made goose bumps slide over her arms.

"Captain Logan!" The voice startled her and she fell back against the wall, her hand clutching her chest.

Quinn inched closer to the window. "I'm here."

"I just want to talk to you."

"You've already talked. You've made your wants quite clear," Quinn shouted in return.

“Are you afraid to face me, Captain?”

Quinn’s hand tightened around the butt of the gun. “No, but I’m not stupid, either. I don’t know your arsenal.”

“And I don’t know yours, but I’m standing out here in the middle of the yard. If you look out the window, you can see me. I’m unarmed right now.” The killer smacked his gloved hands against his side, as if hoping to impart his helplessness.

Quinn climbed slowly to his feet, still keeping his body pressed to the wall.

Gabi leaped up beside him, her hand on his arm. “You aren’t seriously thinking about going out there, are you? It could be a trap.”

“No, it’s not. He wants me to meet him – to see who he really is.”

“But that doesn’t make any sense.”

“Sure it does. He doesn’t think we’re getting out of here alive, so what harm could there be in revealing his identity?”

Her face whitened, and her hand tightened on his arm. “Please don’t go out there.” She’d plead if she had to, anything to keep Quinn from walking out the door. He hadn’t seen the coldness in the man’s eyes, felt his fury. If Quinn confronted him, he could die, and she’d do whatever she had to do to keep that from happening.

He peeled her fingers away, lowering her hand to her side. “I have to. It’s important that I see him. I have to know my opponent.”

“Now is not the time for heroics!” Panic made her snap.

“I have to go out there.”

“No, you don’t. Why can’t you just aim at him, shoot him?” Desperation laced her voice, and she clutched at him once more. “You said yourself that he won’t give up. He’s not about to surrender. I don’t trust him.”

“Neither do I, but if he really is unarmed, I can’t shoot him, Gabi.”

A trickle of sweat slid down her spine. “Why not? Hasn’t he done enough to deserve to die?” The moment the words filled the air, she slapped one hand over her mouth. “I can’t believe I said that.”

He cupped her cheek with his empty hand. “No one can blame you for thinking that. Now, stay out of the doorway, and I’ll be back in a few minutes.” His hand still wrapped around the automatic, he advanced toward the door.

Her hands dropped away from his arms, and she bit her lower lip to keep from screaming his name. She saw her dream for the future fade away with each step he took just as she had when she’d left him before. But that had been her choice before...this time, the choice was out of her hands.

“Are we going to do this, Logan?”

Quinn gave Gabi a warning look as his hand turned the doorknob. “I’m here.”

Standing in the center of the fresh snow, dressed all in black, the killer extended his arms away from his sides. "Do you want to frisk me?"

"What kind of game are you playing?" Quinn kept the gun safely tucked behind his back.

His opponent laughed, a shrill, forced sound. "Oh, it's no game. I assure you that I'm quite serious." He lifted a finger, tapped it against his covered cheek. "Now, I wonder what you want to happen, Captain? Let me see if I can guess. In your perfect world, you'd like me to surrender, throw myself on the mercy of the justice system, and allow you and the pretty doctor to go your merry ways. Am I close?" He lifted leather-clad shoulders in a halfhearted shrug. "Or better yet, you'd like me to 'go for my gun,' so you can use the one you've got behind your back to drop me. You'd really like to see me dead, wouldn't you, Logan?"

Quinn stared at him for a long time, assessing the tone, the inflections. The voice, though disguised, sounded extremely familiar. "What I want is justice."

"Justice is highly overrated." He took a step closer. "And I'd much rather go down with the ship if you'll pardon the cliché."

"Well, that can be arranged, especially since I have every intention of taking you back to Cody Springs."

The killer shook his head. "Aren't you even curious about me? Don't you want to know who I am, why I've been doing this? I'll bet you've wondered why I chose blonde women, haven't you?" He took several steps backwards. "Well, I'll tell you. I've always been attracted to blonde women, but for some reason, I've never been lucky in love." He tossed his hands up in the air. "I suppose I just chose the wrong women, those who thought they were better than I am."

Quinn willed himself to remain calm. He called on every ounce of his police training to help, but as his temper surged, it was becoming more of a difficult task. "No, I don't particularly care why you killed or how you chose your targets. That's something your unlucky defense lawyer and the prosecutor could fight in court. My job is to bring you in."

Mocking applause was the only response.

Quinn gripped the butt of the gun so tightly his fingers ached. He wouldn't crawl down into this guy's wormhole. "Why don't we cut the small talk and get this over with? You wanted to see me for some reason. So what was it?"

"We will fight, you know. You and I. We will face one another and one of us won't walk away. Which one of us do you think will survive, Captain Logan?"

"If you have to ask that question, you can't be that sure of yourself."

"Not scared? Not even a little?"

The fear had long been replaced by fury. "No, I'm not."

He tsked beneath the ski mask. "That's too bad. Maybe this will change your mind." He raised a hand.

Immediately, Quinn's hand swept from behind his back, weapon trained on the figure standing more than twenty yards away from him. He took one step back and assumed the firing stance. "Keep your hands where I can see them."

The killer paused. "Not very trusting, are you?"

"You've never given me a reason to trust you."

The black clad figure slapped a hand against his thigh as if that had been the funniest joke he'd heard in a long while. "I guess I see your point, but the gun isn't necessary. I told you I'm unarmed. Besides, you'd have to be a helluva shot to take me out at this distance."

"I *am* a helluva shot."

"You really think you could make it?"

Quinn didn't move, didn't even blink. "Do you really want to find out?"

"Not yet. Now isn't the time. I was only lifting my hand to raise my mask. I thought you'd want to see your opponent. So with your permission..." He paused, waiting.

Quinn conceded with a wave of his gun.

The man grabbed the bottom of the knitted material and swept it over his head. Tousled sandy-brown hair fell over his eyes as he tossed the mask to the snow-covered ground. He lifted cold hazel eyes to face the man who knew him so well.

Even from the distance that separated them, Quinn recognized him, but then, instinct had been screaming out loud for the last few minutes of the man's conversation. He had known him for a very long time, long enough to train him, befriend him, and bestow upon him his gold shield. "Sam. I can't say that I'm surprised."

Sam bowed low as if acknowledging silent applause. "I didn't expect you would be. I was wondering, though, if you would have put the clues together if I hadn't revealed my identity to you tonight."

"You're not as smart as you think you are. Why do you think I brought Gabi here? Do you really believe I was convinced Bannon was the killer? You should know me better than that. I had a hunch he was being gift-wrapped for us." Quinn lowered his arm to his side.

"And you always trust your hunches. I remember you telling me that early on in my career."

Quinn didn't take his eyes off Sam's face as he assessed him, seeking out his weakness. It shouldn't be that difficult to find. "Make your move. I'm tired of talking."

"Well that's too bad because this is one place where you don't call the shots, Captain. I'll be the one to decide when this ends just as I'll be the last man standing when the smoke clears."

"You've forgotten that I trained you, but I didn't teach you everything I know."

"And I didn't learn everything I needed to know from you. I've got a few tricks up my sleeve."

"I don't need tricks to defeat you."

"What you'll need is a miracle, Quinn. I'm too smart for you. I mean, look at the way I've bested the entire police department at every turn."

"Except this time."

"You didn't know that it was me."

"Didn't I?" *Keep him on his guard. Make him feel insecure.* The words repeated themselves over and over in his mind like the refrain from a bad movie score.

"You couldn't have known." Sam grew agitated.

"What makes you think you're that smart? You've been a detective for three years. I've been in this business for over twenty." Quinn gave a laugh that carried across the yard. "I know you didn't seriously think you could outsmart me."

Sam began backing away once more, his gaze never leaving Quinn's face. "If you knew, why didn't you stop me before I killed all those innocent women?"

"I'm stopping you now." He'd never admit the young detective had been ahead of the game up until now. Sam had been calling the shots, but now that Quinn knew his enemy, things would be different. Knowing who you faced was half the battle.

"You can certainly give it your best shot." Sam's teeth flashed in a grin, and he took another step backwards. "I'll be seeing you again, Captain."

Quinn watched him as the taunting words floated on another strong wind. As the snow began to swirl, the young detective faded into the woods.

"Dammit!" Though the curse was low, it was no less pungent. Quinn wished he could have shot him, but Sam had lowered his gun, taking away the threat to his own life. His lips curled into a sneer. Innocent until proven guilty. It didn't matter that Sam had admitted to the kills. He still had rights which would protect him...much more than they protected his victims.

Quinn didn't move away from the cabin right away. He stood still, making sure the man he'd once called a friend was gone.

Gabi sagged against the door once he crossed the threshold. "I'm so sorry."

Quinn's hand brushed her arm as he walked past her. "Don't be. All of us learn hard lessons."

"Did you really know it was him?"

"Not right away, but I guess I had a hunch something wasn't quite right. After what happened to you in the tub, when he was supposed to be protecting you, I had a feeling I couldn't shake. Some things just didn't add up, but I didn't have any proof. That's why I wanted to make sure to get you out of town."

She wrapped her arms around her body and followed him to the window. "You know him, Quinn. Now that you know who it is, you know how he operates, how he thinks. He..."

He whipped around, pinning her with a furious gaze. "No, I know how Sam Myers, the detective, operates, not how Sam Myers, the serial killer, operates. I couldn't begin to tell you what's going on in his head. I don't know when he's going to return, and I don't know his next step. So can we please just let this drop until he does come back? I need to concentrate."

Gabi's own temper surged to the fore. "I didn't make your friend into a killer. He was that long before he targeted me. I know you're angry and hurt but don't take it out on me. You're not the only one who got the bad end of this deal, you know." Spinning on her heel, she headed down the hallway.

"Gabi, get back in here!" he shouted after her, hearing the bedroom door slam and with a low curse, he tracked her, thumping against the solid oak with a clenched fist. When he turned the knob, he opened the door easily. "Look, this has been tough on both of us." He placed his back against the door. "I guess even though I suspected Sam, it still caught me off guard when he pulled off that mask. I was willing to believe it was anyone but him. I mean, I've known him for ten years. I coached him through the police academy, taught him how to shoot, pushed him through PT and well –" He dropped to his haunches. "– I guess I thought I'd done a good job."

Gabi sat down against the other side of the door. "This has nothing to do with the kind of job you did. Sam is sick, psychotic. He needs help and not the kind either one of us can give him."

"I think he's beyond help."

Her hand touched the wood at her back. "I'm really sorry."

He sighed heavily. "It's not your fault. I didn't mean for it to sound like it was. I guess I'm just trying to prepare myself for the worst."

"You might not have to kill him."

"Something tells me that, in the end, killing him will be the only option available." Using his legs, he propelled himself back to a standing position. "Will you come out now?"

She opened the door. "Couldn't you just shoot to maim him or something? If you could disable him..."

He tugged her into his embrace. "Let me worry about how to solve this. All that matters is that you and I walk away from this together and Sam will never be able to hurt another woman."

Gabi was sure Quinn believed that for now, but she wasn't so sure he would be able to forgive himself for killing a friend...even if that was his only option.

Chapter Twelve

Gabi woke to the smell of coffee and the sounds of humming. Rubbing her eyes sleepily, she straightened her wrinkled shirt and threw her feet off the sofa. “Quinn?”

He stuck his head outside the kitchen. “I’m here.”

“What time is it?”

“Just after six.” He came toward her with a steaming mug of freshly brewed coffee. “We had a heavy snow last night. No doubt the roads are closed, so it looks like we’re in this by ourselves until the roads are plowed.”

She accepted the cup of coffee and scooted so he could sit beside her on the bed. The first sip scalded her tongue, and she placed the mug on the table beside her, allowing it to cool. “That’s not exactly what I wanted to hear first thing this morning.”

“Hey.” He kneaded her thigh gently. “Sam’s wounded. That’ll make a difference in how he makes his next move. He’s got a deficiency now that he hadn’t counted on.”

“Are you sure you shot him?”

His brows furrowed. That wasn’t a question he heard very often. “I’m sure. He said it was only a nick, but he was favoring his left shoulder. That bullet’s in there.”

Her even, white teeth worried her lower lip. “It needs to come out.”

“With any luck, it’ll have a few more to keep it company in a little while.”

Gabi’s mouth fell open. “You sound as if you’re looking forward to it.”

“I want to stop him.” Today he’d need to put aside his ethics and do what his instincts told him, regardless of what could happen to his career. If he didn’t stop the son-of-a-bitch today, more lives could be lost...and Gabi would be a target forever.

She reached for the coffee once more. “It might not be as easy as you think once you’re standing face to face again...now that you know who he is.”

He sat beside her, his own fingers splayed around a ceramic mug. "It's never easy, Gabi. Killing someone isn't part of my job." But this had become more than just a part of the job to him. Sam had hurt the woman he loved, had almost taken her away from him. Those thoughts had kept him awake all night and had prepared him for the battle ahead.

She leaned against his shoulder. "I'm sorry it has to come to this."

He wrapped an arm around her, pulling her close to his side. "We said we believe in fate; well, whatever happens is fated to happen. We may make our own destinies, but we can't always control what happens along the way. We just have to roll with the punches and deal with the fallout the best we can."

Gabi joined her hand with his and closed her eyes. "I love you."

He kissed her forehead. "I love you, too, and don't forget that once this is all over, you're going to marry me again."

She lowered her head, resting it against his chest. "How can I forget when the proposal was so romantic?"

* * * * *

Sam's eyes narrowed with fury as he slid the hood of his black jacket over his head. He winced as a sharp pain ripped through his left shoulder. Pushing the heavy cotton sweater aside, he viewed the wound once more. It was bleeding again. It needed medical attention but would have to wait. Nothing mattered now but the finale. Straightening his clothing, he lifted the gas can with his right hand and crept through the woods.

* * * * *

The odor of gasoline permeated the cabin, seeping through the walls and lingering in the air like a cloud of smoke. Every room carried the scent, a warning omen. "Gabi, get your coat! We've got to get out of here!"

She stopped just outside the bedroom, watching him. "What's wrong now?"

"Sam's surrounding the cabin with gasoline. He's going to try to burn us out." He took hold of her arm and towed her toward the kitchen. "The basement will be safe. It's dug deeper into the ground and will keep out the smoke. You're going to hide and stay put until I tell you it's safe to come out."

Gabi stopped walking, digging her heels in to halt the forward motion. "You said 'you' again. I'm not going anywhere without you." She tilted her chin at a mutinous angle. "This is going to be for better or for worse, remember?"

"Dammit, Gabi, I need to know you're safe." His hands framed her face, and he gave her a quick, hard kiss. "I can't concentrate if you're in danger." His head bumped hers. "The thought unravels me."

His words made her sag against him, and she dug her fingers into the thick denim of his jacket. "This is what you wanted all along...for me to hide out while this morbid scenario played itself out like some kind of macabre stage production. Please don't ask me to do this. I want to stay with you. It's the only way I can make sure you're not injured and needing my help." Her hands gripped his forearms. "Please let me stay."

He pressed another kiss against her forehead. "I can't put you in danger any more. As long as I know you're safe, I can concentrate on taking him down."

As much as she hated to admit it, she knew she was defeated. Glaring up at him, she stabbed his chest with one finger. "If anything happens to you, I'll never forgive you."

He caught her finger in his hand and smiled at her. "It's a deal. Now, let's go."

Gabi started toward the kitchen again, her heart slamming against her chest wall. Reaching behind her, she found his hand and she held on.

Quinn moved her aside, snagging hold of the doorknob of a solid wooden door just off the kitchen. The door opened with a creaking protest, and a whirl of dust floated up out of the darkness. He leaned forward and flipped a switch. "Like I said, the basement is several feet underground and surrounded by cement. You'll be safe there."

A tiny beam of light beckoned them as they descended the metal stairs into the dark abyss. "Quinn, I don't want to do this." Her teeth chattered in the cool interior.

"Stay here until I call you. If you hear anything else, footsteps, whatever, there's a trap door underneath the stairs. It leads to an old mining cave. There's a kerosene lantern in the cave with –"

"Stop!" Her voice was sharp. "You make it sound like you're not coming back."

As he reached the bottom of the stairs, he turned to lift her down to the ground, touching her hair with such a gentle caress that her eyes watered. "I'm just taking precautions. As I was saying, there's a lantern along with matches. There should be enough kerosene in the lamp to take you out of the cave. There's only one way. Just keep following the path until you see a large wooden door." His lips brushed hers once. Twice. "Safety will be on the other side. In the meantime, this place isn't much, but there's light and water."

She didn't tell him she wasn't going anywhere without him, but she suspected he knew. "I don't want to lose you again."

"You're not going to lose me. You're just not going to have a front row seat for the show. Just stay here until I come for you. Wait until you hear my voice. Is that clear?"

Gabi still had so much to tell him, and desperation made her clutch at his arms. "Wait. You can't leave yet. I have to tell you..." She broke off, licked her lips, and tried again. "I never should have left you."

He slid a finger down the length of her nose. "That was a lifetime ago."

"But I shouldn't have gone. I just couldn't take your job, the late hours, never knowing if you were going to one day face a situation just like this one." She bit her lower lip. "And

now here it is, and all I can think to say is I love you and –” The next words came out on a sob. “– I want you to come back to me.”

“I will.”

“Promise?” She knew he couldn’t make it, but she needed to hear him say it anyway.

“Promise.”

She didn’t watch him leave. She’d always heard that was a bad omen.

* * * * *

Match in hand, Sam waited for the smell of the gasoline to filter inside the cabin. Any minute now they were both going to come running out into the fresh air. Dawn lit the sky, and he wanted to get this over with before sunrise. His swan song. The crowning glory of his life.

Stamping his feet to keep warm, he kept his eyes trained on the door, watching and waiting to no avail. The door didn’t open, and no one came. “Dammit!” Reaching for his revolver, he slid a round into place and headed toward the back door. “You’re not going to win that easily, Captain.”

* * * * *

Quinn pressed himself against the wall by the entrance to the cabin. The smell of the gasoline almost made him gag, but he held his breath until he heard footsteps on the packed snow. Muscles tensed, he waited, semi-automatic at the ready.

Sam turned the doorknob, pushing against the heavy, oak wood with his shoulder. It didn’t budge. Another hard shove, and it scraped open. He stepped inside the dimness, allowing his eyes to adjust to the early morning light. He sensed danger one second too late.

Quinn’s fist caught him next to his right eye, staggering his friend and enemy. Then, using the element of surprise, he dove in for a tackle. Quinn’s elbow forced Sam’s head to the hardwood floor while his other arm bracketed his former friend’s neck. Sam grunted from the lack of oxygen and tried to twist away. Quinn drove his knee into the detective’s back, stilling him.

“Lie still. This is over.”

Sam laughed in spite of the pain. “Do you really think I would make it this easy for you, Quinn? I’ve always got an ace in the hole.”

Quinn tried to shake off the sense of dread sliding down his spine, making a cold, clammy sweat cover his body. He pressed the muzzle of the automatic against Sam’s ear. “I don’t want to hear you say one more thing.”

Wheezing from the pain in his lungs, Sam continued to chuckle. "If I were you, I'd check to make sure your best friend was safe. I've heard traveling in these parts of the woods can be treacherous this time of the year."

Quinn relaxed slightly. "Nice try, but Wade isn't here."

"Did you ever know Batman to get very far without Robin?" His face scraped the splintered floor and he winced. Quinn's knee increased its pressure against his spinal cord. "Why don't you try giving Wade a call on his cell? Oh, wait. Reception's a bitch here. I guess we wait then."

Quinn didn't want to believe him, but hadn't Gabi said the line had went dead shortly after Wade had called? Whipping the handcuffs from the hook on the back of his pants, he secured them around Sam's wrists before retrieving his cell from the front pocket of his coat. The signal was low, but he tried anyway.

"Come on, Wade. Answer the phone!" When voice mail picked up, he leaped to his feet and dragged Sam to a sitting position. Pressing his weapon underneath Myers's chin, he drove the steel into the tender skin. "Tell me what you've done to him, or I'll blow your fucking brains out."

"No, you won't. You wouldn't be able to find him, and you and I both know your friends are far too important to you than catching a killer. Jesus, you must be arrogant as hell to think you could catch me with one flying leap from behind a door."

The butt of Quinn's weapon found the right side of Sam's temple, and Sam buckled. His head slammed against the unyielding wood, and he yelped with pain. Before he could recover from the attack, Quinn was there, his hand wrapped around his larynx. "Okay, we can do this the easy way or the hard way." His hand tightened considerably. "The choice is yours."

"Shit," Sam managed to gasp.

Quinn relinquished his hold slightly, allowing Sam more air, albeit precious little. "Tell me what you've done to Wade."

Sam responded with a crude remark that only made Quinn tighten the hold once more.

"In case you haven't figured it out, that's the wrong answer."

Myers repeated the same response, and Quinn backhanded him. "You can either tell me where he is, and live to stand trial, or you can remain quiet and I'll find him on my own. But you'll be dead."

"You can't kill me in cold blood."

Fury overrode reason as Quinn hauled Sam to his feet, nose to nose, eye to eye. "Wanna bet?"

Sam's bloody lips curled into a sneer. "What? And lay aside your ethical commitment to the badge you wear?"

"I'd lay aside my badge to kill you." Quinn pressed the barrel of the gun to Sam's temple. "I'm giving you to the count of three. One."

Shoulders sagging, Sam looked the picture of surrender. "I don't know these woods as well as you do, my friend."

"What the hell does that have to do with anything?"

"I can't tell you where he is, but I can show you."

Bullshit. Too easy. Sam wanted him outside. "Fine." He'd play along for now. Maybe then Sam would make a dumbass move, and he'd have every reason to pull the trigger.

Boiling fury guided Quinn's every step as he followed his former friend deep into the woods surrounding his cabin. His muscles tensed as his gaze searched through the trees, expecting the unexpected, anticipating Sam's next move.

As if on cue, Sam stopped and turned around. "I've changed my mind. Why don't you just go ahead and shoot me? Since finding your friend is so important to you, I'll just let you do that on your own." He bent forward to show his cuffed hands and wagging fingers. "Come on, shoot me. I'm unarmed, you know. The press will have a field day with this one."

"In case you haven't noticed, we aren't exactly surrounded by the news media."

"They would find out eventually."

"Maybe...if they ever found your body."

Quinn watched the fear shoot into Sam's eyes. "Brave words." He took a step back as if anticipating the bullet.

"You're going to tell me what you've done to Wade, or I'm going to beat it out of you."

Sam licked his lips in anticipation. "You might want to rethink that threat. I'm considerably younger than you are. Youth can be a benefit in a fight."

"Or a liability, depending on who your opponent is." Quinn flexed his shoulders and took a small step forward. "Or I could just shoot you in the leg, make you hurt for a while. That's a good way to make a man talk."

Sam's Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed hard. "You wouldn't shoot an unarmed man."

"You have a dagger in your boot. I can see the handle. That the same one you used to kill all those innocent women, Sam?" The blood rushed to Quinn's head, fury becoming a living, breathing entity.

"Is that what you're looking for? A confession?" Sam's hands came forward just as the cuffs fell to the snow-packed earth. "Yeah, I guess you weren't expecting me to be able to lose the cuffs, were you? I used to do magic tricks in college. Just one more thing you didn't know about me."

Quinn didn't take his eyes off of Sam's face. Though his muscles had tensed once Sam freed his hands, he allowed no emotion to show on his face. "That only gives me a better reason to shoot you. Now where the hell is Wade?"

Slowly, Sam lowered his hand to his boot and withdrew a dagger, ancient markings swirling around the handle.

Quinn leveled his aim. "Don't do it."

Laughing, Sam stroked the blade much like a lover. "Why don't we do this my way? Since you're so sure you're going to win, come find me." Whirling, he took off running.

Tucking his weapon into the waistband of his jeans, Quinn ran after him, a combination of fear and rage lending speed to his feet. Weaving through the trees, he kept sight of Sam's fleeing form, easily keeping pace. He considered shooting the bastard. A part of him really wanted to hurt him, make him suffer as much as his victims had, but deep inside, he knew he'd do what was right. Because he'd always be the better man.

Suddenly, Sam whirled, darting through the trees until he was even with Quinn. "Let's see if you can handle this, old man." He flung the dagger.

Quinn jerked back, and the blade missed him by an inch, embedding itself deep within the bark of a stately pine.

"Almost got you," Sam called out in a maniacal voice.

Slowing to a walk, Quinn listened for the sounds of Sam's footsteps, but Sam had stopped moving. Just like the killer he was, he waited, trying to anticipate Quinn's next move. But there was one thing Quinn knew that his trainees didn't. He'd never met a man he couldn't take down. Sam would be no different.

The wind rustled the tree branches, causing the snow to drift downward. All fell quiet except for the thundering of Quinn's heartbeat in his ears. Every muscle in his body coiled with tension, he waited, expecting the unexpected.

With a loud cry, Sam dove forward, a knife aimed at Quinn's heart. With lightning quick reflexes, Quinn leaned a foot forward and tripped him. Sam sprawled on the ground, his hand flinging open to relinquish its hold on the handle of the dagger.

Quinn kicked the dagger to the side. "You should have kept running." He could have ended the fight there, but his own desire for revenge overwhelmed him, and his hands curled into fists. "Come on, get up." He stayed close, ready to tackle Sam at any moment.

Sam climbed back to his feet, his eyes wary. Faking to the left, he then dove to the right, his head catching Quinn in the mid-section. Both men tumbled to the ground and vied for supremacy.

Scissoring his legs around Sam's head, Quinn managed to gain the upper hand. Choking, Sam gasped for air, his hands clawing at Quinn's legs. Reining in his temper, Quinn released him, leaping to his feet to press his foot against the man's chest. "It's over, Sam. You're finished."

“You think you’ve won, but you haven’t really...especially since I’ve taken something from you that you will never be able to get back. Ask Dr. Reddick who’s the better lover between the two of us, Quinn. Oh, I see she didn’t tell you that part. Did you really think I would be alone with her in the cabin and not take the opportunity to sample the goods?” Sam’s voice was silky soft as he goaded Quinn. “You know, she’s really quite good. I can see why you want her so much. I’d fight for her, too.”

Quinn’s eyes narrowed to small slits, and with a growl, he dropped to his knees, one hand holding Sam’s collar while the other fisted hand smashed into his face repeatedly. He offered no mercy as he swapped from left to right, bruising the tender flesh around Sam’s eye sockets.

Sam couldn’t defend himself. Blood poured into his eyes, and he tried to struggle against the raining blows, but there was nowhere to go. Quinn didn’t stop even though his hand pounded. His knuckles raw, he continued to rain down the punishing blows. He didn’t stop until he felt a hand on his shoulder, a gentle, almost reassuring hand.

“It’s over, Quinn. He’s not going anywhere.” Wade’s voice took Quinn by surprise and brought him back to sanity. “You’ve stopped him.”

Quinn’s hands dropped to his sides, his chest heaving with released anger. He rocked back on his heels and looked up at his friend. “You’re here.” Relief poured through him as he assessed his friend’s health. No visible wounds and no other signs of injury. “Sweet Jesus. I thought he’d killed you.”

Sam managed to take the opening. With a snarl of victory, he plunged the small dirk into Quinn’s side then rolled to safety. Sam came to his feet in an instant, crowing with glee as he took off toward the cabin at a speed fueled by lunacy.

Wade dropped to one knee at his friend’s side. “Quinn, are you...?”

Quinn brushed aside his concern and struggled to his feet. “The bastard’s trying to find Gabi.”

“I’ll go.” Wade placed a restraining hand on his friend’s shoulder. “You’re in no shape to tangle with him again.”

“I’m going after him.”

“But you...”

“I said I’m going after him.” Gritting his teeth against the pain, Quinn took off at a limping run, one hand pressed against the flowing wound in his side.

“Fine, but I’m coming with you,” Wade yelled.

* * * * *

Sam fought back a wave of nausea and staggered the last few feet toward the front door of the cabin. The doorknob turned easily in his hand, and he scrambled inside, pressing his back against the solid wood. He gulped in several deep breaths as his gaze scanned the room.

Gabi heard the footsteps overhead, and heart made the leap to her throat. Was it Quinn? It seemed like hours had passed since he'd left her. Placing one hand over her mouth to silence any sound, she strained to listen, aching to hear Quinn's voice.

"Gabrielle, you can't hide from me. I will find you."

Her blood ran cold. Sam was here, but where was Quinn? Had he killed him? The question jangled her nerves, causing her to shake almost uncontrollably. Forcing herself to focus on Quinn's instructions, she dropped to her knees and crawled forward until she reached the door underneath the stairs.

She tugged, but nothing happened. Another tug. Nothing. Trying not to panic, she threw all of her weight into the next pull, but the door wouldn't budge. Rocking back on her heels, she swallowed a hysterical cry. What now?

He wasn't supposed to be here! It should be Quinn who came for her. Why hadn't Quinn checked the door to make sure she could open it? Nausea welled in the pit of her stomach. Should she wait?

The footsteps had stopped. Had Sam left? Or was it only a matter of time before he found her here? She wouldn't be a match for him trapped in a corner like a wounded animal. She needed a weapon. Anything.

She seized upon the only thing available, a thick chunk of wood which felt heavy in her hands. Clasp the makeshift bat in her hands, she ascended the steps, climbing them as quietly as possible.

The door leading from the basement creaked open, and Gabi held her breath, waiting for Sam's appearance. All she heard was the pounding of her heart. Shuffling a few steps in, she managed to squeeze herself in between the pantry door and the refrigerator. From her vantage point, she would be able to see Sam's approach if he was still in the house.

Seconds later, the thump of boots over the wooden floors caused her head to spin.
Focus, Gabi. Focus!

Sam came down the hallway, walking into the kitchen without the slightest hesitation. Gabi acted swiftly, bringing the piece of wood down in a solid arc that connected with his right shoulder.

He gave a howl of pain and stumbled forward, trying to regain his balance.

She swung again, catching his forearm. The room resounded with the crack of breaking bone.

"Dammit!" Sam yelled, his uninjured arm catching hold of the piece of wood that had rapidly changed to a deadly weapon. A tug of war ensued as he climbed to his knees. "Let go of the damned bat, Gabrielle."

"Not on your life." She panted, bracing her feet against the floor even as she scooted forward by the strength of his pulls.

Sam grunted with pain and played his ace in the hole. "Your boyfriend is dead." He saw her face pale and drove the trump card home. "I stabbed him. Why do you think I came back for you, and he didn't? I left him lying in the snow bleeding to death."

"You bastard!" Gabi wailed. Blinded by agony and fury, she renewed her struggles for the bat, and when he refused to relinquish his grip, she flung her right leg forward, catching him under the chin with the toe of her boot.

Sam gave a gurgle of surprise and fell backwards, but he quickly scrambled to his feet. Blood dripped down his face, running into his eyes, and across his lips. Rage colored his vision as he staggered toward her. "You little bitch!" Arms outstretched he lumbered across the distance separating them.

Gabi looked around for a way to escape, but her back was against the wall. Sam smiled as he closed the gap. He stood mere inches away from her when the distinct sound of a clip sliding into place drew his attention away from his target. His glance slid toward the door over his left shoulder. "God, you don't even know how to die, do you?"

Quinn leaned against the doorjamb, gun trained on Sam's face. "Get away from her."

"Or you'll do what?" Sam spat out a long stream of blood.

At the sound of Quinn's voice, Gabi's eyes flew open and found his. "You're alive."

"Not for long," Sam interjected coldly. "Just stay put. I'll take care of this, and then we can continue where we left off. I haven't forgotten that I owe you. Or maybe, I'll take care of you first." His hand rose, and he reached for her arm.

"I said get away from her!" Quinn snarled.

"We've been over this before, Quinn. You won't kill me. It's not in your nature." Sam flicked one more dismissing glance at his former friend before directing his gaze back toward Gabi. "Maybe it's fitting that your ex-husband should watch. I mean, after all, he's the reason why I first noticed you. Did he tell you that, Gabrielle?" Swift as lightening, he snatched her arm, pulling her to his side. His hand closed around her throat as he took several steps backwards. "Quinn, I think you should just drop that weapon to the floor and kick it over here...unless you'd rather be the cause of Gabrielle's death."

Quinn raised the automatic several inches and closed one eye. "I'm going to count to three."

Sam swallowed hard but didn't back down. "I'm going to kill her."

"One."

"I mean it, Quinn, I'll choke her right here and now. I have nothing to lose."

"Except your own life. Two."

"You won't kill me." Sam's grip tightened on Gabi's throat, and she gasped for air.

"Three." Quinn's other eye narrowed, and he squeezed the trigger.

Sam's grasp released as his hands fell to his side. A stunned expression on his face, he teetered back and forth before collapsing, his lifeless body crumpling to the floor.

Gabi stood in the center of the room, horror-stricken. One hand covered her mouth to stifle the scream as tears poured out of her eyes.

Sliding the safety lock back into place, Quinn returned the gun to its holster at the back of his jeans and took several faltering steps forward. "Gabi?" His voice was soft.

Her other hand joined the first one, pressing against her lips.

He reached her then, catching her in his arms, forcing her head down to his shoulder to obscure the grotesque visage lying at her feet. "It's over, baby. It's over."

The dam released, and the sobs came then, overtaking her. He held her tightly against his chest, but it was no tighter than she held him. Her hands gripped his waist, as her face pressed against his damp, flannel shirt.

"I just knew he was going to kill me," she managed after her sobs subsided to hiccups.

Quinn lifted his head, his gaze searching her face. "You're okay? He didn't hurt you?"

"No." Her smile was wobbly at best. She took a step out of his embrace to take a visual inspection of his body to reassure herself he was all right. "But you're hurt!" Her hand tugged away the hand covering his wound.

"It's just a nick."

"I'll be the judge of that. Sit down and let me take a look." She walked toward the table, one foot encountering Sam's lifeless body. She hastily amended her instructions. "Let's go into the living room, and I'll check it there."

"Gabi, it's no big deal. It can wait."

"I wouldn't argue with her, pal," Wade stated from the open doorway. "I've heard that women coming out of traumatic circumstances can be real bi...tough."

Gabi gripped Quinn's hand and tugged him toward the sofa. "He's right. I'm not going to be satisfied until I take a look at that. So you might as well get it over with."

Quinn heaved a mournful sigh and trailed after her. He stopped when he reached his friend. "Thanks for coming, but I really did think he'd killed your ass."

"Not a chance. The fucker wasn't as interested in me as he was in you."

Quinn dropped a hand to his shoulder as he moved past him.

Gabi sat on the sofa beside him, her nimble fingers lifting his shirt. She sucked in a sharp breath at the amount of damage. "It's pretty deep. You're going to need stitches, maybe more if he nicked any internal organs. We've got to get you to the hospital." She jumped to her feet. "You'll need..."

Quinn caught her hand and brought her back down to sit beside him with an abrupt flick of his wrist. "It's just a nick. Luckily, I twisted in time. It just caught my skin."

"But you're bleeding heavily. You may need blood."

"I don't need blood." He refused to budge from his sitting position.

"Dammit, Quinn, I'm the doctor! I know what I'm talking about. Why don't you listen to me instead of trying to second-guess what I'm telling you? You would think that..."

Tipping his head, he kissed her to staunch the flow of angry words. He just needed to show her he was very much alive.

Gabi sagged against him, her hands gripping the lapels of his shirt. When the kiss ended, she didn't move away from him, choosing instead to press her slight frame against the strength of his body. "I could have lost you."

He tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear. "Not a chance."

Her lips twitched as a smile fought its way free. "Did you mean what you said about when this was all over?"

He grinned. "You mean the ridiculous marriage proposal?"

"Yeah. That's exactly what I mean."

"Well, that depends."

"On what?"

His fingers circled the nape of her neck. "Did you really mean yes?"

Her eyes darkened to forest green. "I don't think I've ever been able to say no to you."

Epilogue

The freckled-faced nurse beamed at her employer as she sailed into Gabrielle's office. "Dr. Reddick, you have a visitor out front."

Gabi pushed her chair back from the microscope and frowned up at the nurse. "Who is it?"

Her dark eyes twinkled with excitement. "Captain Logan."

Gabi headed toward the door. "What is he doing waiting out there? He knows he can come back. What is he up to?" Rounding the corner, she stopped, staring at a waiting room full of roses, their fragrant scent filling every corner. Clasp one hand against her mouth, Gabi advanced slowly forward. "Quinn? Where are you?"

A bouquet of roses lowered, and he smiled at her. "I know how many bad memories you've had because of these flowers, but I wanted to give you a good memory to replace the bad. Sam took a lot of things away from you and some, I will never be able to replace with good memories, but this one, I knew I could. And I couldn't think of any other way to do it other than, well, show you." He swept out his hands to encompass the entire room. "I've wanted to be able to give you roses for a long time, but I was scared it would trigger, well..."

Gabi reached his side by then. "Quinn, over the last few months, you *have* helped me to start living again. I could never have any bad memories with you." Her eyes glistened with tears as she lifted her hand to touch his face.

The door behind them clicked shut as the nurse made herself scarce.

Quinn lifted a rose and brushed her cheek with the petals of the flower. "You are so beautiful."

A tear leaked out of one eye to trail down her cheek. "So I guess what you're saying is that you're really sure you want to go through with the wedding."

He cupped her face. "No doubts."

“Even though we’ve tried this once before?”

Quinn shook his head almost furiously. “None.”

Gabi took the rose from his hand and pressed the soft petals against her lips. “It’s hard to believe the wedding’s tomorrow.”

Wrapping an arm around her waist, he guided her toward the door. “Not for me, it’s not. It’s all I’ve been thinking about for days.”

One eyebrow lifted in surprise. “Only days?”

He dipped his head for a quick, hard kiss. “I didn’t say how many days.”

THE END

Rachel Carrington

Rachel Carrington is a multi-published author of fantasy and paranormal romance and currently writes for four publishers, including Loose Id. A freelance editor as well as writer, Rachel can be found on the web at www.dawnrachel.com or on her blog at www.rachelcarrington.blogspot.com.