



EVERLASTING

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CHAPTER ONE

Unable to shake the apprehension gripping her gut, Marilyn stood in her office at the top of the multi-storied building and watched out the window, waiting to see David walk to his car. Gray, roiling clouds obliterated the normally crystal blue Maine sky. An autumn storm, a Nor'easter seemed to be boiling toward Sherry. From what Marilyn had been told during her short stay in the town, which would hold the central jewel in Midwest Viking's crown, such storms occasionally arrived this early in the year.

Rain began pelting the floor-to-ceiling windows of her office. Irrationally, Marilyn raised a hand to wipe away the drops, as she waited impatiently to see her lover, her fiancé, make his way to where the valet had parked his Jaguar. A sudden gust of wind shook the window, causing her to jump back half a step. Debris, bits of newspaper and pieces of cardboard danced across the pavement of the parking lot, like demons dancing to excite the passions of the devil storm hurling itself against the town.

Finally, David walked from under the cover of the building toward his car. Ignoring the wind-driven rain, he was nonchalantly strolling along, chatting with the security guard usually stationed at the front desk of the building. She watched as he threw his blonde head back and laughed at something the guard evidently had said. That was David: fearless and in control of himself and all that surrounded him. A full gale with rain so fierce that Marilyn could barely make his figure out across the drive meant nothing to him.

He waved at the guard and pulled open his door. One foot inside, he stopped and looked directly up at the window at which Marilyn stood. She watched as he lifted his fingers to his lips, kissed them and tossed the invisible kiss toward her. Unconsciously, she reached out to catch it, only realizing the futility of the act when her finger rapped against the icy pane of the window. Even if there'd been no sheet of glass between them, the kiss would have been lost on currents of the rising wind. David laughed again and waved at her, before disappearing inside the red Jaguar.

For a brief second, she demanded he look up again at her window. Somehow she'd make him understand that he should wait...wait for her. She just couldn't let him go off to his appointment without her. Marilyn

couldn't shake the forbidding notion that she was watching him leave for the last time.

Only a moment later, she saw the bright red taillights of the Jag turn into the traffic of the street, lost from her vision.

An uncontrollable shudder ran through her and she hugged her arms close around her body. A chill permeated through the heavy wool suit and took up residence in her very bones. She just knew something was about to happen, something that would destroy her relationship with David.

This was ridiculous. Absolutely insane. Heavens, she was an astute and highly respected businesswoman. Not some child, given to foolish notions and superstitions. It was only because David and she had barely spent five minutes outside one another's company since she'd arrived in Sherry a week earlier. Within hours of her arrival, she'd shrewdly realized that she was in love with her employer. In the midst of all the feminine stirrings and longings, there was a core of unbridled logic that told her she'd found the one man who could complete her happiness, just as she could complete his. And with all the cunning and precise thinking that had led her to success in business, she'd decided against playing silly, female games...she merely made her feelings obvious to David.

Of course, she'd felt rather safe in that. No one could mistake the not-so-subtle signals David was sending her. The attraction was more than mutual. It was an undeniable fact.

Love at first sight? Hardly. She'd been working for Midwest Viking as an executive, as well as a jewelry designer, for nearly two years. And while until a mere week ago the relationship had been strictly professional, it hadn't taken them either very long to realize that their mutual admiration and affection had rooted itself deeper than nine-to-five at the office.

Marilyn turned away from the window and forced her arms to her sides. Taking a deep breath, she chased away her silly concerns for David's safety and walked to her desk. Brushing the skirt of her red wool suit under her, she slid into her chair and picked up the latest status report on the construction of the new store, only a few miles from the temporary office space they'd rented as a headquarters until the new building was constructed.

Casually, she scanned the report before her. As usual, concise and professional. Daryl, Midwest's architect, had provided her with all the information she needed to know in simple terms, without a lot of technical jargon that would have her reaching for her dictionary. Without needing to look, she reached over to the intercom on her desk and pressed the button to hail her secretary.

"Is Daryl still in the building?" she asked, then listened to a shuffling through the small speaker.

"Right here, boss. Need something?"

Marilyn smiled. No doubt he was wielding his charm on her secretary. Daryl may have been away from their native Texas for the past

two years, but there were just some Texan attributes not easily lost, even this far from home.

"Leave her alone, Daryl," Marilyn chuckled. "Can you step in here, please?"

"Right away, boss." She heard more shuffling of papers through the speaker before Daryl's voice, becoming more distant came through again. "Don't you change a thing, Darlin'. You're perfect the way you are. I'll be right back."

Marilyn didn't really need to see Daryl. His report more than told her what she needed to know. Yet, that gloomy feeling that had settled over her as she'd watched David leave failed to dissipate. Daryl's warmth and charm seemed the perfect antidote.

She rose at the light tap at the door. "Come in."

Daryl sauntered in and nodded at her, blessing her with the gift of a crooked grin and sheepish look in his blue eyes. She shook her head at him. It was more than just that Texan charm he couldn't leave behind. From the silver studded tips of his Western cut shirt to the impeccable blue jeans to the toes of his comfortably broken-in cowboy boots, Daryl looked as if he'd just stepped out of a tourism advertisement for the state of Texas.

"Wanted to see me, boss?" he drawled in his deep, sultry voice, waiting until she'd re-seated herself before flopping down in the chair across from her desk. He lazily crossed one leg over the other; calmly tapping a rhythm against his knee with nicely manicured nails.

"Daryl, you'll do me the favor of at least turning off the intercom before resuming your flirting with my secretary," Marilyn laughed, taking a deep breath and unbuttoning the jacket of her suit. Already his presence, the homelike comfort of his Texan drawl and his humor was allowing her to relax just a bit. "Come on. I finally have her trained to the point where I'm not getting kerosene for coffee and nail polish remover stains on the reports she's supposed to be typing for me. You're going to get her flustered, and then it's hell for me again."

"Ahh, Miss Marilyn, surely you wouldn't begrudge a simple old country boy a little pleasure. Ah rely on the kindness of strangers in these foreign parts," Daryl drawled, barely hiding his grin. "Besides, I've been waiting two years for you to get up here and put me out of my misery and what happens...You come up here and the next thing I know old David has snatched you right out of my fingers."

"Daryl, I was never in your fingers," Marilyn laughed, nervously rolling the sapphire and diamond engagement ring around her own finger. David had surprised her with it the day before, when they'd visited a local jewelry shop that stocked Midwest Viking jewels. She'd been stunned by the gift, even though he'd already proposed and she'd accepted. Yet, meeting David's parents for the first time that morning, she'd realized his wisdom in giving it to her so soon. With his ring on her finger, the normal nerves in meeting one's future in-laws disappeared entirely. Not that she'd

had anything to worry about. Hilary and David Sr. were two of the nicest people she'd ever met, immediately treating her as if she were already one of the family. She already regretted that they headquartered themselves in London, only rarely returning to the States for visits and important business concerns.

"Oh, that which might have been lives only in the poet's heart and the drunkard's soul." Daryl crossed his hands across his heart and looked at her woefully.

"Shakespeare?" she asked, laughing again.

"Nope. Just me. See what you're missing with that old David? Bet he never waxed poetical for you."

"Hmmm. Seems we never get around to poetry. Other things keep us pretty busy," she teased, glancing down again at her ring. "Now, let's talk some business."

"Fire away, boss. If I can't have your heart, I'll settle for your mind. Though, if I told you that you have a beautiful heart, would you hold it against me?" Daryl asked, chuckling deeply.

Marilyn ignored the old joke as she pulled up his report. "I've read this, and it sounds very good. But, I have a question for you," she said, tapping the paper. "This says we're slightly ahead of schedule, which means that we'll more than be able to open the new store on the projected opening date of December first next year. Here's my question...Daryl, if we pulled out all the stops, keeping proper construction codes in mind, could we push for an August first opening instead?"

Daryl sat up in his chair, allowing a long, low whistle to escape his lips. She could see the wheels turning in his brain as he weighed the proposal carefully before responding. It was the gleam that sparkled in his eyes that told her his answer before he even opened his mouth to speak.

"That would really be pushing it. We're headed into winter here...and that's going to slow down construction considerably. Remember that this isn't Texas. There's no twelve-month construction season here."

"I know. But, if the weather clears up for a while, couldn't we get the frame in place and enough construction completed so that the crew could start on the electricals and infrastructure?"

Daryl cocked his head first one way and then the other. "Yes, if this storm isn't the beginning of a rough winter, I think we could probably do that. It would mean extra overtime while the weather held, though."

"I think that could be offset by the profits we'd make by opening for the full holiday season next year. Plus, that would mean that by the following Christmas we'd already be an established business here. No hesitancy in accepting Midwest Viking. You know how people react to new businesses. And this is the kind of big ticket business where the sooner you build a reputation of quality and service, the more profitable the business becomes."

This felt right. This felt safe and secure again. For this brief time, she was able to push back her concerns, the bad intuition, over David. Marilyn knew the business as well as she did the back of her own hand. If it hadn't been for her daring, and sometimes seemingly reckless, business decisions, Midwest Viking—David—would never have taken the chance on giving her this plum assignment. It was that instinctive edge she possessed that had led to her repeated successes since joining the company. Not that she hadn't sacrificed to accept the position. She'd only recently bought a townhouse, now vacant in Dallas. And, she'd had to leave her parents half a country away at home, knowing that it would be months before she could even slip away for a long weekend to see them and doubting that either of them, sharing her fear of flying, would be able to come to Sherry to see her. It was the first and longest separation from them she'd ever experienced.

"How long would it take you to run up a proposal on a new opening date?" she asked. Knowing Daryl, he had probably already run half the numbers through his head as he sat there.

"Properly motivated, I could probably come up with some projections by tomorrow morning," he replied, settling back in his chair again.

"Properly motivated? Just what would it take to 'properly' motivate you, Daryl?"

She watched him lean toward her, grinning from ear to ear. "Leave David. Run away with me. Let me keep you in a style to which you could lower yourself. I mean, if I walk away from this just to steal you, I doubt I'd ever get another assignment. So, it would be beans and bacon, I'm afraid."

"And a six-pack properly chilled in the refrigerator at all time, too, I'm sure," Marilyn laughed. "You Texas boys. See why I think I did much better finding David? He only lived in Texas a few years. He didn't have code instilled in him from birth."

"Your loss, Darlin'." Daryl smiled again, as he rose. "I'll get right on this. You'll see the report by noon tomorrow."

"I've no doubt." Marilyn pushed herself up from her chair and watched him walk to the door. "Oh, and Daryl...thanks. I may belong to David heart and soul, but it's nice to know I'm appreciated."

Daryl winked at her before disappearing out into the lobby. She watched her door slide silently closed and walked back to the window. If anything, the storm was intensifying. A thin glaze of ice covered every surface. The roads would be treacherous for even the most experienced driver. She solaced herself in knowing that David had been raised here and had probably long ago arrived at his mysterious appointment.

That he hadn't told her where he was going or whom he was meeting surprised Marilyn. But, how much did they really know about one another? David had told her that it was better this way, that they'd have an entire

lifetime of getting to know each other's little secrets, endearing habits and likes and dislikes.

"Marilyn, every day will be a new adventure," he'd promised, as they'd sat together at the beach near the lighthouse days earlier. It had been the day after they'd first made glorious, passionate love. She remembered laughing to herself that the old saying about that "glow" that surrounded lovers clung to them. As they'd sat there watching the breakers crash against the rocks, sending plumes of blue-green spray high in the air, and as a light wind ruffled their hair and brought the briny smell of the ocean to their nostrils, she felt that glow radiate around them. Together in one another's arms it hadn't seemed odd at all that they could find themselves passionately in love with one another and still know so little about each other.

The only worry dancing around the edges of their happiness had been their forgetfulness. The night before, mellowed by the heady wine David had selected for dinner and soothed by the romantic melodies playing in the background, it had only seemed natural to slide into one another's arms. Under the guise of dancing, all they'd actually done was cling to one another and sway under the seductive influence of the Chianti, Harry Connick and one another.

When his hands had slowly slid up her back to her shoulders, she'd moved closer and raised her face to his. She trembled now at the memory of that first taste of David's lips, as she realized that she was standing at the window swaying slowly, as she'd done that night.

Time stopped at that moment, lasting an eternity as she memorized the feel of his lips against hers, teasing and testing. Impatience had grown within her, spreading as quickly as the liquid fire igniting the passion she'd always held so tightly in control. Being with David meant that she could lose herself, allow the control to slip away, as she savored the uninhibited raw desire she felt for him.

That she had favored him with the gift of her virginity had both surprised and humbled him. As they lay, entwined together in the sheets of her bed at the Lang mansion, panting for breath and a descent back from the heaven they'd created with their bodies, she'd felt the slight tremor and the moisture of his tears as he'd held her. So strong, so vital, so in command of himself, yet the notion she'd given her very essence to him and him alone exposed the tender, gentle nature that she'd always somehow known he possessed.

It was his tears that brought the impulsive, instinctive need to take control and, in her inexperienced way, show him just how much pleasure he'd brought her by pleasing him. Only when he seemed on the verge of all loss of self had he rolled over taken possession of her again.

"I won't say I love you," he'd whispered hoarsely. "Not now. Though I've never really made love before tonight. Sure, I've had other women. But, I know the difference now between sex and making love. This is love, but I

never want you to think that those words hold any more power now, when we're like this, than when we're drinking coffee at breakfast or watching videos in the evening. This is merely the exquisite result of loving you all the time."

And then it was Marilyn's turn to weep.

Running her hand over her eyes to block the sight of the horrendous weather outside, Marilyn was startled to find tears once again in her eyes. It had all been too perfect. And perhaps it was the worry that somehow there might be a chink in that perfection, for could anything be that really pure and ideal, that led her to worry over David's safety now, the first time they'd really been separated since they'd truly found each other.

"Get over it," she ordered herself. "He's fine. He's probably just off getting me another surprise. I just hope we don't both have a surprise coming in about nine months."

She felt her face work itself into a mass of worry wrinkles and took a deep breath, forcing herself to relax. There was no sense in borrowing trouble, just as it was ridiculous to worry about David simply because he had some mysterious meeting. Just as she hadn't expected to fall in love with him so quickly, she hadn't prepared herself to obtain anything necessary to prevent a pregnancy. Fortunately, when they'd both realized what they'd done—several times—they agreed to obtain protection immediately. Thankfully, David had told her that he couldn't wait until they had children, though he knew it would be prudent to wait a while first.

"But, if you have conceived," he'd told her, "think of the purity of love that would bring that child into the world. He'd be the most blessed baby in the world. And you can't beat that."

How many other men would have been so loving, so caring? How many other men wouldn't have stewed over it or accused the woman of trying to trap them? Instead, David had just shrugged it off and suggested that they should marry as soon as they could because he was so excited about starting their life together.

The shrill buzz of the intercom shattered the images of David she'd formed in her mind: blonde hair tousled, lips swollen, sheen of sweat from their intensive lovemaking shining on his brow. She turned back to her desk and depressed the button on the machine.

"Yes?"

"Mrs. Hilary Lang on line one," her secretary's voice came through the speaker.

"Thanks. I've got it." Marilyn picked up the receiver and pressed the button on her telephone. "Hilary? It's Marilyn."

"Marilyn, I'm not so sure you and David should join us for lunch at the club after all. It's getting really wicked outside. In fact, David's father and I were thinking that it would probably be a good idea to just send everyone home before this storm becomes much worse."

"I think that would be a good idea. Where are you and Dave?"

"We're at the house. Marie has enough food in the freezer to feed an army. So, why don't you and David just come home? Might be a pleasant afternoon to just sit around by the fire and get acquainted," Hilary said. "As you can probably imagine, Dave and I want to know everything about you."

Marilyn laughed. She could imagine that she'd be in for the same kind of grilling that her parents planned on giving David. "That sounds delightful. But, David isn't here. He had some appointment away from the office. He didn't say where."

"Oh—"

The muffled sound on the telephone indicated that Hilary had placed her hand over the receiver. She was probably conferring with Dave.

"Marilyn, Dave's going to try to call David on his cellular. Hold on a moment, dear," Hilary said, after a moment.

Waiting patiently, Marilyn pressed the button on the intercom. Leaning over, she spoke briefly with her secretary, asking that she spread the word that the office would be closing immediately to allow everyone to go home because of the storm. She was just finishing when she heard Hilary call to her through the telephone.

"Marilyn, Dave only gets David's voice mail. That's very unusual."

"Well, this meeting must be pretty important. He probably just doesn't want to be disturbed during it."

"Dear, how are you going to get home? You went to work with David, didn't you?"

Marilyn thought for a moment, sliding down into her chair and drumming her fingernails against the white blotter. Inspiration struck. "Hilary, I know that Daryl is still here and he drives one of those huge, four-wheel drive things. How about if I ask him to give me a lift? Think we can stretch Marie's lunch to feed a hungry Texan?"

"Believe me, Marie's worked for us for years. I've never yet seen her fail," Hilary laughed softly. "Just tell Daryl that he's staying here until this blows over. There's plenty of room and a lot better place than his bachelor's pad."

"Good idea. And while we're getting there, why don't you keep trying David? Make sure to tell him that I've sent everyone home so there's no sense in his coming back here."

"Right. Okay, dear, go find that Texan."

The roads were treacherous. Marilyn continually glanced over at a tight-lipped Daryl as he drove slowly, his knuckles whitening as he clutched the steering wheel. Even just creeping along the icy roads, Daryl repeatedly had to fight the large vehicle to keep it from fishtailing down the roads.

It was only when she saw the tall granite pillars guarding the driveway to the Lang mansion that Marilyn began to relax. She turned her

prayers to hoping that David was already safe and warm beside the fireplace inside.

As Daryl braked to a slow stop in the circular driveway, he let out a long sigh. "Houston, the Eagle has landed. And it ain't going a foot farther until I see blue skies and dry land."

"I really appreciate this, Daryl," Marilyn said, buttoning her coat as she pushed open the door.

"Just you wait until I get around there. No way are we going to meet that new deadline if you're laid up with a broken leg," Daryl ordered, swinging out of the door. She watched him skate around the front of the vehicle and slide to a stop at her door. She slipped out slowly and felt him put his arm around her. "If I go, you go, Darlin'. And vicey versey."

Slowly they stepped toward the house; relieved when finally they reached the door, which opened immediately.

Dave looked solemnly at both of them. Marilyn noticed, with concern, that his face was heavily lined with worry with an almost gray tone beneath his tanned complexion.

"David?" she asked, before she even took a step into the house.

"No word. I've just about been ringing that cellular to pieces. He must have left it in his car, wherever he went." Dave took her arm and pulled her into the house, before looking up at Daryl. "Not the best drive I'll bet you've ever taken. Thanks for bringing Marilyn home. Hillary's got hot coffee and sandwiches waiting in the kitchen. I imagine you both could use some warming up."

As if she could even think about eating. Where was he? And why didn't he have the cellular with him? She'd once teased him about how it could probably only be removed from his body surgically. Of course, then he'd shown her just how easy it was to toss aside when he had something a bit more enjoyable in mind than business.

Still it wouldn't do Dave or Hilary any good if she went to pieces worrying over him. They didn't need any more anxieties at the moment.

"That sounds great. I'm just going to freshen up a bit, maybe change clothes and I'll be right there." Marilyn laid a hand on Dave's arm and smiled up at him. "David is perfectly safe wherever he is. He'll be in contact as soon as he can."

A sweatshirt and jeans felt heavenly, Marilyn decided, after she'd changed out of her business suit. She pulled a brush through her long hair and caught it up in a ponytail, securing it in place with a band.

Hurrying down the stairs, she glanced at the beautiful portraits of all of David's ancestors. Generation upon generation smiled down at her. One day, she knew, she'd grace the wall with David at her side, and maybe even a child or two.

Marilyn paused in the hallway, glancing at the telephone resting on a small table next to the door to the drawing room. Dave hadn't had any luck

reaching David, but maybe fortune would smile on her. She lifted the receiver and quickly punched in the number to David's cellular. It rang...and rang...and just as she expected the automated voice to come on the line and ask her to leave a message, someone answered.

"H-h-hello?"

"David? David is that you? Honey, we've been so worried—"

"Ma'am, may I ask who I'm speaking with?"

"This isn't David, is it?"

"No, ma'am. I need to speak with someone who's related to Mr. Lang."

"I'm his fiancée. What's happened to David?" Marilyn fought to control the panic she knew was reaching her voice from the hollow pit in her center.

"There's been an accident. Mr. Lang has been injured and transported to Sherry Hospital. The hospital has been attempting to reach his family. Can you tell me how to get in contact with them?"

"His parents are here. How badly is he hurt?" Please God, minor injuries. Please God, a broken nose or a sprained ankle or...

"I'm afraid it's pretty serious, ma'am. But his passenger came out okay. They've transported her, but just as a precaution."

"Passenger? Someone was with him?"

"Yes, a Miss Cheryl Rogers. Ma'am, can you call one of his parents to the telephone? We're going to arrange for a patrol car to come and get them and take them to the hospital. They...ummm...they may have to make some decisions, ma'am. Could I speak with them?"

Marilyn staggered against the wall, sliding down until she was sitting on the floor, the telephone dangling limply in her hand. A vision of the last company picnic in Dallas the previous July formed in her mind. David was there, accompanied by a beautiful blonde that simply exuded vitality and energy. It was obvious to anyone observing them that she was more than just attracted to David, as she hung on him as if she were a third appendage.

Surely not...not here. Surely if there was something still between them, David would have told her. He would have explained. He wouldn't have...

"Marilyn, what's wrong?"

She looked up, seeing Dave through the veil of tears filling her eyes.

"David's hurt." She shook the telephone receiver at him. "He's hurt. He's hurt badly."

Just as Dave reached for the telephone, Marilyn clutched it to her breast.

"Dave, do you know why David would have been with Cheryl Bridges?"

CHAPTER TWO

Through her tears, Marilyn watched Dave's mouth drop in shock, obviously just as surprised. He didn't answer, instead listened to the officer on the line. "Yes, we'll be waiting."

Marilyn held her head in her hands as the tears fell unheeded down her cheeks. What was he doing with her? Why couldn't David had told her where he was going. It didn't make sense. That was beside the point now. David was lying in a hospital with God only knows what wrong.

She felt a hand on her shoulder and looked over. It was Daryl. She tried to smile, sniffed back a gasp and stood.

"You okay, Darlin?"

"Yes." Marilyn took a deep breath and looked at Dave and Hillary.

"Are they picking us up soon?"

"Yes, they'll be here as soon as they can, weather permitting." Dave looked at Daryl. "Would you like to go with us?"

Daryl nodded. "Yes, thank you. I don't know if I can be of any help, but I'd like to be there all the same."

Dave led Hillary to a couch in the living room. "We'll wait here until the police arrive."

Hillary patted Dave's hand and sat quietly. "Marilyn, please come in and have a seat. There's no need in standing in the hallway. The police can only get here so fast."

Marilyn walked slowly into the living room with Daryl close behind her. She sat in one of the leather chairs across the room, separated from Dave and Hillary. It was the first time she'd felt distant from them. They'd taken her in instantly, but this escapade of David's had thrown a loop.

The room was as silent as a tomb, with only the fire crackling in the background. Dave walked across the room to the wet-bar and methodically poured himself a glass of water. The glass shook obviously, and Marilyn turned her face away, not wanting to embarrass him.

Flashing lights flickered down the hallway and Marilyn and Hillary stood at once. "They're here." Marilyn tried to calm her beating heart. They'd arrived so quickly; it had to be serious.

Daryl put a calming hand under her elbow, guiding her down the hallway to the coat hanging on the rack. He helped her with the coat and then slipped into his own large leather jacket. "Everyone ready?"

Dave and Hillary nodded and opened the door as the police officer began to knock.

The officer removed his hat. "Lang's?"

"Yes. We're ready." Dave held the door as Hillary, Marilyn and Daryl proceeded him down the steps. "Careful, we don't need another person in the hospital." His gut clenched at the thought of his strong virile son, lying in the hospital with his life on the line. God, please spare my son.

They arrived at the emergency room and were escorted to a private waiting area. The nurse turned and faced Hillary and Dave. "The doctor will be with you in a minute." She smiled and quietly walked away.

Marilyn stared in space. The smell of disinfectant was making her stomach nauseous. She squeezed her hands tight in a fist, her nails biting into her palms. There was no pain, only a numb feeling of loss. She was almost frozen with fear of the unknown.

"I knew there was something wrong." She remembered hoping he would drive carefully when she noticed the storm approaching. "I should have warned him to drive carefully. I should have done something." She wrapped her arms around her stomach. "God, I can't lose him." She anxiously chewed on her bottom lip.

David's mother pulled her close and held her. "Don't worry, dear. David is a fighter. He'll be fine, I promise." Hillary closed her eyes.

Dave stood impatient. "Well, I'm not waiting here another minute. I'm going to go find that doctor and get some answers." Just as Dave was leaving the waiting area, a doctor dressed in light green scrubs walked in. He had gray hair and looked to be in his late sixties.

He ran his fingers through his hair then extended his hand to Dave. "Hello, my name is Scott Drummond. I'm sorry you've been waiting so long." He walked in and shook Hillary, Daryl and Marilyn's hand also. "David was brought in about two hours ago. As you know, he's been in an automobile accident. There was no ID on him so we couldn't get in touch with you when he first arrived. Luckily one of you called on his cellular."

All four stepped close together as the doctor continued. "He has several back injuries and needed immediate surgery. He's been in there for about an hour now. The spine was severely bruised and he has several broken bones in his back."

He put a x-ray on a lighted display and pointed. "One kidney was ruptured and he had internal bleeding. The surgery is going to take several hours. He can live without the one kidney and they've finally gotten the bleeding under control. David will come out of the surgery fine, but we'll not know the full extent of the injuries until he regains consciousness. He, of course, was unconsciousness when brought in. Are there any questions I can answer for you?"

Hillary asked the question that was going through Marilyn's mind but was afraid to voice. "Will David be able to walk? Are there any long term effects?" She saw Dave flinch.

"I'm sorry Mrs. Lang, but we can't answer that until David awakens. The spine looked fine, except for the bruising. But, you never can tell for sure until the patient is awake."

Marilyn straightened and tears silently fell from her eyes. "David will live. That's all that matters. We can work through anything else that comes along."

Dr. Drummond nodded. "There was another person in the car with him. A Cheryl Bridges. She was very fortunate. She only received a concussion and a few bruises. We're keeping her overnight for observation."

Three hours later the doctor returned. Everyone jumped to their feet. "David is out of surgery and doing fine. It's going to be a long haul for him. We were able to set the broken bones and they removed the kidney. They took a careful look at his spine. The spinal cord itself looks in good condition, all though there is a lot of swelling."

Dave held up his hand. "Tell us Doctor, will David be able to walk?"

"Like I said, we'll know more when he wakes up. It may take a couple of days for that to happen, or he may wake up within a couple of hours. Every case is different. You may go in and see him for a minute. However, It's best if you go home for the evening and return in the morning. If there is any change, the nurse has your number and we'll contact you immediately." The doctor left.

A great wave of relief washed over Marilyn. "He's going to be all right." She was crying and didn't realize it this time.

David's parents hugged her. "David's always been a fighter. He's the strong one in our family, don't worry." David's father held both women while they cried tears of joy.

They walked silently to ICU and looked through the window. David's parents let Marilyn go in first.

Marilyn couldn't believe what she was seeing. David was as pale as the sheets. He looked like he had lost a large amount of blood. He didn't even look alive. Large dark circles surrounded his eyes. The only sign that he was all right, was the constant beeping of the monitors. He had four different monitors hooked up and tubes coming out of him in every possible place. Marilyn went forward and kissed David on the cheek. She held his hand and put her face next to his. She could feel his breath blowing on her cheek. Knowing that David was breathing brought on another flood of tears.

She knelt down beside his bed. He's alive. God, thank you for letting him live. Marilyn kissed his cheek. "David, I'm here with you. You're going

to be all right. Try to relax and everything will be fine. Can you feel me holding your hand? I'm right here. I love you so very much."

David and Hillary walked away from the glass partition. Without them saying, she knew they were going to check on Cheryl. Marilyn looked at David. Why? She wanted to shake him and ask him why he was with her? Why couldn't he have told her he was meeting with Cheryl? Surely everything they'd shared together the last few days wasn't a lie. It couldn't be. No one could fake the feelings they'd shown each other.

David's parents watched Marilyn. Hillary turned to Dave as he took her in his arms. "Hush, he's going to be all right. Don't worry, dear."

"I know. I was so scared." She wiped her tears away. "David will come through this. He's a Lang." She watched Marilyn as she talked to David. "She loves him so much. It breaks my heart to see her so unhappy. She and David were bursting with happiness this morning. I hope she knows how hard this is going to be for him when he wakes up. David's never been good at having to depend on other people. He's going to be a big grumpy bear." She chuckled.

Dave looked at his son. "My question is, why was he with Cheryl? It doesn't make any sense. I'm going to want answers as soon as possible. Marilyn doesn't deserve this added worry."

Hillary took his hand. "David has never given us reason not to trust him. Don't assume the worst."

"It's hard not to. Why didn't he tell us he was meeting with her and what is she doing here in Sherry?" He shook his head. "It doesn't add up. I'm going to talk to her as soon as she's awake."

Marilyn came out of the room. "You can go in. I didn't mean to stay so long."

Hillary hugged her. "He's going to be your husband. You deserve to be there." Hillary turned and followed Dave.

Hillary stayed on one side of the bed as Dave went to the other. "Hello, son. Your mom and I are here. I hope you know how scared you made that beautiful fiancée of yours. You both must be on the same wavelength, because she knew there was something wrong when you didn't show up for lunch." He reached down and grasped David's hand. "You're going to be fine, son."

Hillary sniffed back tears. "I hope you know you scared your poor mother, too. I didn't bring you into this world to have you taken out so soon. You better wake up quick. I love you." She leaned over and kissed his cheek and tried to keep the tears from her voice.

They walked out together as the nurses came in to check his monitors. "You can come back tomorrow around ten in the morning. If there is any change, we have your number at the desk and we'll call."

Dave stopped in front of Marilyn and Daryl. "Let us take you home, Marilyn, so you can rest. We can come back together in the morning."

Daryl guided her from the hospital. His strong presence was comforting during this time. On the ride home, Marilyn kept playing the events of the day over and over in her head. She wished there was some way she could have kept this from happening, but she knew there wasn't. She realized they hadn't asked about all the details of the accident. Was there another car involved?

They walked into the house. It was quiet and empty. Marilyn's first step inside had been with David. Now, he wasn't here. He was lying helpless in a hospital bed fighting for his life. She felt David's father removing her coat. She smiled at him. "Thank you. I'm so glad you both came into town. I don't know how I could have survived this on my own." Tears were running down her face. "Look at me. I'm a mess. That's your son laying in that hospital, not mine."

Hillary pulled her into her arms. "Now Marilyn, everything will be fine. I want you to get some rest tonight and David and I will get settled into our old room down the hall from you. If you need anything all you have to do is call out."

Marilyn couldn't do anything but nod. She turned and walked up the stairs and remembered Daryl. He was standing quietly behind her. "Daryl, thank you."

Daryl smiled his crooked little smile. "For what, Darlin?"

"For being there for me today."

"I wouldn't have it any other way. Now, go upstairs and get yourself some rest. You're going to need it. I'm going to head on back to my place. Call me if there's any news or you just need to talk." Daryl pushed back a lock of hair that had fallen from her hair clip.

"I will." Marilyn whispered. She slowly ascended the steps until she reached her room. It was dark and gloomy from the rain outside. No sunlight was pouring in, only darkness. She sat on the edge of the bed that she and David had shared. She laid back and pulled one of the pillows in front of her and cried. She wanted to hold David not the pillow. She wanted to have his arms wrapped around her and telling her it was all a bad dream.

She saw the phone and picked it up. She dialed Jacqueline, her closest friend in Dallas. The phone rang three times and when Marilyn thought she'd give up, someone answered. "Hello, is Jacqueline there?"

"Sure, hold on a minute."

Marilyn heard music in the background and groaned. This wasn't the time to call.

Jacqueline picked up the phone. "Hello?"

"Jacqueline, it's me." Marilyn felt a tear drop from her eye.

"Marilyn, what's wrong? You sound horrible. Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine." She took a deep breath. "You're not going to believe what I've gotten myself into."

“What in the world’s wrong? You’ve only been there a week, it’s not like you could get into that much trouble.”

“Remember our hunk boss, David?”

“Like a sane woman could forget? What about him?”

Marilyn gave a dry laugh. “We’re engaged.”

“No! Are you serious? How did you pull that one off?”

“You wouldn’t believe it if I told you, but we are.” She blew her bangs off her forehead. “God, I love him, Jacque. Never really noticed him in Dallas, but move me out here to Sherry, and we hit it off.” She laughed and then started crying uncontrollably. “I don’t know what to do. David’s been in a car accident.”

“Oh, Marilyn, I’m so sorry. What happened?”

Thoughts of the day flashed before her. “The weather’s horrible here and David was out in it and I don’t know. Somehow he was in a car accident. Now he’s in a coma and it’s a waiting game.”

“Marilyn, do you need me? You know I’ll come out there somehow. The Dallas store will survive for a few days.”

“No, wait. I’ll see him again in the morning and I’ll know more then. I just had to talk to you. I’ve been meaning to call you the last couple of days, but it’s been crazy. Now, this happens and I had to call. You’ve always been here for me and I needed to hear your voice. I’ll call you tomorrow and let you know what’s going on.”

“All right. I know everything will be okay. I’ll keep David in my prayers tonight. Call me as soon as you hear something from the doctors. I don’t care what time it is. Um, should I mention this to the office?”

“I wouldn’t. I don’t know if Dave and Hillary will let the company know yet, or if they’ll wait to see how he does.”

“I understand. Let me know what’s going on and if I can do anything for you, sis. I love you.”

“I love you, too.” Jacqueline was the closest Marilyn had to a sister and she thanked God everyday for bring her into her life.

Marilyn placed the phone back on the cradle and turned back on her side. The pillow was wet from her tears. She fell asleep praying God would somehow make everything all right. She knew He could do it, but would He? She’d only turned to Him in times of need. Could this be a lesson for her to turn to God more often? She prayed not. Still, the thought of Cheryl lingered in the back of her mind. Why?

CHAPTER THREE

Marilyn and David's parents arrived at the hospital promptly at ten, the first available time for visitors. They went directly up to ICU. Each patient's window was open and Marilyn could see the visitors talking. She pushed David's door open and stopped. Another patient occupied the bed. She looked at the room number. It was right. She looked at Hillary. "David has been moved."

She shut the door and rushed to the nurse's station. "Excuse me, could you tell me where David Lang has been moved? He was in room six yesterday and now he's not there. Has something happened? Is he okay?" Marilyn was becoming frantic.

The nurse stood and looked at a dry-erase board with patient's information. "Don't worry. Mr. Lang has been moved to a private room on the fifth floor. He's out of danger and the doctor felt with you and his family; it would be more convenient if he were in a private room. I'll give you the number and you can go up to see him. The doctor is there and will be for a while." She wrote the number on a sheet of paper and gave it to Marilyn.

Marilyn rubbed her tight neck and looked at Dave and Hillary. "Did you hear her?" She was smiling. "Everything's going to be all right."

They quickly took the elevator to the fifth floor. The elevator opened facing another nurse's station. Marilyn saw a sign with numbers showing the way to David's room. When she arrived at the room, the door was open. Two nurses and Doctor Drummond were inside. The nurses were monitoring the machines hooked to him and Dr. Drummond was inspecting David's legs.

They waited while the doctor continued his examination, each holding their breath. Doctor Drummond looked up and saw them in the doorway. "Come on in. David's doing better. He's slowly coming around, but that's to be expected after his trauma."

They approached the bed. The tube had been removed from his mouth and only oxygen remained on his face. He still had an IV and a heart monitor, but other than that, it was a real improvement. Marilyn picked up his hand while Hillary and Dave went to the other side of the bed. His complexion was still pale and he had dark rings under his eyes. Marilyn continued to look at him, willing his eyes to open.

"David started coming out of his coma shortly after you left last night. We didn't want to call, knowing it would take hours for him to completely be conscious." Dr. Drummond picked up his clipboard and moved so Hillary and Dave could step closer to the bed.

"You can come in as often as you like. Some patients respond to sound and some don't, so we want to keep an eye on his behaviors. If you see any change let us know immediately. However, I still suggest you go home in the evenings so you can keep your strength up. It's going to be a long haul for him after he wakes. He's a very lucky man to have survived." He smiled and started for the door. "I have some rounds to make, but I'll be back to check in later."

Marilyn looked at Hillary and smiled. She was so overwhelmed with gratitude. God had heard her prayers and seen fit to grant her this grace. "He's going to be fine, Hillary. He already looks better. Look at his color." She leaned down and kissed David on the cheek.

Dave looked down at his son. He said gruffly. "Yes, he's going to make it. He's a strong Lang man."

Marilyn couldn't hold back the tears from falling down her cheeks. She held tight to his hand. "I couldn't lose him after just finding him." She pulled the chair next to the bed and sat down. "I'm not leaving his side. I'm staying here until he wakes up."

The door opened and Hillary and Dave spun around. "Jax, you're here." Hillary lifted her hand to him.

Jax grasped her hand and pulled her into a hug. "Of course. I would have been here sooner, but I just got the message. How's he doing?"

Jax walked closer to the bed. "He looks like hell."

"Shh, he might hear you." Marilyn reprimanded him.

Jax jerked his head to her. "I'm sorry, I didn't know." He extended his hand across the bed. "You must be Marilyn."

Marilyn looked at the hand in front of her. Large dark tanned hands with short manicured nails. She lifted hers and let the hand enfold around her fingers. "Yes." His touch was warm and comforting. She closed her eyes needing strength. She looked at his face. He looked like he'd been fashioned after Adonis himself. A beautiful man, dark complected with short brown hair, almost black. His deep British accent was mesmerizing. "I'm sorry, David has never mentioned you. He doesn't have a brother, so you must be..."

Jax laughed. "Jax Blair and I'm not surprised David didn't tell you about me. He did however tell me a lot about you." Jax quickly perused her. "Now I see why he told me to stay away. You're beautiful."

Marilyn blushed and pulled her hand out of his. "Thank you, I think."

Jax laughed again. "Don't worry. David and I have been the closest of friends since childhood. He was just letting me know you're off limits. He really cares about you."

Marilyn relaxed. He didn't bother Hillary and Dave, so he had to be harmless. "I hope so, since we're engaged to be married."

Jax gasped. "What? That was fast. I knew he had it bad, but I didn't know he was that far gone." He looked down at David, concern lacing his voice. "How's he really doing?"

"Dr. Drummond said he woke up last night, but not enough for them to be able to tell the full extent of his injuries. I guess what they mean is, they can't tell if he has feelings in his legs." She gently brushed her hand down his arm remembering the way Dr. Drummond had been checking his legs and feet.

"He'll make it. Don't worry." Jax squeezed David's hand. "I know he will." He turned away from the bed and approached Dave.

Dave hugged him. "Thanks for coming, Jax. I know how close you and David have become over the years. He'll be glad you were here."

Jax swallowed the lump that had risen in his throat. "I know. I can't believe this happened. We had lunch just a couple of days ago." He shook his head. "You never know what's around the bend."

Hillary laid her hand on Jax's arm. "I'm glad you're here and not in London. David's going to need your support."

"I can stay as long as I'm needed." Jax turned back to Marilyn. "If you need anything, you can always call me."

Marilyn witnessed the bond between the three of them. It was more than friendship. The Lang's had taken her into their circle the same way. She had never had a lack of love, but if she lost David all the love in the world wouldn't be able to fill the hole in her heart. She continued to hold David's hand, willing him to open his eyes. But it didn't happen. His blond lashes lying still on his face.

She looked back at the threesome. "If you all need to go to the office, I'll call you if there's any changes."

Dave smiled. "I think we will. You stay here and we'll call you if there's anything that needs your attention."

"Thank you."

Hillary came around the bed and gave Marilyn a kiss on the cheek. "Call us if anything changes or he wakes up."

"I promise." Marilyn nodded at Hillary. She watched as they quietly left the room. Jax looked back before the door shut. He gave her a reassuring smile and she returned it. Marilyn was glad he was there for David. If there was the chance of David not walking, she knew he would need the support of all his closest family and friends.

* * *

As the door shut, Hillary and Dave looked at Jax. Dave spoke. "Cheryl was in the car with David when it happened. She's here under

observation. Obviously, she survived the accident with minimal injuries. She's in room 202; we're going there now. Do you want to come?"

Jax ran his hand through his hair. "Wait a minute. Cheryl was with David. This doesn't make sense. What is she doing in Sherry anyway?"

Hillary slipped her purse onto her shoulder. "That's what we're going to find out." She turned for the elevator. "Are you coming or not?"

Jax followed the two. "Yes."

All three were silent as the elevator descended to the second floor. The doors opened to a busy floor, visitors and patients up and around. Completely opposite of David's floor. They continued down the hallway and stopped in front of Cheryl's closed door. Hillary pushed the door open and checked to make sure there wasn't anyone else there. The room was empty except for Cheryl.

"Cheryl, how are you?" Hillary walked over and took Cheryl's hand in hers. "Dr. Drummond told us you were only being observed so we've been with David. I'm sorry we couldn't come down sooner."

"How is David? Dr. Drummond told me he's still unconscious." Cheryl asked, concerned.

"He is, but he's coming around." Hillary didn't know if she should mention Marilyn, so she waited.

Dave stepped next to Hillary and allowed Jax to walk to the other side of the bed. "I'm glad you're okay, dear. Have you notified your parents?"

"Yes, sir. I called them this morning. I assured them I'm fine. They want me to keep them informed of David's progress."

Cheryl looked at Jax. "Jax, David told me you were in town. How have you been?"

Jax studied her before he spoke. "Fine, how about you? When I talked to David the other day, he didn't mention you being in town. When did you arrive?"

Cheryl straightened the blanket over her lap and looked down. "I arrived yesterday morning. As soon as I called David at the office, he came over." She looked up at each one. "He told me about Marilyn."

Hillary let out her relieved breath. "I'm sorry, dear. I know you and David have been close for many years."

Cheryl waived her hand in the air. "Of course and that will never change."

Hillary knew the tone Cheryl was using. It was the same irritating tone she used with others to get her way. "What did David tell you about Marilyn?"

"Oh, he said she was up here to open the new store." Cheryl continued to pleat the blanket on her bed, her hands twisting tighter in the blanket as she went along.

"That's all he said?" Hillary watched her.

"Yes." Cheryl didn't look at anyone.

“Cheryl. David and Marilyn are engaged.” Dave spoke.

“Oh, but that was before I returned. We’ve been together too long for him to marry someone else. You know it’s assumed we will marry. It’s always been that way.”

Hillary gasped. “Dear, David is marrying Marilyn.”

“We’ll, see.” Cheryl finally lifted her face and started straight at Hillary. “David wants to be with me. He knows he loves me.”

“Is that what David said?”

Cheryl thought for a minute and then shook her head. “No, that’s when we had the accident, but he was about to. Do you know when I can see him?”

Dave and Hillary stood stunned. Jax wasn’t. “Cheryl, I don’t know what you’re trying to pull here, but you know David only cares for you as a friend. You two have never talked of marriage.”

Cheryl’s voice started to rise. “How would you know, Jax? You may be David’s best friend, brother practically, but I’m the woman of his dreams. You can’t be everything to him.”

Jax stepped away from the bed afraid he’d grab Cheryl, shake her and make her teeth rattle. “Cheryl, I’d advise you to wake from this dream world you’ve spun and see reality. David loves Marilyn, and she’s going to be his wife, not you.”

Cheryl started to cry. “Get out! I don’t need your grief added to what I’m already dealing with, Jax. The man I love is in this hospital fighting for his life and you want to argue with me. Get out!”

Jax shook his head. “Cheryl, I’m warning you. I won’t stand by and watch you destroy David’s life.”

Dave and Hillary came to stand beside Jax. Hillary spoke. “Cheryl, we’re going to leave now. If you need anything call us.” Hillary looked at Jax and let him know she didn’t want him to say another word.

“I will. Thank you Mrs. Lang.”

They all walked out of the room, leaving Cheryl behind. Jax turned around and faced them as soon as the door closed. “She’s up to no good. You two have been away too long. Cheryl is one conniving woman that will stop at nothing. There’s going to be trouble.”

Dave shook his head. “I’ve never seen her that way. What happened?”

“I don’t know. Cheryl’s always thought of David as her property, but she’s taking it to another level. That woman could be certifiable. If we were in London, I’d say lock her in The Tower.”

“I’d have to agree with you. Let’s just keep Marilyn from Cheryl and maybe we can get this settled without a confrontation.” Dave led Hillary down the hallway. “What has my son gotten himself into?”

Hillary and David walked in the room at six. Marilyn stood and stretched. Her back aching from the hours spent sitting in the chair at David's bedside. "You're back."

"Have there been any changes?" Hillary asked.

"I thought he was waking up one time. He squeezed my hand. I called the nurses, but they said it was probably his muscles twitching." Marilyn looked at his hand. He hadn't done it again all day. She didn't believe the doctor. If it were involuntary twitching, it would have happened again. Hadn't they said he was waking up?

She smiled and brushed back his bangs. "I've talked to him all day. Going over the last week. I was hoping something would wake him." She shook her head. "But it didn't work."

Hillary reached across the bed to her. "The doctor said it would take time. He'll come around, don't give up hope. I know I haven't."

"Oh, I'm not. I just wish he would open his eyes. I need to tell him how much I love him."

"I know. We all do." Hillary ran her fingers through her son's hair. "He always had the softest hair." She fingered his bangs. "When he was a little boy, he'd always try to style his hair back like his dad, but it just didn't want to stay." She laughed. "It still doesn't."

Dave put his arm around Hillary. "That's our stubborn son. He wore his hair that way for two years before he finally gave up. He'll be the same with this. If he can't feel anything, he'll work hard until he can."

Marilyn held back the tears she wanted to shed for them. They loved David so very much. She knew their hearts were breaking over what happened. But, they still had hope that David could come out of this whole. She prayed for their sake he would.

Dave pulled a chair up and sat. "Why don't you two ladies go downstairs and get something to eat? I know you haven't eaten today. Have you, Marilyn?"

"No, sir. I was afraid to leave David's side."

"Well, you have to keep your strength up. Go and get something to eat. Take a break."

Hillary picked up her purse. "Come on, Marilyn. You can't argue with a Lang."

Marilyn smiled at Dave. "Thank you. We'll be right back."

As Marilyn and Hillary were getting in the elevator, Marilyn asked. "How did it go at the office today?"

"Pretty smooth actually. Daryl came by and wanted me to tell you that things were going as planned at the site and not to worry about anything. You do have a meeting tomorrow. I didn't want to cancel it without talking to you first. What do you think? Do you want to go? You probably need to get away for a while."

Marilyn knew Hillary was right. "I'll go. Do you think you could stay here while I'm gone?"

"He is my son, after all." Hillary smiled.

"I know. Thank you for letting me stay today. I know you wanted to be here."

Hillary rested her hand on Marilyn's arm. "Darling, you're just as much a part of David's life as me. He made that perfectly clear. You're a part of this family now."

Marilyn felt humbled by Hillary's words. They had taken her in without a doubt in their minds. She didn't know what to say. How could she ever tell this woman how much it meant to her to have someone believe and trust her as much as she did? "Thank you. You'll never know how much that means to me."

They walked into the cafeteria. The smell of hamburgers grilling filled the room. Her stomach growled, but Marilyn didn't feel she could eat anything, even though she knew she had to eat something to keep her strength up. She chose a roll and cup of tea. They sat at a table and talked over the day's events at Midwest. Marilyn wanted to be there to help get things rolling, but knew she couldn't leave David for very long. "After the meeting tomorrow, I'll probably drive out to the site if you don't mind."

"Of course not. Do anything you need. Our visit here was mostly pleasure. I've already taken care of what I needed to do. Take your time."

"I want to tell you something." She took a deep breath. "Dave and I went to Cheryl's room this morning when we left." Hillary hoped she wouldn't burn for the lies she was about to tell.

Marilyn waited, afraid to hear what Hillary was going to say. "Yes."

"Apparently she called the office yesterday morning and David told her he wanted to speak with her. He told her about you and your engagement. He didn't want her to hear from someone else since you had both announced it to the office." Surely this would straighten out before Marilyn discovered her lie.

Marilyn looked down and a tear dropped from her eye. "I see."

"I know you're angry he didn't tell you. I just wanted you to know why they'd met. He was telling her how much he loved you."

"Thank you, Hillary. I know he loves me, but he should have been honest and not said he had a meeting. He could have told me."

"I agree. He should have, but he didn't. There's no changing the past. You'll learn men don't always think before they act."

Marilyn smiled. "Thank you for telling me. At least I know for sure now that there's nothing going on between them. I hated not knowing. I thought I knew him, but this shows I don't. We've only really known each other for a couple of weeks."

"Marilyn, my husband and I have been married for forty years and we still discover new things about each other all the time. That will never change. There will be sad and happy times throughout your lives. That's what makes a marriage work." She smiled and brushed the tears off Marilyn's cheeks.

"Now cheer up. That stubborn son of mine loves you desperately. Desperate men do stupid things. This is just one of the many he'll do throughout the years. Come on; let's go back upstairs. It's about time for that boy to wake up and he'll want to see your beautiful face first thing."

Marilyn finished her tea and pushed it aside. Time to quit worrying about other things. David was her focus and then on to Midwest Viking.

"Let's go." Hillary stood and they left the cafeteria.

Dr. Drummond was in the room when they returned. He saw them and smiled. Marilyn waited for him to speak.

"David's moving a little more now, so it shouldn't be long. When he does finally wake up, he'll be in a lot of pain so be expecting that. I suggest you go home and get some sleep. Tomorrow will probably be a big day for you all."

Marilyn walked to David's bed and took his hand. He was still, but his breathing was deeper now, as if he were sleeping more peacefully.

Hillary and Dave looked at each other. Worry etched their faces as they watched Marilyn with David. Dave spoke. "Marilyn, I want you to come home with us. David will be fine. If there's any drastic changes, Dr. Drummond has assured me, he'll call the house immediately."

Marilyn knew he was right. "Okay, I'll go." She leaned down and kissed David gently on his bruised cheek. "I love you." She waited for a sign that he'd heard, but there was nothing. Sadly, she let go of his hand and followed Dave and Hillary out the door. The important thing was that David would soon be awake.

On the ride home, she thought of Jacqueline. She would have stayed by Marilyn's side the entire time. But, there was no need for her to. Hillary and Dave were wonderful. They cared for her as a daughter and barely knew her. She missed Jacqueline, but was glad she had Hillary and David to lean upon. She knew she could turn to them if anything happened.

When they arrived at the house, Marilyn walked up the steps and stopped at her bedroom door. The bright yellow wallpaper depressed her. It wasn't the same as before when her and David had stayed together in the big bed. David teasing her and pulling the feathers out of the comforter and mattress.

She closed the door and continued down the hall and then stood in the doorway of David's room; the dark masculine colors comforting. She walked in and shut the door behind her. The bed beckoned her to come closer. Marilyn smoothed the blanket in place. David had obviously sat on the edge when getting dressed. His shirt and slacks were nonchalantly thrown over a chair in the corner. She picked up the shirt and breathed in his familiar scent, recalling their intimate times spent together.

Pulling the covers back, she removed her clothes and slipped on the shirt. The smell of him was soothing. She slipped between the sheets and pulled the pillow close to her cheek. Tomorrow was a new day and she'd

worry about it when it arrived. She vowed to pull herself together. She was here for a reason, to get the new store opened. She had a job.

That didn't mean she wasn't going to stand by David's side. She loved him with all her heart, but she wouldn't forget why she was here in the first place. She was strong and she knew she could do it. She'd help David heal and she'd do her job. Fatigue won the battle and sleep quickly took control.

* * *

Dave lay down on the bed and watched as Hillary changed her clothes. He saw the worry etched on her face and lines and dark circles under her eyes. She'd been strong the last couple of days, but he was worried about her. He waited until she sat on the edge of the bed and then put his arm around her. "Lie back, darling."

Hillary turned around and faced Dave. "You know me so well." She lay back and let Dave's arms encircle her.

"Our son is strong. He'll be fine." Dave rubbed the lines between her brows. Trying to soothe her emotions and worries. He kissed her forehead.

Hillary sighed and raised her arms around his neck. "I know. It's just so hard watching Marilyn stand by his side, when I've always been the one."

Dave laughed. "It's hard to give your son to another woman isn't it? Even though you know she loves him as much as you do. Now, you see how our parents felt."

"You're not helping, Dave."

"I know. Just trying to help you see it's natural to feel this way. Marilyn's a wonderful girl and David loves her. It would be different if she was just a girl friend, but David made it a point to let us know this was different. He wants her as his wife."

"You're right and I wouldn't stand in the way. I love the girl already." She sighed. "I just wish their future looked more hopeful. It's going to be a struggle for both."

"They'll make it. Have faith."

"I do. It's just a mother's wish for her children to have an easy life. Besides, I have a feeling they're not going to just have his rehabilitation to face, but the wrath of Cheryl. How could she have gotten so deranged? I know that's a harsh word, but that's how I feel."

Dave pulled her head on his chest. Her auburn hair splayed across his hands. "Don't worry, our son has handled her all these years. He can handle her. Besides, it's all in God's hands."

CHAPTER FOUR

Marilyn walked through the front doors of Midwest Viking. Everything seemed to be running as if the last few days had never happened. She looked over and Mark, the head security guard was watching her. He reminded her of the last time she'd seen David getting ready to leave. She smiled and headed in his direction. "Hi, Mark. How are things this morning?"

"Just fine, Ms. Rogers. I'm sorry to hear about Mr. Lang. How's he this morning?"

"The same. He's still unconscious." She took a big breath. "The doctors say he'll be coming around in his own time."

"Let us know of any changes. I know it doesn't look like the news has slowed us down, but it has. Mr. Lang was respected by everyone." He patted her on her shoulder. She smiled at the security guard. "I know. Thank you, Mark."

Marilyn entered the elevator and waited as the doors slid closed. She leaned against the cool metal walls and watched as the numbers flew upward. She smiled, remembering her and David's first ride up together. She'd tried to keep his hands off her body as the doors had opened. They hadn't had a worry in the world.

She shook her head. A person never knows when their life is going to change. One minute you couldn't think things could get any better and then the next you're dealt with a blow to knock you to your knees. She could still hear David whispering to her in the dark as they made love. The touch of his hands moving over her as if she was the only woman in the world for him. Tears filled her eyes and she took a deep breath.

The doors slid open. She stepped out of the elevator and saw everyone at his or her job, a fine running office. She walked off the elevator and Cindy looked up with a surprised expression on her face. "Ms. Rogers, I didn't know you would be here so early. How's Mr. Lang?"

Marilyn approached the desk. "He's still the same, but they expect him to awaken at any time." She took the messages left in her box. "Have the Vandergriffs called this morning?"

"No, the meeting is still on for ten."

"Thank you. I'll be in my office." Marilyn relaxed her shoulders and walked into her office. She gently shut the door and walked to the window looking down at the front drive. He had waved and told her he loved her.

How happy she had been at that moment. She lifted her hand and placed it on the pane, the same spot she'd done before. The day seemed like ages ago, even though it had only been a few. Marilyn sat at her desk and picked up Lauren's jewelry plans. It was time to concentrate on work. Hillary would call if there were any changes.

Lauren, Daryl and Karen joined Marilyn fifteen minutes before the meeting with the Vandergriffs to go over any pertinent questions. "Well, it looks like we're ready. I'm determined to get this store off its feet and running prior to expected time. The way I see it, we have six months to build, furnish and hire personnel. Karen, I want ads running now for employees. Daryl, I want you to have a meeting with the contractors and I want the building started immediately. Lauren, you and I are going to begin purchasing the jewels for the opening. I want this store opened in record time and with exquisite taste."

She watched their surprised expressions. "Do any of you think you can't do this?"

They all agreed they would try their best. They wanted to get started as soon as possible. The receptionist beeped them and said the Vandergriffs had arrived. They rose and Marilyn went to welcome them. She ushered the Vandergriffs into her office and introduced them to Midwest Viking's finest.

Mr. Vandergriff produced several magnificent pieces. Marilyn had seen some beautiful pieces in her life but none equal to these. "Mr. Vandergriff, I'm impressed. How rare are these pieces?"

"Let's say you're looking at pieces worth from ten thousand to two hundred thousand. David said he wanted pieces that even the European market would drool over." He laughed. "You've got it. Hillary and Dave have already approved of the additional pieces." Thoughts of how Midwest Viking would take the Northeast in a whirl transformed Marilyn's thought to business.

When they'd concluded the meeting, everyone went about their plans and Marilyn finished up at the office. She had been gone for hours from the hospital and was anxious to return. She gathered her briefcase and told Cindy she was leaving for the day.

When she arrived, Dave and Hillary were in the hall. They looked nervous and she quickly walked to them. "Hi, is David okay?"

"Marilyn, we tried to reach you at the office and they said you'd already left. David is beginning to wake up. We noticed him twitching and mentioned it to the nurses and they said it was common for patient's muscles to respond after being asleep so long. They kept a close eye on him and then said they felt they needed to call the doctor. After the doctor was here just a short time, David began to move his hands. They rushed us out and said they would be with us as soon as they were through testing him." Dave was breathless with his excitement.

"Oh, Marilyn, our son is coming back to us. I'm so happy." Hillary put her arms around Marilyn. "I knew he would be okay."

Marilyn gripped Hillary's hand on her waist. Her heart was pounding. She put her other hand over her heart, willing it to slow. He was waking. "I've prayed so hard today." She choked back her tears and couldn't say another word. She stood quietly with them as they waited for a sign from the room.

Shortly, Dr. Drummond came out and found everyone in the hallway waiting. "David is coming out of the coma. He's responding well to light and sounds. It may take a few hours, but he will be coming to. This is a critical time. I'm sorry, but you will have to wait a while before visiting him. We need the room free for equipment. As soon as I know anything else, I'll be right over." He turned and left.

A nurse approached and escorted them to a private waiting room. Marilyn was about to jump around the room in excitement. David was going to be fine. She had been so worried she would lose him. She couldn't wait to see his beautiful eyes again. She wanted to hold him in her arms and tell David how much she loved him.

Hillary and Dave were holding hands and talking about David when he was growing up. Such beautiful memories, she'd never before heard. She wanted to know everything there was about his life. She couldn't wait until her and David could do the same thing. She wanted to start a family right after they were married. She couldn't wait.

Time seemed to creep along. David's parents went to get a bite to eat. It was already dinnertime and Dr. Drummond was still working with David. Marilyn was anxious to find out what was going on. None of the nurses or doctors that went in and out of the room ever looked her way. She was starting to feel like there was something wrong. She knew the worst thing she could do was get upset, but Dr. Drummond still had not come out of David's room.

Marilyn left the waiting room and began pacing back and forth in front of the door. One of the nurses came out and Marilyn stopped her. "How are things? Dr. Drummond hasn't come out to talk to me all afternoon."

"It could take a while to get all the tests finished. I'll tell Dr. Drummond you'd like to talk to him." She turned around and reentered the room.

Marilyn saw a shadow to her right and turned. "Jax, hi."

"Hello." He walked up and took her hand. "What are you doing out here in the hall? Is David alright?"

"Oh, yes. He's coming around. The doctor is running tests and they're waiting for him to awaken. Now, is the real waiting game."

Jax walked her to a chair. "Have a seat. No need to wear a hole in the carpet."

Marilyn sighed. "You're right." She sat and tried to calm her ever moving feet. "You know, I can't wait to see his eyes looking at me or that little dimple in his cheeks."

Jax grinned. "Women! You're all nuts."

Another machine was being wheeled in and Marilyn sighed. So many tests. She'd thought they could go in after a little while. Isn't that what Dr. Drummond meant?

Dr. Drummond walked out of the room and turned in her direction. Marilyn anxiously sat up. Jax put his arm around her shoulders. The doctor squatted in front of her and took her hands, as dread crept up her spine.

"Ms. Rogers, David is out of the coma. He can answer short questions. He knows where he is and why. However, all the tests have tired him."

He took a deep breath. "David isn't responding to touch from the waist down. As you know, his spine received quite a shock in the accident, it's swollen and bruised. We're hoping this is the cause for no feeling or movement. All we can do is wait for the swelling to recede. What's important now is for him to get plenty of rest and he's going to need support from you and his family."

Marilyn looked at Jax and closed her eyes. David was awake and responding, they could deal with anything else. She took a deep breath and returned her attention to the doctor. He was still holding her hands. She smiled. "We can deal with this. Thank you for coming out and talking to me. Not knowing what was going on was the worst part. When will we get to see him?"

"We still have several tests to finish, but if you'd like, you can peek in the room. I don't suggest talking to him right now. Let us finish with the tests, then you can go in and try to talk to him." He stood up and placed his hand on Marilyn's shoulder. "I hope he knows what a special person you are. Hang in there. It's going to be really hard for David right now. Don't forget all the broken bones we had to set during surgery. He's not going to be the happiest man for a while."

"I know." She and Jax followed Dr. Drummond to the room. He held the door open for her to see David. He was lying on the bed still as before. If the machines and nurses weren't in there she would have thought him still in his coma. A tear fell from her eye and she brushed it aside. He was going to make it. She looked up at Dr. Drummond and he smiled.

She whispered. "Thank you." The door slowly shut and Marilyn turned and fell in Jax's arms. His tall sturdy frame, comforting her. Tears of joy slowly fell down her cheeks. She wished he had opened his eyes. Just to see the depths of his brown eyes would have reassured her so much more. She took a deep breath and remembered Hillary and Dave.

She looked up and they were coming down the hall. She rushed to them. "David is doing fine. Dr. Drummond just came out to talk to us. I'm

sorry you missed him. He said they would still be taking tests for a while and then we could go in and see him. The spine is still swollen and David can't feel or move anything from the waist down. It's probably going to stay that way until the swelling goes away. Dr. Drummond says David knows where he is and why and that he's doing well. He said for us not to forget about the broken bones and that David will be in a lot of pain."

Marilyn laughed. She knew she had been going ninety to nothing. "I'm sorry. I know I'm going too fast, but David is really going to be all right." She was crying again. "You can peek in the room, but the doctor said not to try to talk to him yet." She watched Hillary and Dave push the door open and look inside. Their faces lit up and they held each other.

Hillary turned and hugged her. "We're all happy dear. Don't cry. Since the doctor said we couldn't see him until later, we're taking you home to get some rest and a change. You don't want David to see you with those dark spots under your eyes."

"I guess it's safe for me to leave. I don't want David to see me looking like an old lady." Marilyn laughed and let Hillary and David walk her out.

Jax saw a shadow in the corner of his eye and looked back. A woman with blonde hair was turning the corner. Jax would know that woman anywhere, Cheryl. He saw the Lang's enter the elevator and he waived them on. He's was going to find out exactly what Cheryl was up to.

Jax quickly walked down the hallway to where Cheryl was standing next to the coffee machine. She had obviously been waiting for him. "What are you doing on this floor?"

"What, do you own this hospital now, Jax?"

"Don't play games with me, Cheryl. What are you up to?"

"Nothing." She said playing the innocent.

"Right? What are you doing in Sherry? Last I heard you were in London."

"So were you, Jax dear. Why are you back in the states?"

"That's none of your business, Cheryl." He stepped closer to her trying to intimidate her into telling him the truth.

"Jax, I've already told you why I'm here. David. It's not over between us and I'm here to make sure of it."

"Why, you've never really cared about David? Why all of a sudden do you want a relationship? You never have before."

"I really don't see where it's any of your business, but I'll tell you. It's time I settled down, at least that's what I've been told and who else would I settle down with besides David?"

"Cheryl, that doesn't mean he wants to settle down with you. You know he's engaged to Marilyn."

"I don't care. It was a mistake. As soon as David's feeling better, it will all be resolved."

Jax shook his head. "I'm telling you now Cheryl, stay away. I don't want to see you on this hall again. Got it?"

Cheryl laughed. "Jax, I'll do as I please, and you can take that to the bank." She turned away from him, her long blonde hair flipping behind her shoulders. "Have a nice evening, Jax."

Jax ground his teeth and refrained from speaking. Anything he had to say to Cheryl right now wouldn't help David or Marilyn. Still, he wasn't about to let Cheryl ruin David's chance with Marilyn. He'd do whatever needed to keep Cheryl away; even if that meant taking her back to London with him.

A couple hours later, Hillary went up and knocked on Marilyn's door. Marilyn had fallen asleep as soon as they arrived home. Hillary walked on in. Marilyn was curled up in the center of the bed. She walked over and brushed back the hair from her face. "Time to wake up and eat before we go back to the hospital."

Marilyn heard Hillary and sat up in bed. "Is it already that time? I fell asleep almost immediately after my head hit the pillow." Marilyn stood up and looked at her wrinkled clothes in the mirror. "I was so tired I didn't even take off my clothes. I think I'll take a quick shower."

"You do that and when you're finished come to the kitchen. Marie made dinner before she left and I've kept it warm." Hillary turned and left Marilyn to herself.

Marilyn rushed to take her shower. She stood in front of the mirror and noticed she had lost some weight since David had been in the hospital. The week had flown by, it seemed like ages. She remembered when David had said she could use a few extra pounds. He was going to be disappointed. Now she really looked thin. She picked out a baggy T-shirt and jeans. David wouldn't notice how thin she had gotten through these.

She ate a large helping of Marie's spaghetti. Marilyn had almost forgotten what food tasted like. The spaghetti was wonderful. Her mother would be jealous. She always thought her mother's was the best but Marie's was coming out ahead this time. Maybe it was because she hadn't eaten the last couple of days. She would have to try Marie's spaghetti again after things were back to normal.

They drove to the hospital in silence. When they arrived, they walked slowly into David's room in case there were nurses or doctors still in there, but he was alone. All the machines were removed except for the IV in his arm. He looked different. He looked peaceful. Marilyn let Hillary and Dave stay where they were and she walked to the other side.

"Doesn't he look better?" Marilyn couldn't believe what one afternoon could do for him.

"Yes, he does. I wonder if he'll wake up?"

David opened his eyes and looked up at his mother. "Hi, Mom. Hi, Dad." His breath was labored and his voice sounded rough.

Dave took his hand. "Don't talk, son. We know it's painful. We're just glad you're finally awake and doing better."

"Me, too, but it hurts like hell to talk." David closed his eyes.

Marilyn took his left hand and squeezed. Her heart was overflowing with thankfulness. David looked up and smiled. "David."

David lifted his hand and gently cupped her face. "So glad you were not in the car. I couldn't bare it if anything happened to you." He started to take small breaths.

Marilyn started to cry. "Oh, David, I'm so glad you're all right. I've been so worried." She leaned down and kissed his cheek. "Don't talk, just lay there and relax. I'll be right here. I love you so much."

David closed his eyes and drifted to sleep. Marilyn looked up at Hillary. "I can't leave tonight. I can't bear to be without him." Hillary nodded.

David looked up and smiled. Marilyn was still sitting by his side. His parents weren't in the room any longer. He looked at the window and noticed it was dark. He had been worried about Marilyn all day. He knew his parents would have taken care of her, but he still needed to see her to reassure himself. He wondered if they knew he couldn't move or feel from the waist down. What would they think if they knew the truth? He had instructed the doctor not to tell them how serious it was. He didn't want them to have to worry. He would tell them when he was ready.

Marilyn's head was lying next to his hand on the mattress. He moved his hand and let the strands of her hair curl around his fingers. Her scent of jasmine filled the room and he took as deep a breath as he could. Pain shot up his back and sides, but he ignored it.

He remembered Cheryl being in the car with him. Dr. Drummond had told him she was fine and had already been discharged. He was relieved. He never wanted harm to come to her. He looked at Marilyn's bent head again. What had she thought when she heard about Cheryl? He should have told her. The thought of losing Marilyn was enough to rip his heart out. He would rather be dead than hurt her.

He saw a bed on the other side of the room. He knew she was planning on staying. He looked at her upturned face. There were dark circles under her eyes and a worried crease between her brows. She had been through enough this week without her having to learn more. What if he couldn't walk and was paralyzed for life? He wouldn't put her through that. "Marilyn?" He pulled on her fingers.

Marilyn turned her face forward. Her eyes slowly opened and she looked at David. "David?"

David tried to laugh. "It's me. You haven't gotten any sleep since I've been in here, have you? I've been calling your name for a couple of minutes. I finally had to give your hand a pull."

She smiled brightly. She sat up and laid her hand on the side of his face. "I love you so much. I've been terribly afraid." She leaned forward and gently brushed her lips against his.

David closed his eyes. The taste of her lips lingered on his, a bit of heaven. "I love you, too."

Marilyn whispered. "Are you okay? Do you need me to get a nurse?"

"No, with all the medicine they're giving me, I'm surprised I can feel anything. I guess I can't sleep because I've been that way since the accident. Tell me how long I was unconscious?"

"I'm surprised Dr. Drummond didn't tell you. You've been unconscious for a week as of tomorrow. He said it could take days to weeks for you to wake up. I'm glad it didn't. I don't know how I would have survived." She held onto his hand tightly.

"Don't worry, everything will be okay. It's going to take a while for all these old bones to heal but they will." He prayed it was true.

"I saw the bed in the corner. I don't want you staying here nights, you need your rest." He brushed her hair out of her eyes.

David squeezed her hand and looked deeply into her eyes. "I want you to start staying at the house. You're not going to get any rest up here and I can take care of myself now. You have to be healthy and radiant for our wedding."

Marilyn put her head on his shoulder. "I felt like it was my fault you were in that accident. When you drove off, I prayed you would drive carefully. It was pouring rain and I had a awful feeling that something was going to happen."

David squeezed her hand and suddenly remembered the accident. A car had come around the corner and the he had lost control on the wet street. "Shhh, you can't predict the future. It was the other driver. He lost control of his car. What happened to him?"

Marilyn looked up in his eyes. "He died instantly. You were fortunate to survive."

David closed his eyes at the pain of another person's death. It had happened so fast. David couldn't steer clear of the oncoming car. He saw the car coming straight for him and knew what was going to happen. The last thought he had was that he was thankful Marilyn was not with him.

"I thought that might be the case. He was coming right at me and at a great speed." David remembered the car was an old station wagon. "Did the man have a family?"

"I don't know. I've been worried about you and haven't looked into the accident. I left it all up to your parents. I know they went to the funeral. I'll ask them."

"Thank you. I want to make sure his family is taken care of. I know it wasn't my fault but I don't think it was his either. The roads were hazardous."

"I'll take care of it tomorrow. Try to go back to sleep. I'll be right here."

"I can't sleep. I think I've been asleep too long." He couldn't keep Cheryl from her any longer "Cheryl was in the car with me."

Marilyn looked down at the bed. "Yes."

"Marilyn, please believe me. There was nothing going on between us. She called the office and I wanted to tell her about us. Since we'd told everyone already, I knew it was only a matter of time before she heard."

He stopped to catch his breath, pain shooting through his sides. Still, he had to finish. He couldn't bear her thinking anything wrong. "I know I should have told you, but I didn't want you to worry. Can you ever forgive me?"

She looked back at him and whispered. "Yes, I forgive you. Please, just be honest with me in the future."

"I promise."

She leaned down and kissed his lips, lingering a bit, not wanting to lose contact. "I wish I could crawl up there with you. I've missed your arms around me."

David groaned. "I wish you could, too. God, I wish I could feel your body next to mine, but I don't think I could handle the pain right now." He laughed.

She touched his lips with her finger. "Shhh, don't try to talk. I know."

David closed his eyes and pictured her dark hair wrapped around his arms as they lay in bed after making love. Her intoxicating scent feeling his senses and driving him to madness. Desperate to change the subject he said. "Marilyn, tell me about the office. How are things?"

"Things are running smoothly. The contractors are working on the ground floor and we're all ready put ads in for employment. I had a meeting with the Vandergriffs the other day and it went well. Don't worry about the office. Everything is taken care of."

"I know I can count on you. That's the reason I brought you here." He patted her hand. "Are Mom and Dad helping out?"

"Yes, they've been great. They're helping at the office and they insisted on moving into the house to take care of me." Marilyn laughed. "Your mom can be a real bully when she wants to."

"She always has been. You better listen to her." David laughed and could tell the pain medication was starting to wear off. "Will you push that button on the IV machine? I can tell the medication is starting to wear off."

Marilyn pushed the button and watched the morphine begin to drop into his IV. "I've pushed you too far. Please go to sleep, David." She leaned over and gave him a kiss on the lips.

“Okay, I’ll get some rest. Tomorrow, you will start sleeping at the house again.” Marilyn looked about to argue. “Don’t argue with me Marilyn. I need you healthy and the office needs you, too. I’ll be fine at night and you and my parents can take turns during the day.”

David watched as she walked to the small bed in the corner. She pulled the sheet back and slipped in between. Her eyes closed and he watched as her lashes brushed across her cheeks. Every time their eyes met, his heart melted. He’d never felt this way about anyone. He didn’t know how she did it, but he was so in love with her. He wanted to spend the rest of his life with her by his side, never a part. He knew she couldn’t hear, but he whispered anyway. “I love you.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Marilyn stepped off the elevator to a bunch of grinning faces. Hillary and Dave must have notified everyone that David was doing better. She smiled.

"Hello." She raised her hand as everyone started to speak at once. "I'm sure you all want to know how David's doing this morning. He's doing fine. We talked last night and he's going to recuperate as quickly as possible. He says thanks for all your prayers."

Cindy handed her the messages and Marilyn walked into her office. Additional messages were waiting on her desk. She picked them up and was looking through them as Lauren walked in. She looked up. "Good morning, Lauren." Marilyn was beaming.

"Good morning to you, too. Wonderful news about Mr. Lang. How long do you think he'll have to remain in the hospital?"

"Actually, the doctors say he can leave this week if everything goes as planned. They say he can heal just as well at home as in the hospital. He'll have a private nurse to attend to all the medications. The spine is still swollen and he has to have time for those bones to mend." Marilyn hoped she wouldn't push her for information she didn't have. She casually changed the subject to the jewels being purchased for the new store.

Lauren brightened. "I have several new ideas and thought you might want to see them. They're coming up for auction in London and if you like them, Mr. Lang might want to go see them. It's nice being able to correspond with him here and not on London's time schedule."

"Did you bring them with you?"

"No. I'll get them together and bring them by later. I didn't know if you would be up to it right now or not."

"Thanks. Bring them over when you get ready."

Marilyn noticed there were several messages from the head contractor. She paged Daryl's office and Cindy said he'd already left to go out to the site. "Do you know why the head contractor has been trying to get a hold of me?"

"No, ma'am. I know Daryl was having a problem with him moving up the expected opening date, but I think he took care of it. I don't know why else he would be calling you."

"I think I'll head out to the site. If I miss Daryl, tell him where I am and he can go back and meet me." Marilyn hung up.

She couldn't believe what she was seeing. The frame was all ready built. It looked wonderful. She spotted Daryl over to the left of the building. She waved and he saw her. He was doing a great job. "This is amazing, Daryl. I never expected you to have this much accomplished so quick."

"It was hard at first. The head contractor, Jeff Adair, didn't want to change his schedule. After a few persuasions, he saw the light." Daryl pointed at his cowboy boots.

"I don't even want to know what persuaded him. You seem to work miracles." She walked around the side and saw the electricians.

"The electricians are putting in the basics now. The rest will have to wait until we get the walls up. Which will be before you know it. The groundwork was a breeze, unlike the hassles we ran into in Texas. The winters here provide the extra time needed to produce enough cement."

"I remember that, it was terrible trying to get the ground work in place in Plano." She shook her head. "I'm glad we're here in Maine. It looks like you've got everything under control. I'm going to return to the office, but I'd like to have a meeting with you tomorrow if you're free."

"Your wish is my command. What time?"

"The earlier, the better. David's doing better, but I want to be at the hospital in the afternoons."

"How about nine?"

"Perfect, I'll see you then." As Marilyn turned to leave, she felt a restraining hand on her arm. She looked around and found Daryl holding her arm.

"Not so quick, missy. How's the boss really doing? You, too?"

Marilyn laughed. "Sorry, I should have told you, I just have so many things running through my mind." She stepped over a pipe on the ground and sat on a cement bucket.

"David's doing great. He has a long way to go, but his body is mending. His doctor plans to move him into the mansion this week. They think it's what he needs mentally to recuperate." She paused a minute and then looked at Daryl. "He still can't feel anything from the waist down."

"Darlin, I'm sorry." Daryl shook his head. "How does David feel about this?"

"David won't talk about it. He's ignoring the fact he may never walk again. I don't want to push him, so I'm waiting for him to bring it up."

"Smart. David's a stubborn man and right now he's just not ready. Give him time."

"I am. I'll be here when he's ready."

Daryl stretched his hand to her. When she put her hand in his, Daryl pulled her to her feet. With one finger, Daryl tilted her face up to his. Their eyes met. "Marilyn, everything will work out. Maybe not the way you dreamed, but everything will be okay."

"I know." She whispered.

Daryl pulled her close to his chest and wrapped his arms around her. "If you need me, all you have to do is pick up the phone and I'll be there."

Marilyn nodded. "I know, thank you."

She stepped out of Daryl's arms. "I had better get back to the office. Cindy had several messages for me earlier and I hate to think what's accumulated now."

"High tail it back and I'll be in touch if there's any changes out here. If not, then I'll see you tomorrow at the office."

Marilyn turned and went back to her car. Everything was working out as planned and they would have an early opening if nothing got in the way. She hoped David would be able to walk into the opening store. She was more worried about David's condition than she let on. She didn't want to cause anyone else undue distress, but she knew there could be a possibility David might not ever walk again. It would be hard on him. He was a take charge man and wouldn't take confinement lightly. It would be very difficult for him to work around. She hoped that wouldn't happen.

As Marilyn predicted there were more messages than she cared to see. She spent the better part of the afternoon returning calls and reviewing resumes. Just when Marilyn thought she might be able to escape, Lauren appeared with her new discoveries. Marilyn was very pleased with Lauren's ideas and said she would mention it to Dave. She left to go to the hospital. She told Cindy if anyone needed her, they could reach her there.

Dave and Hillary were talking to David when she arrived. "Well, how's the patient today?" She walked into the room and approached the other side of David's bed.

Hillary looked up and Marilyn could tell they were having a serious discussion. She looked down at David, and he turned his face from her. She looked back up at Hillary. "What's going on? What were you talking about?"

Hillary and Dave looked at each other. Dave spoke up. "I think we'll go back to the office and let you two talk." Dave looked over to Marilyn. "We'll see you tonight when you get in."

Hillary gave Marilyn's arm a little squeeze. "We'll see you in a bit, dear."

Marilyn waited for them to leave the room. She turned to David. He was still looking out the window. There was definitely something seriously wrong. "Tell me, David. What's going on?" She waited and he said nothing. "What is wrong!" She had run out of patience. She gripped his hand. "Please."

David continued to look out the window. "Marilyn, I think you should spend more time at the office. Your job is to see the store up and running by the deadline. You can't do that here everyday."

Marilyn knew there was more to it than the opening. "David, things are running ahead of schedule. We're looking at an early opening. I'm surprised your parents didn't tell you."

"That's good. I knew you could do it. But it still doesn't change the fact that you're needed at the office. I don't need you here and they do." He continued staring out the window.

That last sentence hit Marilyn like a ton of bricks. He'd said he didn't need her. What did he mean, he didn't need her? "Would you quit staring out that damn window and look at me when you're talking? I want to know what is really going on here." Marilyn had a feeling she didn't want to hear what David had to say. Fear clutched her heart.

David finally looked at her. Marilyn swallowed, her throat suddenly becoming dry. She hadn't done anything and couldn't understand why he was so upset. "I'm listening, David."

He cleared his throat. "The doctor came in today and informed me that I may never walk again. I refuse to lay that at your door or my parents'. This is my problem and I want to deal with it as I please. You deserve a complete man, not half a man. I need my time alone and I want you to stay at the office. Do you understand what I'm saying, Marilyn?"

The room seemed to spin around her. Marilyn took a step back. She couldn't believe what she was hearing. She was stunned. She loved David and he loved her. Her David would never speak to her like this. She slowly opened her eyes. "David, I love you. We can work everything out. I'll help you." She was pleading with him.

"No, Marilyn! I told you I want to deal with this alone. You need to find yourself another man. I can't give you what you need. You deserve a husband who can give you children and can take care of you. I can't do any of that now. I'm useless." He hit his legs and turned his face away from her.

"David, that is nonsense! You are not useless. Do you honestly think I care if you are paralyzed or not? What kind of person do you take me for? I love you! Do you think I say that lightly? I never made love to anyone before. I gave myself to you because I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I don't want anyone else. I will not give up on you. You'd better come out of this self-pity. I won't have it! This is not the man I fell in love with. You are trying to push me away, but it's not going to work." Marilyn felt her heart breaking into a million pieces. She'd always thought people's hearts breaking was an expression, but now she knew it wasn't. It truly happened. She raised her hand towards David's hair.

He knocked her hand away. "Marilyn, I've made up my mind. There is no room for you in my life. I will make it through this, but I will do it alone. I expect you to live up to our agreement and open the store. Midwest Viking will keep their contract with you. You will have a choice at the end of the year just like before." David took a deep breath. "I don't want to talk about it anymore." He continued to look out the window.

"David, you can't dismiss me like some employee. I know that's what I am, but not when I'm here. I am the woman you said you loved. I am the same person you proposed to and gave this ring. I will not give up on you. I will give you time to adjust, but I will not let you do this to us." Marilyn turned and stormed from David's room in tears. She wiped them away, but they continued to flow. The nurses at the desk saw her and didn't say a word. Usually they all greeted her.

Marilyn walked to her car and once inside let all her anguish emerge. She and David had been through so much the last couple of weeks. She couldn't believe David was treating her this way. She knew he was upset with the news he'd just received. She would do everything she could to help him through this. She vowed she wouldn't let David push her away.

She drove straight to the house. She walked in and went directly to her room and shut the door. She didn't want to talk to Hillary and Dave. Marilyn lay on her bed. She remembered the time she and David spent together. She thought back to the day David found her working in the garden. The talks they'd shared of having a family and raising them here in this house and gardens. She knew he desired her and he had told her he loved her several times. She knew by the way he said them, they weren't just words. He truly did love her. She hadn't imagined the way he whispered to her in the dark.

She heard a knock at the door. Marilyn knew it was Hillary. She ignored the knock, but it came harder this time. She sighed. "Come in, Hillary."

Hillary walked in carrying a tray with soup and cup of tea. "I thought you might need something to eat. I know it's been a long day for you and it's probably going to be even longer." Hillary laid the tray over Marilyn's lap. "Now eat for me and then I'll leave you alone if that's what you want."

Marilyn picked up the napkin and held it over her eyes. "Oh Hillary, what am I going to do? I know David is having a hard time right now, but I want to help him. It's not like we're just friends, we're engaged to be married." She looked at Hillary. "You saw us that morning. We love each other. David loves me. He can't say he doesn't want me in his life."

Hillary took the tray away. "It's going to turn out all right. David is a stubborn Lang man and he doesn't like to depend on anyone else. He takes care of people not the other way around. Give him time and it will all work out." She brushed the hair back off Marilyn's wet cheeks.

"Thank you for the soup, but I really don't think I can eat anything right now." She sat up and blew her nose.

"I'll leave it on the bureau in case you change your mind." Hillary walked over to the door. "If you need me, Marilyn, please let me know. I'm here for you." She shut the door behind her.

Marilyn lay back on the pillows and closed her eyes. She was having that numb feeling she always got when she was terribly depressed. She

tried to relax. There was nothing she could do tonight. She would worry about everything in the morning.

She woke up the next morning and decided to go into the office and wait until the afternoon to see David. She would give him a little time to think. She knew Hillary and Dave would talk to him. The office was in its normal bustle. Everyone was running around like there was nothing wrong. She remembered she had a meeting with Daryl. He was already in the lobby talking with Karen. "Good morning you two."

Marilyn knew she looked like torture, but she walked up to them anyway. Daryl and Karen looked up and she saw the surprised looks on their faces.

Karen was the first to speak. "Marilyn, is everything all right?"

Marilyn rolled her eyes. Of course, nothing was all right. She smiled and acted like nothing out of the ordinary had happened. "Of course, why do you ask?"

Daryl looked to the floor and cleared his throat. "Marilyn, I think Karen's just too nice to say you look terrible. Had a bad night?"

Marilyn knew she had to tell them something. "Come in my office and I'll fill you in on David's progress."

Once inside Marilyn sat behind her desk and Daryl and Karen took the chairs in front. "David is doing better, but he still has no feeling in his lower body and can't move. The doctor said it would take some time for the swelling to go down, but he's taking it very hard. I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't let anyone know. I know David wouldn't want the office worrying about him."

"Of course not." Daryl looked over to Karen.

Karen asked. "Is there anything we can do to help?"

"Everything is pretty much under control. The only thing we can do right now is get this store opened as soon as possible."

Daryl and Karen both smiled. "That's one thing we're on top of. I've already had several call backs on the ads and I have several interviews set up for employment."

"The building is coming up rather quickly. We have city inspection scheduled today for a preliminary check on the basic electricity and plumbing. I'll let you know how it turns out."

Daryl's look reassured Marilyn. She relaxed in her chair. Everyone was taking care of his or her job and it made it easier for her to deal with David's and her problem. "That's wonderful. You have got to be the best group of people I've ever worked with. I don't have to worry about a thing." Marilyn smiled. "I have a meeting with Lauren and Mr. Lang today. I'll fill her in on David. That way you won't feel like something is being kept from her. But if you will just keep it between yourselves. I'd really appreciate it."

Three o'clock that afternoon Marilyn finished up in her office and decided to go back to the hospital. She couldn't keep her lunch down and

only drank water. She knew it was nerves, but it didn't look like it was going to change anytime soon.

She drove to the hospital in her Lexus. It wasn't the same as spending time with David as they drove his Jaguar around town. She took a deep breath as she pulled into the hospital parking lot. A space was available close to the door and she pulled in. As she got out of the car, she saw Hillary sitting on a bench on the walkway. She approached Hillary. "How is David doing today?"

Hillary looked up and shook her head. "He's being very stubborn. He's decided to take all this on himself and won't allow anyone to help him. He won't even allow us to bring up your name. I'm afraid he's losing reality." Hillary began to cry.

Marilyn sat next to Hillary and put her arm around her. "Shhh, he'll come around. You're the one who's been telling me how stubborn and strong he is and that he'll pull through it. Have faith. God knows that's the only reason I could get out of bed today."

Hillary sniffed and wiped her nose on her handkerchief. "I know and I do. It's just so hard watching him lying in that bed thinking he has no hope for a future. I just want to strangle him."

Marilyn laughed. "You get one side of his neck and I'll get the other."

Hillary joined in her laughter. "You know he loves you, don't you, Marilyn?"

The laughter stopped and Marilyn sighed. "Yes, I know, but that doesn't mean he'll let me help him right now."

"Hello, Marilyn. Looks like I've found the two most beautiful women in the world." Dave paused and looked at his wife. "Now, why are you two crying?"

Marilyn looked up and into Dave's eyes, mirroring his sons. She saw him look at Hillary. The sorrow and love shining between the two made Marilyn crave for it once more with her David. "Hi, Mr. Lang."

"Are we back to that again? Call me Dave. Now, why would you two be crying at a time like this? David will pull through this. He's just being his normal stubborn self."

"I'm sorry." She lowered her head and then looked back up. "How's he doing?"

"The same, I'm afraid."

Hillary glared up at him. "I'm getting sick of his attitude already. How can he treat the people who love him most the way he does? I'm about to march up there and snatch him bald."

"Darling, you don't want to go in there and upset David. He's dealing with this the only way he knows how. I know it seems irrational to us, but it's his way of dealing with it."

Dave looked at Marilyn. "Are you all right? I hope you don't mind me saying, but you look horrible. You need to get a hold of yourself and let my

son stew for a while. He thinks he can do this alone but we know better. We just need to give him some time to face the truth."

"I know it, Dave. I just had to come see him this evening." Marilyn stood and walked to the entrance of the hospital.

Hillary put her hand on Marilyn's arm. "I don't know if you want to go in. David is rather a bear today. Nothing I've said made a difference and I'm actually thinking of not going back in there until tomorrow."

"Well, he may push me away, but he can't do that to you. He's going to have to start acting like an adult and not a child. Don't worry about me. I'll be fine." She walked through the entrance and into the elevator. Determination would see her through this visit. She wouldn't let David see how he'd effected her and she wouldn't allow him to abuse his mother.

The elevator doors glided open and Marilyn walked to his room. She stopped and counted to ten as she readied herself for the battle with David that she knew would happen. She pushed the door open and walked in.

David looked up and then immediately turned away. "What are you doing here, Marilyn?"

The sound of him saying her name made her heart ache. She closed her eyes and tried to draw on her inner strength to get through this. It was obvious David hadn't changed his mind by the way he continued to turn away from her. She had made him angry just by walking in the room.

She took a deep breath. "Hello, David. How are you feeling today?" She saw his bed had been raised a bit.

"I thought I made it clear yesterday that I didn't want you here. I want you to get on with your life," David said, with a clenched jaw.

"I wanted to come by and check on you and let you know how things were coming along at the office. Apparently you don't care." Marilyn gripped her hands tighter. She wanted to yell and tell him how much he was hurting himself by acting this way, but knew he wouldn't listen at this time.

"You can discuss anything about the office with my dad. He's going to take over for me."

"I'll do that from now on. I won't bother you with office details. I want you to know that I'm still going to come by here and check on you each day. I know you don't want our relationship to end and I don't either." She raised her hand to stop David from saying anything. "You can say anything you want, but I know you and I don't believe it. You will be talking to a wall."

She took a deep breath and continued. "Furthermore, I also will not stand for you to treat your mother so shabbily. She was outside crying and she doesn't deserve your attitude. She loves you deeply and I will not stand by and let you act like some adolescent. Grow up, David, or you'll lose everyone who cares about you." She turned around and slammed out of his room. She heard something crash against the door.

Marilyn closed her eyes and counted to ten. The last thing she needed was to lose her cool with him, like she just had. Marilyn opened her eyes and was greeted with a shock. "Cheryl! What are you doing here?"

Cheryl stood straighter and brushed her hair back off her shoulders. "Visiting David. What do you think?"

Marilyn held onto her temper, knowing she could blow it at any moment. "David's not up to visitors at the moment."

Cheryl smiled. "Well, that's odd. He called and asked me to come by. I guess he's up to one."

Marilyn stepped back as Cheryl pushed her way into David's room. Suddenly she felt like she was going to be sick. What was David playing? How could he call Cheryl? She quickly walked down the hall, trying to escape the closing walls.

A hand reached out and grabbed her and Marilyn jerked her arm away. "Let go!" She was jerked around and gasped. Anger was clouding her vision but she couldn't mistake Jax looming in front of her. "Jax"

"Marilyn, what's the rush? What's happened?"

Jax's anxious voice caused her to stop. She took a deep breath trying to calm down. "David has a visitor. Cheryl."

Jax looked at her puzzled. "Cheryl Bridges?"

"The one and only. I don't have time for his games and I'm not going to put up with them. If he wants Cheryl, he can have her." Marilyn couldn't keep the catch in her voice from breaking. "Let me go Jax. I've got to get out of here."

Jax released her arm and stepped aside. "I'll take care of this."

"No, don't bother. David made his choice. Now he can deal with it." Marilyn turned and headed for the exit.

Jax watched Marilyn angrily walk away. He brushed his dark hair back off his forehead and turned towards David's room. He didn't understand David. Years of friendship and brotherhood, and still David was a mystery. Couldn't he see what a gift he had in Marilyn?

Jax didn't bother knocking, instead pushed the door open and stepped in the room. Cheryl was sitting on the edge of David's bed and holding his hand. Jax cleared his throat. "Isn't this cozy?"

David guiltily looked at Jax and pulled his hand from Cheryl's. "Hello, Jax."

"David." Jax nodded and moved closer to the bed. He stepped close to Cheryl and she was forced to stand. "I see you didn't heed my warning, dear."

"When have I ever?" Cheryl asked.

"Now, would be a good time to start." Jax looked at David. "What's up with Marilyn? She just stormed down the hall."

David's eyes darted to Cheryl. "You saw Marilyn in the hall?"

Cheryl looked away. "Yes."

David pushed the button on his bed to elevate himself. "Did she see you?"

"Yes. She was a bit rude, too. You really should talk to her." Cheryl turned her attention back to David.

"What in the hell did you say to her, Cheryl?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "Not a lot. We only talked for a second."

Jax glared at Cheryl. "You apparently said enough to send her off upset. What did you say?"

"She said David wasn't up to visitors, and I told her David called and asked me to come out."

"What? Why did you say that? I didn't call you." David looked anxiously at Jax.

"She wasn't going to let me come in, so I said what I could."

David took a deep aggravating breath. "Cheryl, you're not helping the matter. You had no right."

"Fine! Next time I'll turn around and leave. Why didn't you tell me to leave when I got here if you didn't want to see me?" Cheryl picked up her purse. "I'm leaving."

"Cheryl wait." David called.

"No. Talk to Jax. Apparently he's the only one you want to see." Cheryl stormed from the room not looking back.

Jax watched her leave and turned back to David. "You need to get a handle on her. She's going to be trouble, David."

David relaxed against his pillow. "Don't exaggerate. Cheryl and I have been friends for years and it's hard for her to get used to the idea of Marilyn."

"So you're admitting there's still a you and Marilyn?"

"No. I'm not admitting anything. I can't give Marilyn the life she deserves, so it's over."

"David, that's ridiculous." Jax sat in a chair on the side of the bed. "Marilyn could care less about your paralysis."

"That's what she says now, but it will change. She's a vibrant woman with the whole world at her hands. I'm not going to be the one keeping her from all she could accomplish."

"David, you're full of pity aren't you?"

"Get out! I don't need this. I don't pity myself. I'm facing the facts. I'm worthless, Jax. Worthless!"

Jax stood. "Let me tell you something, brother. Marilyn is the best thing that's ever happened to you and you're about to lose her. You better think about that while you lay there giving up on life. You'll be the biggest fool alive if you let her slip through your fingers."

Jax turned and stormed from David's room seeing red. What had made his best friend turn so dramatically? This wasn't David, CEO of

Midwest Viking. This was a sniveling kid afraid he was going to have a few rocks thrown his way. Jax took a deep breath trying to pull his thoughts under control. Something had to be done.

CHAPTER SIX

For the fourth morning in a row, Marilyn woke up feeling sick as an ailing dog. She got a wet rag and lay back on her bed. She put the rag across her throat while the room continued to spin in circles around her. She didn't dare open her eyes for fear of being sick again. She lay there praying it would pass, knowing there was nothing to do except wait. The stress of the last month was getting to her. It was breaking down her health.

The only thing she'd been able to keep down the last week was weak tea and crackers. It had been terrible. She was losing more weight as the days passed by. It was nearing Christmas and the last thing she needed was for Jacqueline to arrive and see her looking like a waif.

The room was slowing down and she was able to breathe better. Marilyn opened her eyes and was thankful that everything was stationary, no pictures or lights spinning overhead. She groaned at the sound of knocking on the door. She knew it was Hillary. Hillary had made it a habit of coming up each morning and checking on her.

"Marilyn, are you awake?" Hillary slowly opened the door and peeked around. "Good morning." She walked in smiling as if nothing were wrong.

Marilyn moaned. The last thing she needed now was to talk. She hoped if she didn't say anything Hillary would go back down stairs. Luck just wasn't on her side today. "I'm fine, Hillary. I'm still not feeling well and I'm laying down for a few more minutes." Her stomach started churning again, and she jumped up and ran for the bathroom.

Hillary was standing in her room waiting for her when she returned. to the bed with a wet wash cloth. "Marilyn, how long have you been sick?"

Marilyn thought for a minute. "I've been sick for four days. I must have one of those dreadful viruses that linger forever."

Hillary sat on the bed next to her. "Marilyn, I know it's none of my business but I'm making it mine. It has to be one of two things. You're either completely stressed because David's being brought home today or you're pregnant. Did you and my son make love?"

Marilyn couldn't believe Hillary had just asked her that. She wanted to crawl under the bed from embarrassment. Then, it dawned on Marilyn. She had been so worried about David the last month and with the store

opening she hadn't thought of the possibility of pregnancy. Marilyn pulled the towel from her face.

She looked at Hillary. "Oh, my God. I didn't think of that. There has been so many things going on I haven't even thought of the possibility of pregnancy." Marilyn took a deep breath. She tried to remember the last time she'd had her period. The last time was before she moved up here. She had been here for two months. She whispered. "Hillary, I haven't had a period since I've been here."

"First thing is to find you a doctor. I know of one and I'll call and make you an appointment. Sometimes stress causes a woman not to have her period. We don't want to get frantic over nothing."

"Hillary, we weren't using protection. I had never made love before so I wasn't on birth control. David didn't use anything either." Marilyn started to cry. "Actually, we had a talk after our first time and we both wanted children. David said he would be thrilled if we'd made a child. Now, I think he would strangle me. What am I going to do? David can't know about this. He would say I was trying to trap him." She began to cry harder. "Life sucks!"

Hillary began to laugh. "Now Marilyn, get a grip on yourself. Pregnant women often think irrationally. Life does not suck." She laughed again. "I can't believe you even said that. You have done wonders with the new store and you can take care of yourself. David doesn't need to know about the baby until you're ready to tell him. Don't worry, Dave and I will take care of you and that nasty son of ours."

"Now, do you think you can get up?" Hillary helped Marilyn sit up against the pillows. "The first thing you need to do is eat some crackers. Don't give me that look. I know what I'm talking about. The crackers will ease your stomach. While you eat the crackers I will call the office and tell them you'll be in later. I need to make you an appointment as soon as possible. Now sit back and relax." She fluffed Marilyn's pillows and then walked from the room.

Hillary walked into the small office down the hallway. She called Dave at the office. "Dear, I'm afraid we have a problem. Now, don't fly off the handle until I finish what I have to say. Okay?"

"Hillary, you know I don't like these little games. Now, tell me what the problem is. Does it have something to do with David?"

"No, it's Marilyn." She took a deep fortifying breath. "I believe she's pregnant." There was silence on the other end. "Dave, did you hear me?"

Dave cleared his throat. "Yes, I heard you. What! How did that happen?"

"Well, it all starts when the sperm..." She started laughing.

Dave cut her off. "I know how, damn it! What made you think she's pregnant? This is the day we're bringing David home. You do remember, right?"

"Of course I remember. We can't do anything about that now. Marilyn has been sick for four days in a row. I told her I would call and make her an appointment for this morning. I wanted you to know and let you know she's not going to be in this morning or possibly this afternoon."

"Okay, I'll check her schedule. What did she say regarding the pregnancy?"

"Apparently she and David had already talked about the possibility of pregnancy, and they were both prepared if it happened. They weren't using protection." She shook her head. "That's not like our son, it's just one more sign of how much he loves her."

"You're right. Well, let me know when you get back what the doctor said."

"I will. I love you."

"I love you, too."

Hillary hung up the phone and sighed. She knew that if Marilyn were pregnant then the situation between her and David would become even more difficult. She looked at the picture of David on the wall. He was such a happy man just a month ago. How life could change.

Hillary dialed Dr. Fry's office. There was an appointment open an hour from then and she booked it. She stood from the desk and took a deep breath. She would need to give Marilyn all the support she needed to make it through this day. It would be one of the most difficult of her life.

She walked into Marilyn's room and heard the shower running. She knocked on the bathroom door. "Marilyn, you have an appointment in an hour. Can you be ready?"

"Yes Hillary, I'll be ready. Thank you for making the appointment."

On the way back from the doctor's office, Marilyn played over all the times her and David had talked about their future and children. Now, there was a child but no future with the father. She would love this baby more than a father ever could. He would never want or need any more love than what she could give him.

Hillary interrupted her reminiscing. "Marilyn, I know you don't want to think about this right now, but are you going to tell David? He's arriving at the house today."

"I know and no, I'm not. David will come back to me for our love. I will not bring him back for a child. It would never work. He wouldn't love us the way he should if I did that. If he finds out, I'll tell him, but not until then." She looked over to Hillary. "I don't want him finding out from you or Dave. I know he will, living in the same house, but it's up to me to let him know. Will you promise not to go against my wishes?"

"Marilyn, I have to be honest with you. I think you're making a mistake. He's going to know as soon as you start showing. Have you really thought about this?"

"Hillary, please just go along with me, right now. I need you."

“Okay, I’ll go by your wishes, but please think about telling him. If he finds out on his own, I don’t know if he’ll ever forgive any of us.”

Marilyn was angry. She didn’t care what David thought right now. “Since he doesn’t want to see me, that won’t be a problem. As far as he’s concerned, I’m dead. He’s decided to go on with his life without me in it and that’s the way it’s going to be unless he decides differently. There’s just one thing he’s not thinking of, when he does come around, I may no longer be waiting.” Marilyn turned and looked out her window watching the green landscape drift by.

When they pulled up in front of the house, an ambulance was parked in front of the door. Marilyn closed her eyes and prayed for patience. She opened the door, straightened her back and walked up the steps. There were several people walking back and forth down the hallway.

Dave had moved all David’s belongings into one of the downstairs rooms, where David would now rehabilitate. There were two other rooms next to his that had been made into exercise and medical facilities, until David was better. Dr. Drummond had said David would improve quicker at home verses in the hospital. However, now Marilyn wished he’d stayed in the hospital. How was she going to deal with the pregnancy with him under her feet?

Marilyn didn’t want to see David, so she walked around the rushing people and into the living room. Brought up short, she stopped. David was lying on the couch and had seen her. “Hello.”

David’s big brown eyes sought hers. “What are you doing home so soon? Problems at the office?”

“Hardly and if there were, you wouldn’t find me home.” Marilyn dropped her purse onto the side table. “Why aren’t you in your room?”

“They’re still setting up. They’ll move me in a bit.”

Marilyn looked at David’s legs lying still on the couch. “Well, I think I’ll go upstairs. I have a appointment.”

She turned to leave the room and was brought up short by David’s words. “I’m sorry.” Marilyn’s heart started beating like a drum. If he only knew everything he was giving up. Without turning around, she answered. “So am I, David. So am I.”

David watched Marilyn walk out of the living room, not looking back. “I’m sorry.” He wanted to shout the words following her up the stairs but he couldn’t. He could see them lying together on the bed talking of future hopes and dreams.

He was a realist. A ninety percent chance he would never walk again, never be able to hold her like a real man. Marilyn didn’t deserve a life of impediments. David slammed his fist against the couch. Why! Why did it have to happen to him?

Two men walked into the living room ready to carry him to his room. David let them lift him and didn’t say a word. The words were stuck in his

throat. Nothing could change things. He refused to allow Marilyn to go through this day after day of her life.

The room didn't look like a hospital room, but still it was the same. Next to the bed was his silver wheelchair. David looked away from it, not wanting to think of his future. The men placed him on the bed. David tried to scoot his legs over, but it was hopeless. Nothing!

Dave was standing across the room. David looked at him. "Well, dad I'm home."

"I'm glad you are David. It will help, to be out of that hospital."

"Right." David looked around the room noticing the pictures his mom had moved from his room upstairs and the trophies from college. "Mom didn't have to bring those down."

"It makes her feel better. Let her." Dave answered briskly.

David closed his eyes. "I think I'll take a nap."

"David, you can't close out the future."

David jerked his eyes opened. "Dad, you have no idea what I'm going through. Have you ever had to deal with something like this?"

"No, son I haven't. But God wouldn't give you something you can't handle. Everything will turn out fine."

"That's what mom says, but I don't see it. There is no feeling dad. None."

Dave walked to David's side. "I know, but give it time. Your body has to have time to heal."

"I know." David looked up at his father and smiled. "So, why is everyone home from the office? I'm fine. You should go back. I'm sure there's some pressing issues to deal with."

"Nothing Marilyn can't handle. You made a fine choice when you promoted her."

"I know. She's perfect for the job. How are things?"

"Why don't you ask Marilyn? She could fill you in on everything."

"Dad, I can't deal with Marilyn right now."

"Why, what is it you can't talk to her about? She knows all about the accident. She'll stand by you through it all."

"I know, but that's not what I want from her. We had plans, dad. Now, they're shot to ... You know."

"Son, Marilyn loves you. Don't mess that up."

"I know dad, but I can't deal with it right now." David felt drained. So little could bring him down now. He didn't have the energy to sit up, let alone deal with his and Marilyn's relationship.

Dave cleared his throat. "Well, don't wait too long. It would be a shame if you lost her."

David watched his father leave the room. Everything around him was tumbling down. Why him? Why after finding the one person in the world who could complete his life? David shut his eyes and tried to block out life.

“Ummmm”

David jerked his eyes open. “Jax! What are you doing here? This seems like Grand Central Station.”

Jax laughed. “Can I come in?”

“Sure.”

Jax walked up and shook David’s hand. “You’ve looked better, brother but I’m glad you’re out of that God forsaken hospital.”

“I don’t know if it’s God forsaken, at least not for most people.”

“Right, well it’s definitely more comfortable coming here.” Jax looked around the room. “Looks like Hillary has set you up pretty well. You’re home right before Christmas too I see. I’m sure you’re mom’s planning the Christmas menu as we speak.”

“I’m sure she is.”

“How’s Marilyn taking you here?”

“We spoke for a second, but that’s it. I really don’t know. I guess she’ll keep to her side of the house and I’ll keep to mine.”

Jax looked around. “Well, this place is large enough to lose oneself in. But I don’t think your parents are going to keep you two separate.”

“I know. Maybe, I’ll just keep to my rooms.”

“Come on, David. Why have you given up? I don’t understand.”

“It’s more like why can’t any of you face reality? I’m not going to walk again. I’ll try with the rehabilitation for my parent’s sake, but it’s not going to work.”

“You don’t know that David. What if you’re wrong and you do walk again? Will it be too late for you and Marilyn?”

David looked out the window. “I can’t take a chance. It’s over.”

“You’re a fool! That woman would do anything for you!”

“That’s what everyone tells me. But none of you are listening to what I have to say. I won’t put her through that and that’s the way it’s going to be.”

David looked at the door and Cheryl was standing there with a smile. He wanted to shout and tell her to leave, but Cheryl was playing right into his hands. She was his escape from Marilyn and he’d use Cheryl to accomplish it. “Come in, Cheryl.”

Cheryl smiled and stepped up to David’s bed. “How are you today?”

“Much better since you got here.” David smiled and turned to Jax. “Was there something else?”

If looks could kill, David would now be carried to the morgue. “No, obviously not. I’ll talk to you later.”

David watched Jax storm from the room and flinched. He knew Jax was angry, but there was nothing he could do about it. If his plan was going to work, Jax was going to have to be in the dark. He wouldn’t understand. David looked back up at Cheryl. She wasn’t his choice of a Florence Nightingale, but she’d do for now.

“I see Hillary set you up pretty well down here. Is there anything you need?”

“You could pour me a glass of water.” David indicated the pitcher on the bureau.

Her blond hair floated behind her as she poured the water and then brought it back to him. Her looks definitely turned the heads of many men, but not him. She’d always been a convenience, nothing more. However, now he’d have to let everyone else think there was more between them, including Cheryl. He knew Cheryl was up to something. She never played the simpering young lady. He’d figure it out, but in the meantime he would use her to his own gain.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Marilyn stared up at the baby picture on the wall. She smiled; even without hair, the baby was adorable. A soft looking pink quilt encircled its tiny body. A week ago, she hadn't thought twice about babies and now here she was lying on an examining table trying to picture how her and David's child would look. Would she have long dark hair like hers or soft shiny blond hairs like her father's?

At home, the pictures in the hallway had drawn her attention each time she walked past them now, as if saying her child would be the next picture to grace the hall. She closed her eyes praying David would still be as happy as he'd said before the accident. How would he react? Would he love and adore their child, or would he simply turn his face away and ignore it the same as he was doing with the rest of his life? Marilyn sighed. "Oh, David, how can you close yourself away like this?"

Someone knocked on the door and it opened. Marilyn sat up and smiled as Teresa, the nurse, stepped in.

"I see you're ready. Dr. Fry will be in shortly." She pointed to the counter. "There are a few magazines, if you're interested."

"Thank you." Marilyn smoothed the paper cover over her lap. She watched the door close behind Teresa and relaxed. "It's just a waiting game." Nervous, she blew the bangs out of her eyes. She heard someone slipping her file off the door and then it opened.

Dr. Fry walked in smiling. "Good morning, Marilyn. How are you feeling today?"

Marilyn laughed. "You're not going to believe this, but since finding out I'm pregnant, I haven't had any morning sickness."

"Well, that's not to say it won't happen again, but it is common. It's psychological in some women. After discovering their expecting a child, Whoosh, the morning sickness disappears." He rubbed the back of his neck and smiled. "It leaves us poor doctors stunned every time."

He approached the examining table. "Why don't you lean back and let me check you once again."

Dr. Fry did his examination and then picked up the file. "Well, Marilyn, by my estimation you should have a beautiful baby around July twenty-first. You can call him your little Fourth of July celebration."

Marilyn gasped. "Do you mean you already know it's a boy?"

"No, no, I was talking metaphorically. We will have a sonogram in your fourth month and can sometimes tell by then, but otherwise it's anyone's guess at this time."

He picked up a bottle and handed it to her. "These are prenatal vitamins and you should start on them today. They're not the most tasteful vitamins, but they're just what the baby and you need. Take one a day. It's sometimes best to take them with a meal, so it doesn't cause any stomach upsets."

Marilyn gripped the bottle in her lap. What if she didn't remember to take them? She didn't have someone to help her or remind her like most women. She shook her head. She could do this on her own. She didn't need David. She pushed the thought of him away.

"Well, do you have any questions?" Dr. Fry waited.

Marilyn shook her head. "No, I believe I've got it. Take the vitamins once a day and read all these book you gave me." She held them up.

Dr. Fry laughed. "Well, you don't have to read them all at once, but it is a good idea to go over them, especially since this is your first child."

"Thank you, I will."

Dr. Fry stood. "Well, I'll let the front desk know to schedule you another appointment a month from today. For the first five months we'll only need to see you once a month, then we'll start every other week. If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to call our office."

Marilyn gave a nervous laugh. "Don't worry, I will."

Marilyn pulled up to the house and jumped out of the car. She grabbed the pamphlets Dr. Fry gave her and jogged up the steps. The door was locked and she reached in her bag for the keys. The door was pulled open and she looked up. "Hi, Jax. Visiting David?"

Jax smiled. "Yes, I was. He stepped back and let her enter the door. "Where have you been?" He looked down at her hands and saw the books and vitamins.

Marilyn laughed nervously. "Oh." She knew it was helpless to try and hide the books from Jax. He'd already seen them. She continued through the hall down to the living room.

Marilyn dropped the books and vitamins onto the table and turned to face Jax. "Please, don't tell David."

Jax stepped closer to her and took her hands. "I promise. When did you find out?"

"A month ago."

Jax dropped her hands and turned around and looked out the picture window. "You've known for a month and haven't told anyone?"

"Hillary and Dave know, but they promised not to tell David. They've agreed it's my choice."

"What do you mean It's your choice? You're thinking about an abortion." Jax turned and waited for her answer.

Marilyn shook her head. "No, I'm having the baby. They agree it's my choice on when to tell David."

"Oh, I see. I'm sorry. It's just a bit of a shock. Have you tried telling him?"

Marilyn laughed. "Right, tell him we're having a baby when he's practically thrown me out of his wing of the house. I don't think so." She walked across the room and then turned back to Jax. "I know I've got to tell him, but I don't know how. I'm not blind. I see Cheryl coming and going. Sometimes I wonder if he ever loved me or if it was just a ploy to get me in bed."

Marilyn sank down on the couch. It couldn't have been a ploy or could it? Could she have been such a fool?

Jax walked to the couch and sat next to Marilyn. "Listen, things will turn out. Have faith."

"Jax, that's my problem. I do have faith. Faith in God that is, not in David. Not any longer."

Jax put his arm around her and held her close. Marilyn relaxed. She trusted Jax, he wouldn't tell David. "Jax, I never made love with a man until David." She felt his arms tense. "See, I always envisioned myself waiting until I married, give myself to the one man of my dreams. Then, David and I started talking, sharing our thoughts and dreams and before I knew it, it'd happened."

"There's nothing I can do about it. It's done and now I'm pregnant." She laughed. "Isn't that how it works. God says don't do it and I did. Now I have a child to think of first."

"Marilyn, you have to tell David. It's only right."

Marilyn pulled out of his arms. "You said you wouldn't tell him."

"I won't, but don't you think you should? Maybe this is what he needs to pull him out of his depression."

"No, I won't tell him yet. I'm not going to have him coming back to me because of a baby. If he doesn't love me, I won't have him. I'm not keeping the child from Hillary and Dave. I never would. They understand, but I'm not ready to deal with David."

"Fine, whatever you think is right. I'll help."

"Thank you." She leaned back against Jax as he pulled her close again. It was nice sitting on the couch with him, no one vying for her attention, no rush to make business decisions and no one telling her what to do with David.

She looked down at the arm resting around her. He was wearing a dark suit, but his hands were dark and strong. The nails perfectly manicured. Her hands were large yet seemed gentle, just as his arms were around her.

She compared them to David's. David's hands were the same, except the color. Where David was light, Jax was dark. She had a feeling

Jax could be just as stubborn as David maybe even more so. She looked up and found Jax watching her. "Jax?"

"Yes."

"What would you do if you found out the woman you'd thrown aside was pregnant?" She smiled but the question was so much more serious.

Jax's eyes never left hers. "If I loved this woman as much as David loves you, I would move heaven and earth to make her marry me. I'd never let her go."

Marilyn felt a tear drop from her eye. "The question is, does David really love me? I haven't seen it since the accident."

"He does. I promise you." Jax whispered.

They were quiet. Marilyn closed her eyes and relaxed in his arms. True friends were hard to find. They heard someone in the hallway and jumped. Cheryl was standing in the doorway watching them.

"What was it you said to me a while back, Jax? Cozy?" Cheryl walked into the room.

Marilyn moved out of Jax's arms. God, please don't let Cheryl have heard us. Marilyn's heart was beating frantically. If Cheryl knew, it would be disastrous.

Jax stood. "What do you want Cheryl?"

"Thought I heard someone, so I came to see if it was Hillary or Dave. I'm sorry if I interrupted something private."

"You know you didn't." Jax looked deadly.

Marilyn stood. "Were you visiting David?"

"Yes, why else would I be here. David called earlier, so I thought I'd stop by on my lunch break."

Marilyn felt nauseous. Cheryl was obviously trying to rub it in that David had called her. Why! Why would he call Cheryl? It infuriated her that David was seeing her again. Maybe it was over. Maybe she should leave and rent an apartment in the city? No, that was exactly what Cheryl wanted and she wouldn't do it.

"Well, I'm glad he's up to visitors."

"Yes, well I guess I'll leave you two love birds alone. You can continue your lunch break on the couch." Cheryl smiled and turned to leave.

Jax spoke before she disappeared. "Cheryl? I'll see you out."

"Don't bother, Jax. I see you're busy."

Jax walked across the room and took her arm in a bruising hold. "No bother. Marilyn, I'll talk to you this evening."

After they left the room, Marilyn collapsed on the couch. Great, what have I done now? She knew Cheryl would run to David with a worse story than it really was. She'd just nailed another nail in her own coffin.

Jax walked Cheryl down the front steps around the house to the back drive. "I advise you not to say a word of what you saw to David. It was nothing. But I'm sure your warped mind could think of all sorts of perverted stories."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that. I saw the way you were sitting with her, your arms around her and her all cuddled up. Looked pretty intimate to me. You and David have shared women in the past, why not Marilyn."

Jax ground his teeth. "Cheryl, it's not what it seemed. We were talking about David and she was resting."

"Right and exactly why would she need so much rest and in your arms? It's only noon. Ha! You're just angry because I caught you. Don't worry, I won't say anything to David, you'll hang yourself. Besides, David doesn't want to have anything to do with that simpering female."

"I'm sure, you've helped him see the light. Cheryl, they'll end up back together. I promise you."

Cheryl jerked her arm out of Jax's grip. "No he won't. David's mine and I'm not letting him go. As soon as that store is open, Marilyn will be on the first plane out of Dodge."

"I wouldn't count on it." Jax smiled ruthlessly. He couldn't wait until Cheryl discovered Marilyn was pregnant.

"Good bye, Jax. By the way, just a suggestion, but if you're going to start something with Marilyn, I wouldn't do it under David's nose. What would you have said if David had caught you?" She smiled and stepped into her car. "Good bye."

Jax shook his head as she drove away in her red Jag. The woman was a viper and if he didn't watch her close she'd eat Marilyn alive. Marilyn...the thought of her sitting in the house alone with David down the hall made him sick. David was a fool. His best friend and brother in every sense except blood and now him having to keep something from him. "I hope he forgives me when he finds out."

As Jax was coming back around the front of the house he saw Marilyn coming out the door. "Going back to the office?"

"Yes, Daryl and I have a meeting in half an hour so I have to get back."

"Do you mind if we go to dinner tonight? I think you need to get away for a bit and I could use the company."

Marilyn smiled. "Sure, what time?"

"I'll pick you up at the office at five."

"See you then." Marilyn waived and left in her car.

Jax watched her drive away. Nothing seemed to stop that woman. He wished the same went for David. He didn't relish another visit with David but knew he couldn't leave without saying hi.

Jax walked in the house and down the hallway. David wasn't in his room. He heard voices coming from the next room. Jax slowly opened the door, not wanting to interrupt if he was having a session.

There were mats on the floor and David was lying on his back. The nurse was telling him to concentrate on various muscles and trying to get him to move. David was obviously trying because he could see beads of perspiration on his face. David looked determined and Jax would glad. At least he wasn't giving up.

Jax shut the door. He didn't want to interrupt and knew David wouldn't be happy if he knew Jax had seen him. He quietly walked back down the hall and out of the house. He would return with Marilyn tonight and talk with David then. Maybe things were coming around. Only time would tell.

"I can't do it. I don't feel a thing." David tried to concentrate. He was doing everything the nurse was saying. Focusing on the muscles and telling his brain to move them, but nothing happened.

Sweat dripped off David's body from his exertions. Why wouldn't his legs move? Everyday he tried and always with the same results. Nothing. Sure, his upper body was coming around, the bones healing well, but nothing from the waist down. He wanted to quit. Give it all up. Why didn't he?

"Come on David. One last time and I'll let you stop for the day. You're making real progress."

"Give me a break. There is no progress. I don't feel a thing and you don't see a thing. Be honest, okay." David tried one last time, willing his body to move. Nothing!

"That's it, I'm finished for today. I've tried." David felt rejected by life. Time to face the facts. He was paralyzed and would be forever. "Call the goons to take me back to my room."

The nurse stood and looked down at David. "Nope, the goons as you call them are gone to lunch and I sure can't carry you. You're going to have to pull yourself up into your chair."

"Danielle, give me a break. Why are they gone? They knew I'd need help getting back to my room."

"David, I'm here to help you be sufficient to live on your own. You've got to work harder. You know how to get in your chair. You've done it a million times." Danielle brought the chair next to David.

She reached her hand to help him but David turned his face away. "Leave me alone. I'll do it myself." Danielle left the room, and David counted to ten trying to calm his anger. He grabbed the arms of the chair and tried to pull himself up but fell to the mat. Angrily David slammed the chair away from him. "Forget it!"

He leaned back on the mat and closed his eyes. The only picture he could ever see was Marilyn. She tormented him day and night. No matter what, Marilyn was always on his mind.

He would venture from his room late at night when everyone was asleep and sit in the living room. He didn't want anyone to see him, so he

waited until very late. Still, her presence would linger. Jasmine followed him everywhere. David would stop at the bottom of the stairs and stare up. There was no way of going up to her room and watch her as she slept. He could only dream of it.

Her dark auburn hair flowing across her pillow as her lashes rested on her cheeks. The small upturned nose facing him as he watched her dream. Those times were gone. No matter how he wished they weren't they were gone.

David looked at the wheelchair lying on its side. He pulled his body over to the chair and tilted it back up. He grabbed the arm and pulled one last time with all his strength. Slowly he made it up into the chair. He sat there trying to bring his breathing back under control. If he could do this, then why couldn't he walk?

David wheeled the chair into his room and to the bed. He pulled himself onto the bed and lay back on the pillow looking up at the ceiling. His room was directly under Marilyn's. He could hear her when she was upstairs. Early in the morning, he heard her walking around getting ready for work.

He closed his eyes. God, if you can hear me. Help me, please. I know I don't deserve your help, but you're all I have left. I can't let Marilyn think we have a future, I know we don't, but help me make it through this time. I hate pushing her away, but there's no other way.

Marilyn and Jax walked into a small seafood restaurant. Marilyn didn't know if she was already having cravings but for some crazy reason, she wanted to eat lobster. They were escorted to a small table overlooking the bay. Marilyn sat first and then Jax.

Jax smiled. "Would you like something to drink?"

"Yes, ice tea with lime please."

Jax turned to the waitress and ordered Marilyn's tea and the same for himself.

"You don't have to do that."

Jax looked at her puzzled. "Do what?"

"Order tea. You can have wine with your meal or anything you'd like."

Jax laughed. "Tea is exactly what I wanted."

"Suit yourself." She looked around. It was quiet and definitely not a fast food restaurant. Most were dressed in suits and dresses and Marilyn was surprised Jax had brought her here. It would have been a perfectly romantic meal with a loved one.

"Do you come here often when you visit Maine?"

Jax waited for the waiter to give them their drinks then answered. "No, I'm sure David has told you of the places I tend to visit when I'm in Sherry."

Marilyn laughed. "Let's see, happy hour and the gym. Am I right?"

“Pretty much.” Jax joined in her laughter.

“Do you like it here in Sherry? It’s different than Dallas.”

“You’re right there, but yes, I really do like it here. It’s small and everyone’s really nice. It would be the perfect place to raise a child, at least better than gang filled Dallas.”

Jax raised a brow. “So, you’re thinking of raising the child here in Sherry?”

“I don’t know. I guess it depends on how David reacts when he finds out.”

“I thought you said you weren’t going to tell him to bring him back.”

“I’m not, but there’s no way he won’t find out. I’ll be showing in about a month.”

Jax looked down the front of her. “You are small. I guess there’s no way in hiding it. Have you thought of moving out of the mansion?”

Marilyn shook her head. “No, he’s not running me off. If he can’t deal with the pregnancy, then that’s his problem. My agreement with Midwest was until the new store is opened. Until then, I’m staying at the mansion. After that, who knows.”

Jax smiled. The waiter approached their table and took their orders. When he left, Jax reached across the table and took her hand in his. His thumbs gently rubbed the center of her palms and he watched her reaction.

Marilyn became very still. What was Jax doing? Her hands were becoming very warm and she wanted to pull them away. When she tried to pull them out of his hands, he held them tighter. “Jax?” She whispered.

“Marilyn I need to talk to you about something. Hear me out before you say anything, okay.”

Marilyn nodded and swallowed around the lump that had formed in her throat.

“Marilyn, I know you love David. I respect you more for that now than I did before, but the truth is, David may never come around.” Jax felt her hands relax in his as he continued to rub her palms. “I can never replace David in your heart, but I would like to be the father to your baby.”

When she started to say something, Jax tightened his hands on hers. “You promised to let me speak first. Your baby deserves to have a father in his life and not one just every now and then. That’s what I had. I want to be the father to this child. I will take care of you and him always.”

“I want you to marry me and let me claim the child as mine. When you felt it right, we would tell him the truth, but only when you were ready. I don’t want to see you hurting. It’s not good for your child and it’s not right. David is the brother I never had and I’m not just doing this for you I’m doing it for him too.”

Jax sat quietly as Marilyn tried to register what had just happened. Did Jax propose marriage? The room started closing in on her. She closed her eyes and concentrated on her hand in his. She opened her eyes

and looked into Jax's dark ones. "Jax, you don't know what this means to me." She whispered.

Jax sat quietly. Marilyn smiled. "Jax, at first when I met you I thought you were a womanizer and since getting to know you, found out how wrong I was, but now." She laughed. "This I didn't expect. Jax, I can't marry you. I don't love you, that way. You're a dear friend and I know you'll be there for me, but I don't expect marriage. Someday you'll find that perfect woman and then you'll marry and have your own beautiful family."

"How do you know I haven't found her already?" He smiled his engaging European smile.

Marilyn tightened her hold on his hand. "I just know. Thank you."

Jax brought her hand up to his mouth and lightly brushed his lips over her knuckles. "I'll always be here for you."

"I know." Marilyn pulled her hand away as the waiter brought their plates to the table.

The waiter quietly left and Marilyn smiled at Jax. "Will you still bring me to fabulous dinners like this?"

"You can count on it." Jax smiled

Marilyn couldn't believe what had happened. The friendship she was developing in this small town of Sherry was amazing. She gently laid her hand over her stomach. Well, be just fine.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The office had been hectic, with The Vandergriffs surprise meeting and four interviews. Marilyn was famished. She arrived at the house and walked in through the side door leading from the garage. A heavenly smell pulled her further into the kitchen and she stopped. "Hi, what are you two eating?"

Hillary and Dave looked up, surprise registered on their faces. "We're eating corn beef sandwiches. Would you like one? Marie made it homemade."

"That sounds great." Marilyn went over to the stove and made herself a sandwich. She sat down next to Dave and began to eat. She had forgotten she hadn't eaten breakfast.

"This is good. I know it's not healthy, but a little fat won't hurt me." She stopped the sandwich halfway to her mouth and thought for a moment. "It won't, will it?"

Hillary laughed. "No, it won't hurt you. I used to eat pizza and lasagna at midnight every day. Poor Dave was warming food all the time. You only have to worry about the weight you don't lose after the delivery because of all the fat."

"Good, then I think I'm going to have two. I'll drink a glass of milk to sort of balance everything."

Dave reached over and took Marilyn's hand before she had a chance to pick up the sandwich again. "Marilyn, I'm glad you're going to have the baby. I know there's a lot of hard times ahead, but I want you to know Hillary and I will stand by you all the way. You and your child will always be a part of our family. Even if there weren't a child, Hillary and I would want it that way. We've grown rather fond of you."

"Thank you, you don't know how much that means to me. I care about you, too. I want you both to know that without you here it would be even harder for me. I want to have this baby and open the store. I'm not going to let the opening be delayed because of the pregnancy. Dr. Fry assured me that I'm healthy and it shouldn't be a problem to work until the time of delivery. I promise to take it easy and watch for any signs of problems but I don't think that will happen. I'm born from sterner stuff."

Hillary smiled. "We know you can do it. We'll be here until after the baby is born and then we'll be going back to London, if David is okay. Until then, we'll be watching you and making sure you take good care of yourself. We love you and don't want anything to go wrong."

They enjoyed lunch together laughing over Marilyn's sudden penchant for corn beef. It was getting easier to relax and enjoy herself. It felt nice to spend a few minutes thinking of nothing except the moment at hand.

After lunch, Marilyn went to the office to see how things were coming. She saw Karen in the lobby saying good-bye to a lady. "Hi Karen, how's your day going?"

"Great, I just interviewed a lady that moved out here from New York. She used to work at Tiffany's and is looking for a job. I think she'll be great."

"That's wonderful. I hope you're right. What about the other interviews you've had since I was gone?"

"I've already lined up several interviews for you. I want you to make the final decisions."

"Let me know when and I'll be sure to be here. Have you seen Lauren or Daryl today?"

"Daryl's at the site, of course, and Lauren is in her office. I saw her walk through earlier."

"Thank you. I think I'll go see how the shopping's coming along. You're doing a great job, Karen, thank you for all your help."

Marilyn went directly to Lauren's office. She knocked and waited for Lauren to answer. When she walked in, Lauren was putting a catalog away. She always looked so in control not a worry in the world. "Lauren, how do you always look so confident? Don't you ever have a bad day?" Marilyn laughed.

Lauren smiled. "I have bad days all the time Marilyn, I just don't let them bring me down at the office. I'd never get anything done if I did."

"Well, I think I need to take some lessons from you. My life seems to be falling down around me. The only positive thing in my life is this job. It's what keeps me sane." Marilyn sat down in the chair across from Lauren's desk.

"How's David?"

Marilyn knew Lauren was sympathetic to her pain. Her mother had been in an automobile accident the previous year and hadn't survived. "Oh, Lauren, you don't even know the half of it." Marilyn relaxed in the chair. "David is doing better each day mentally. But, I don't know if he'll ever be able to walk again. David is taking it very hard and I know that's to be expected. I don't care if he can't walk. What's important to me is he being healthy and alive. I love him so deeply."

"Marilyn, you know it's going to be hard on him for a while. It would be for any man. Just give him time."

"I wish that was all there was to it." Marilyn looked out the window. "Can I tell you something and it go no further?"

"Of course, what's wrong?"

"David has called off the engagement and said he never wants to see me again. He doesn't even want me walking down his hall. Each time I've tried to talk with him, he gets irate and tells me to not come back. I don't know what to do about it." Marilyn felt drained remembering her and David's last explosive visit.

"I'm so sorry. I know David loves you. He's only doing this because of the accident. He'll come out of it." Lauren reached across the desk and took Marilyn's hand.

"I'm starting to think it's never going to change. Cheryl Bridges is constantly at the house with David. It's driving me insane and now I have an even bigger problem." Marilyn took a deep breath. "I'm pregnant."

Lauren looked back at her surprised and gripped her hand tighter. "Marilyn, what are you going to do? Does David know?"

Marilyn shook her head. "No, I'm not going to tell him. I know he'd want us to get married just because of the baby and I won't have him back like that. I'm going to have this baby and make a beautiful life for him—with or without his father. Hillary and Dave both know my plans and are giving me their full support. Jax knows too and he's been great."

"What do you think he's going to do when he finds out? You're going to start showing before you know it."

"I'm not going to worry about that until the time comes. David has put himself in this situation, not me, and I can't feel sorry for him. Right now, I'm going to take care of the baby. I'm going to quit worrying about David and start concentrating on Midwest Viking. I came here to do a job and I'm going to see it through." Marilyn felt better that she had gotten everything off her chest.

"Well, all power to you girl. I'll support you in everything you do. I wish I could be as strong."

"Thank you. I need a friend I can talk to besides Hillary and Dave. They're great, but I don't want them thinking bad about their son and if I continue crying on their shoulder all the time, they would." She shrugged. "Jax has been more than wonderful, but he is David's best friend."

"We'll I'm here for you and we can take care of anything that comes our way. What do you want to do first today? Did you come in here for a reason?" Lauren was smiling.

"I have to go over to the site this morning. Would you like to have dinner later?"

"That sounds good. I haven't tried the new seafood place up on Stratford. Do you want to try it or do you already have those crazy cravings you hear about pregnant women?"

"You know I think I am, but seafood is definitely one of them." Marilyn laughed and left Lauren to her buying.

When Marilyn arrived at the site she couldn't believe her eyes. The building was standing with walls. The contractors had worked miracles.

She saw Daryl's truck around the corner, but no one was outside. She assumed they were all in. She walked through the front doorway. There were only beams where there would be three levels. The front entrance had a high vaulted ceiling, where they would place the chandelier. She looked around and couldn't believe everything they had accomplished. It was amazing.

She saw Daryl over at the opposite corner. She had to yell to get his attention. There were machines running everywhere and hammers banging. She laughed and was waving at him. "Hi, Daryl." She walked over and Daryl greeted her with a quick hug.

"What are you doing out here so early? You usually come out in the afternoon. Doesn't everything look great?" Daryl was obviously very proud.

"You've done an amazing job, Daryl. It looks wonderful. They have worked very hard for you. Congratulations on a job well done." Daryl beamed at her praise. At first she didn't think he was going to be able to pull it off, upping the opening day, but he had.

"Thanks, you're looking better today. Things must be going well with David."

"Yes, David's doing better. He has a long way to go, but he's doing well." She wanted to change the subject before she had to lie to him.

"What is your estimation when the building will be finished?"

"It will still take a couple of months to get everything done and ready for inspection. But, it looks like it will be ready way before expectations."

"You are remarkable, Daryl. I don't know anyone else who could have gotten this done as quickly. Thank you." Marilyn was glad to know that something was going so well.

"Would you like a tour? I can spare you a few minutes."

Marilyn knew she probably shouldn't be climbing over beams so she decided to wait until a little more work was finished. "Oh, I don't want you to give me a tour until you're ready. Let's wait until you have the ground floor finished the way you like it. I think I'll head on out."

"Thanks for stopping by. I'll be in the office tomorrow and we can talk then." He walked her to the front entrance and waved bye.

Marilyn drove to the house to see Hillary. When she walked in the house, she saw Hillary coming out of David's room carrying a tray full of food. "Did David not eat lunch?" Marilyn looked to the full plate.

"No, he didn't. He refuses to eat. He's not in a good mood today. They took him for rehabilitation and he came back spent and down. I know it's going to be rough, but it still hurts to see him so sad."

"He's strong, Hillary. Don't worry about David so much. He'll come out of this like he has every other time in his life. I have no doubt about that."

"I know, but it's still going to be hard on me, too. Enough of this, how are you doing this morning? You don't look sick today."

"I'm not. I feel great. I've been to the office and the site already and feel like I can still go another mile. Ever since I went to the doctor things have been different. I guess my mind knew what was wrong and I just didn't want to face it. I feel wonderful now."

Hillary looked at the floor. "I wish David could be just as happy as you about the baby. What if this is just what he needs to get his priorities back in order?"

"Hillary, you know I don't want David to know yet. Please let me take care of it in my own time. Trust me."

"I will and I do, dear. I'm leaving it in your ballpark. I just hope it doesn't take too long. This may be exactly what David needs."

"I'll think about it." Marilyn looked toward David's room. "Do you think he would let me come in today?"

"I don't think you want to right now. He's acting like a bear. I don't even want to go back in there. I'm going to call Dave and meet him for lunch and then I'll come back and check on him. Would you like to join us?"

"No, I think I'm going to go to the park and grab something out there. It's such a beautiful day, I'd like to spend some time outdoors."

After Hillary left, Marilyn took a sandwich out to the garden and ate there instead of going to the park. She watched the wind blowing the flowers and could smell all the different fragrances. She loved being in the garden. It was so peaceful. The only sounds that greeted her were the birds singing and the cool breeze against her skin. There was a small statue of a little boy bending over a flower. Her heart jerked at the thought of David as a small boy working by his uncle's side here. She wished she and David's dreams had come true.

Marilyn closed her eyes and remembered the day she was first working in the garden. She could still feel the heat of that day. She was bent over the roses and then a shadow had drifted overhead to block the heat of the sun. She kept working and noticed the shade wasn't a cloud. Marilyn had looked up and there he was, watching her with those dark deep eyes. He was seeing her for the first time as a real woman.

Remembering that moment made Marilyn want to fight to keep what they had before the accident. She wanted to try to talk to David one more time. She knew David still loved her, but he was being a stubborn ass. How could he ruin their life? He had to think of her too, not just himself. She was a human being with feelings not a dog for him to trample on. Marilyn threw the remains of the sandwich to the birds and decided to speak with David. He would hear her out once and for all.

CHAPTER NINE

David's door was shut and Marilyn slowly pushed it open. As she walked in, she looked around. His room was nearly bare. He had removed all the flowers and cards. It saddened her to think David truly felt this way. David was asleep. She didn't want to wake him, so she sat in the chair next to his bed.

David's breathing was slow and soft. It wasn't the same hard sporadic sound he used to make shortly after the accident. Hillary had said his bones were healing well. She watched his chest moving up and down and remembered when she would lay her head upon his chest and sleep, both having the same dreams for the future.

He'd be angry when he woke and found her there, but she didn't care. She had to see and talk to him. To let him know she was still here for him, that she loved him.

She wanted to brush his hair back like she used to but was afraid David would wake. His skin had lost that dark tanned look and was now pale and drawn. His left hand lay motionless on the bed, where a wedding ring would have now been placed. Tired, Marilyn laid her head down and drifted to sleep.

David woke up and thought he was dreaming. He looked up and Marilyn was sleeping peacefully next to him in the chair. She had moved the chair next to his bed and if he tried, he could reach out and touch her. He watched her as she slept. She was so beautiful. Those big bright eyes were closed and her soft dark hair was wrapped behind her ears. Her hair was in it's usually disarray. She always looked so sexy with her hair that way.

David yearned to take her in his arms and never let her go. He loved her to the depth of his heart. It was killing him keeping her at such a distance. But he knew the only life he could ever give her would be one as a cripple. She deserved better than that and he loved her so much that he would make sure she had better.

He knew it was a mistake to touch her, but he couldn't stop himself. He brought his hand up and felt her hair. It was so soft. He could remember having her hair lay across his chest. Feeling of her hair wasn't enough. He brought his hand down softly over her face. Her lips were slightly parted and he could still taste them. He moved his hand to the side and gently let

his hand go down past her ear to her neck. How he wished he could wake her and tell her how much he loved her.

She started to move her head to the side and David jerked his hand back as he watched her wake up. Her eyes opened and he knew she had somehow known he was touching her. He straightened as much as he could in the bed. "What are you doing here?"

Marilyn sat up and got herself under control. She didn't want to get him upset again. "I just wanted to see how you were doing and see if you needed anything. When I got here, you were asleep and I didn't want to disturb you. I must have dozed."

"Apparently. You can leave now. I don't need anything, and if I did, my parents or the nurses could get it for me. You need to concentrate on the store, not me. We're through, Marilyn. Let it be."

Marilyn jumped from the chair. "How can you say 'let it be?' I love you and you love me. Don't even tell me you don't. I know you do. You can't turn love on and off like running water. It doesn't work that way. You are the most stubborn man I know and I'm getting sick of it! You need to get a grip on life and wake up, David. It wouldn't matter if you were paralyzed for life or not. All that matters to me is you and your love. You are the one destroying everything. Don't you remember the dreams we had? Don't you remember our plans? You obviously don't. But I do and I'm never going to forget."

He followed her gaze to the table next to his bed. Cheryl's picture was lying there. He looked up at Marilyn and saw the pain etched on her face.

Marilyn stood straight and proud. "David, you have no idea what you're letting slip through your fingers." She turned around and slowly left the room and David.

David gripped the rail on the side of his bed and closed his eyes. His gut was twisting into a knot and he tried to breathe deeply to lessen it. The pain of his heart ripping in two was almost too much to bear. He wanted to yell for her to come back, to take her in his arms and tell her how much he loved her. A tear dropped from his eyes and he angrily brushed it away.

The door opened again and David looked up praying it was Marilyn and dreading if it was. Jax stood in the doorway: Jax in his perfect form, a woman's man. David looked out the window. "Come in, Jax. No use standing in the doorway"

Jax walked in and stood at the bottom of David's bed. Angrily he asked, "What did you say to Marilyn? I saw her leave."

David looked at Jax and narrowed his eyes. "It's none of your business what I said to her. Got it?"

Jax walked around and slammed his hand down on the rail. "If you think I'm going to stand by and let you treat her like some castaway, think again. God, don't you remember how you told me you loved her and that

you wanted to spend the rest of your life with her and making a family? What changed that and don't give me that crap about the accident."

"You have no idea what I'm going through. You! You're Mr. Perfect. The perfect body and looks. You walk on your own two legs, can hold a woman and make love to her. I can't do that now! I can't hold Marilyn and tell her I'll take care of her always. I can't tell her we'll have that family we dreamed and talked about!"

"That's crap and you know it! You've been in here for almost three months and all you've done is feel sorry for yourself. Sure, I know it's difficult for you, but you know there's the possibility that you'll walk again. That's what all the physical therapy is for. It's not to just watch you fail."

Jax ran his hands through his hair. "Listen, David, she loves you. You'll never find another woman like her, and if you don't change, you're going to lose her. That I can promise you."

David knew Jax was right, but didn't think he could do it. He'd always just relied on himself and now Jax was telling him to rely on Marilyn. He loved her deeply, but was scared to trust her or himself. What if he failed? What if it didn't work out? He couldn't make Marilyn live half a life. He knew how important family was to her. She shouldn't have to live that way. No, he wouldn't do it. He shook his head. "I can't do it."

Jax straightened. "Then it's your loss. I'm not going to sit and let her hurt because of you."

"What in the hell does that mean? Are you going to go for her? Stay away, Jax, I'm warning you."

"From where I stand, it doesn't matter what you say anymore. Does it? Why don't you pick up that phone and call Cheryl like you usually do." Jax turned and slammed out of the room.

David tried to still his shaking hands and squeezed them into fists. "I will walk and I'll get Marilyn back if it's the last thing I do!"

Marilyn and Lauren met at the new restaurant and ate until they couldn't eat anymore. "Lauren, are you finished with your squid?"

Lauren laughed and wondered where Marilyn put it all. "I sure am. Would you like to have it?"

"Yes, if you're not going to eat anymore. I guess it's the pregnancy, but I'm always hungry."

"Well, it's about time you quit eating. You're going to be as big as a horse." Lauren laughed at the look Marilyn gave her.

"Well, at least I'll have a good excuse." Marilyn patted her stomach.

"You are going to be the cutest pregnant lady ever. Can you tell you're pregnant yet besides being tired and hungry? Are you showing yet?"

"Not yet, but I will be before we know it. I can't wait to go buy those cute maternity clothes."

"I can't wait either. This will be my first pregnancy, too. I want to go through it all with you." Lauren reached over and took Marilyn's hand.

Marilyn was glad she had confided in Lauren. She now had a friend she could depend on. She pushed the thought of David from her mind and their fight earlier.

"What does your family think of you having a child?"

Marilyn was shocked at herself when Lauren asked her. She hadn't thought of her parents since she found out she was pregnant. Hillary had been so kind and supportive that she hadn't thought of anything else. She knew it was David going through her mind that kept her from thinking clearly, but she was still disappointed in herself. "My parents died several years ago and now all I have is a brother. We're not close, so I really haven't thought about telling him.

Lauren smiled. "I guess we better be going. I have an early start in the morning."

"I know and Hillary and David will be sitting at home waiting for me to get in." She laughed. "They're hilarious. They want to make sure I'm getting all the rest I need. They're sweet."

When she got home she went straight up to bed. She couldn't seem to get comfortable. She changed her gown twice, took a warm bath and tried to read one of the books from the doctor's office. Nothing helped. She kept thinking about David and the baby. Should she tell him or should she let him find out on his own? She knew he would find out. She just hoped it was later instead of sooner.

She soon fell asleep and dreamed David found out about the baby after she delivered. David never forgave her for her deceit. She woke up shivering from the pain and hatred she saw in his eyes. At that minute, she knew she had to tell him. She had to have faith that David would make the right decision for the right reasons.

The following morning, after Marilyn got ready for work, she nervously walked down the stairs to David's room. Might as well get this over with first. She knew if he truly loved her it would all work out just like Lauren had said.

She took a deep breath and walked in his room. The smile froze and dropped from her face. Marilyn was looking straight at David and he was looking back at her with just as much of a surprise on his face as her.

Sitting in the chair next to David and holding his hand was Cheryl Bridges. Long red nails against his pale flesh. Marilyn thought she might faint. All of a sudden she became weak and everything shifted in front of her. This is what I get for thinking David loved me. Everything was over. David had been holding hands with Cheryl and smiling and enjoying her conversation. She'd been the only one able to get him to eat a decent meal.

"I'm sorry to interrupt. I wanted to talk to you, but I can tell you're busy. I'll be going." Marilyn turned to leave.

"Marilyn, wait. I haven't seen you in a long time. How are you doing?" Cheryl asked.

"If you want to know how I'm doing, maybe you should ask David. It's nice seeing you again. I'm sure David has needed you since his accident." She turned and walked out of the room.

Marilyn walked down the hall, her body shaking. She felt sick and had to run to make it to the rest room in time to be sick. After throwing up her breakfast, she rinsed her mouth and wiped her face. She stood up and tried to get control of herself. She walked out of the rest room and ran into Hillary.

Hillary saw her and stopped short. "What's wrong? Is it the baby?"

"No, I'm fine. I just felt sick for a moment. I think I'll go to the office." She turned and tried to get past Hillary.

Just her luck, Dave walked into the hallway and stopped her. He'd obviously been listening. "I want to know the truth, Marilyn. What happened?"

She looked up in his concerned eyes and took a deep breath. "When you walk in your son's room, you'll know. Now if you'll excuse me, I have a busy day ahead."

Dave let his hand drop from her arm and looked behind him. Jax was silently standing in the hall. "Jax, will you take Marilyn to the office? I don't want her driving right now."

"Of course."

"Dave, there's no need. I can drive."

"Marilyn, don't argue with me right now. You'll do as I say. Jax will take you to the office and I'll make sure your car is brought there later." He turned, took Hillary's arm and they headed for David's room.

Marilyn looked up at Jax. "I'm okay, really. You don't have to take me to the office."

Jax placed his hand under her chin and gently lifted her face towards his. "I said I'm here for you."

Marilyn looked away and let Jax lead her out the house. His car was in front and he opened the door for her. The door shut and Marilyn stared out the window. She didn't want to watch the scenery as they drove away. She closed her eyes and listened as Jax got in the car and then started down the drive. Stress was taking a toll on her body and she soon found herself dozing.

Someone lifted her, and she opened her eyes. She didn't know why she was so tired, her eyes seemed to have a mind of their own, not wanting to open. She tried again and saw a dark head next to her face. She leaned back and Jax turned his face to look at her. "What are you doing?"

He continued to walk up the steps. "You're not going to the office. I brought you back home. You need to rest."

"Jax, please, I want to be at the office." She tried to squirm out of his arms, but he was stronger. She couldn't budge.

"Listen and behave. You're pregnant and you need your rest. Apparently what happened with David drained you, because you were sleeping like the dead." He started up the steps. "Which room is yours?"

"The first on the right." She relaxed and let him carry her through the door and lay her on the bed. "Really, I'm okay."

Jax brushed her bangs off her forehead. "I'm sure you are, but there's no reason to take chances. Do you think you should call your doctor?"

"No, I'm just tired. After a short nap, I'll be good as new."

Jax sat on the side of her bed. "Marilyn, tell me what happened. I'd rather have it from you than David right now. We didn't leave on the best of terms yesterday."

Marilyn felt nervous with Jax sitting on the edge of the bed. It wasn't right. The only man she wanted in her room was David. She felt foolish, she knew Jax was just a friend, but still she couldn't help it. "Cheryl Bridges was in David's room when I walked in."

Jax shook his head. "This early in the morning? You do know David and Cheryl have been friends since they were kids, right?"

"Yes, but she was holding his hand and he was letting her give him the comfort that he refuses to let me give." A tear dropped down her cheek. "God, I hate the way he makes me so weak. I was never like this before."

"I'm sure the pregnancy has a lot to do with it. As for Cheryl, I don't know what's going on between them, but I can guarantee you one thing, David doesn't love her like he loves you."

"Right! David doesn't care about me anymore. He's already shown that."

Jax turned her face back to him. "Has David told you he doesn't love you anymore?"

Marilyn shook her head. "No, but one can only take so many hints. Let's see, he told me to never come back again, that we were through and that he didn't want or need me. I'd say that's putting it pretty plainly."

"Marilyn, David can be a real stubborn jerk and now is one of those times. Give him time, he'll change."

"Jax, I don't know if I have anything else to give him. I have to think of the baby first now, not a man that's telling me to jump off a cliff." She sniffed and tried to hold back her tears.

Jax scooted over against the headboard. He opened his arms. "Come here, I won't bite, I promise."

Marilyn didn't hesitate. She leaned against his chest and let Jax hold her, offering the comfort that David couldn't or wouldn't give. He held her in his arms as she cried for all the memories that her and David would never share. The family and love they once craved and now was taken away.

Jax whispered comforting words and brushed her hair with his fingers as she cried. "It's okay. Everything will turn out. Trust me."

Marilyn finally calmed down and let her body relax. Jax's chest was warm and she didn't want to lose the comfort it provided. She closed her eyes and slowly drifted asleep.

Jax woke to the sound of the front door opening. He looked down at Marilyn's tear streaked face while she slept. Her tears had dried on her cheeks. He inhaled the jasmine scent that always seemed to follow behind her. This was one woman, who if David ever came to his senses, would make him the happiest man ever. He wished he'd found her first. He would never make his desire known, but he would protect her and he'd do it anyway he needed.

He gently laid her on her side and stood up. He didn't want Hillary to find him on the bed holding her. He took the blanket from the bottom of the bed and laid it over her. He memorized the sight of her with her auburn hair lying on the pillow before turning and walking from the room.

Jax descended the stairs and found Hillary and Dave in the kitchen. "Hello."

"Jax?" Hillary looked up surprised. "We didn't know you were still here. Where's your car?"

"I pulled around the side and came in through the terrace doors. Marilyn was asleep and I didn't want to wake her to ask for the keys."

"You've been here this whole time?" Dave asked.

Jax looked Dave straight in the eyes, man to man. "Yes. You know me well enough to know I'd never do anything to hurt her or David."

Dave cleared his throat. "I know that, Jax. I'm just worried about her."

"She was pretty upset when she woke up. I let her talk and then she fell asleep. I guess I did, too." He sat next to Hillary. "What did David have to say for himself?"

"Apparently, Marilyn walked in and saw Cheryl holding David's hand. I want that woman out of my house for good, but David seems to want her visits. However, he seems to be slipping back into his sour mood."

"I didn't know he'd ever come out of it," Jax said. He'd had about as much as he could take of David's adolescent attitude.

Hillary looked up. "Right now, we all need to concentrate on Marilyn. She's got to take care of herself and the only way I can see her doing that is staying away from David."

Dave agreed. "I hate to admit it, but Hillary's right. Marilyn has got to think of the baby and herself."

The picture of her standing with David's baby in her womb made him want to scream. Couldn't David see what he was losing? No, of course not. He didn't know about the baby. That's the way Marilyn wanted it and he would stand by her side. He just hoped it was the right thing. If a woman were pregnant with his child, he would be furious if she never told him and he knew David would be, too.

Hillary poured another cup of coffee. "Sit, Jax, and join us."

Jax smiled. "Thank you, but I've got to go. Let Marilyn know if she needs to talk to give me a call."

"We will." Dave stood and gave Jax a hug. "You're just like a son to us, Jax. Thanks for your help."

Jax returned the hug. "I know. I just hope I never let you two down." He turned and walked out the terrace door and disappeared around the corner, away from the family he wished were truly his.

When Dave went back to the office, Hillary stayed and watched over Marilyn. She slept all morning and through lunch. When she woke up, Hillary was next to the bed watching her. "I didn't think you would ever wake up. That baby must be starving." She put a tray down in front of Marilyn and handed her some soup. "I don't want to hear any complaining and I want you to eat all that soup."

"Thank you, Hillary. I'll eat it all."

Hillary sat in the chair next to the bed. "Marilyn, we have got to do something. You can't let yourself get upset like this. What do you think the solution is?"

"I've decided to put all my energy into Midwest Viking and my baby. As far as I'm concerned, I'm going to be a single mom and that's fine with me. I can give this child all the love he'll ever need from parents and I'm not going to worry about it. David is David and there's nothing I can do about him until he decides he wants to change." Marilyn leaned back and let out a sigh of relief.

Hillary was proud of her. She'd made the right decision. She knew Marilyn was made of stronger stuff than the average woman and she had just said so. Now the hard part. Carrying out her plan. "Very good solution, Marilyn. I'll help you and we'll start planning for the baby. The store is coming along wonderfully and you can ease up a little on that and concentrate on other things."

"I don't want to ease up on the store. I want to keep busy. I can prepare for the baby throughout the months to come." She smiled and put her hand casually across her stomach.

Hillary smiled at the show of affection she saw in Marilyn. "Have you decided if you're going to remain here or return to Dallas?"

"I've decided to remain here. Sherry is so beautiful and I want my child to grow up knowing peace and tranquillity. He would never receive that in Dallas."

"Then David and I want you to have this house. It belongs to us now and we want our grandchild to grow up here. You're the daughter we never had and you're now carrying the only grandchild we'll probably ever have. I know you don't want to take it, but it's important to us. We can't be here in the States all the time to see our grandchild, but we'll feel much better knowing he's in this house and enjoying the gardens. Please accept the house. It's very important to us."

Marilyn started crying, but they were tears of joy. She smiled up to Hillary. "Thank you. You two are unbelievable. This would be the perfect place to raise a child. David and I had talked about it together before. Now, at least our child will be happy here even if it's without the two of us together. Thank you so much."

Hillary hugged her. "Now I want you to get some rest and you can return to work tomorrow if you behave yourself." She laughed at the look on Marilyn's face.

"But I can't miss work today. I've got to be in the office."

"No you don't. Dave and Jax are there and they'll take care of anything that comes up. Dr. Fry said for you to stay in the bed until tomorrow morning."

"Yes ma'am." Marilyn saluted Hillary as she left the room and snuggled back into the down comforter.

CHAPTER TEN

Marilyn walked into the office and Daryl waiting for her in the lobby. When he saw her he stood up. "Good morning, Darlin. How are you feeling?"

"I'm doing great this morning. How about you?" Marilyn could tell Daryl was excited about something.

"Couldn't be better. We finished the bottom floor and it looks great. They're starting on the second as we speak." He was grinning from ear to ear.

"Why don't you come into my office and you can tell me all about it." Marilyn entered her office and Daryl sat in one of the chairs facing her. She smiled as Daryl started telling her his plans for the opening.

All of a sudden there was a knock on the door and before Marilyn could say anything Lauren came in swinging a pink baby blanket in front of her. Marilyn looked up and gasped. Lauren looked over and saw Daryl and froze. She swung the blanket behind her. "Hi, Daryl. What brings you out here so bright and early?"

Daryl saw the baby blanket and looked at Marilyn. "I thought I would stop by and talk with Marilyn before I headed back out. What is that little pink thing you're hiding behind your back?"

Lauren pulled the blanket out from behind her. "Oh, I just thought I would show Marilyn something I bought for a friend. I can wait until later. You two have your meeting." She tried to back out of the office.

"Lauren, wait. Might as well tell Daryl the truth." Marilyn looked over to Daryl. "I'm pregnant."

Daryl looked from Marilyn back to Lauren and then back to Marilyn. "You're pregnant and you don't want anyone to know. Why not? I thought things were coming around with David. Am I missing something here?"

"David has turned me away. He's decided that I deserve better than what he can give me since he may be paralyzed forever. I tried everything I could to change his mind, but he's determined. I've decided to get on with my life. I'm not going to worry about him right now. No matter what I say, he won't change until he's ready. I'm not going to push it anymore. I've decided to have the baby and raise it here in Sherry."

Lauren smiled and slowly backed out of the room. "I'll leave you two to your meeting."

Marilyn looked at Lauren. "Chicken."

Daryl looked at Marilyn. "Well, Darlin, I think you've made the right choice. What's important right now are you and the baby. That's all you should worry about. Mr. Lang is a very strong-willed man and he'll come around. If he doesn't, then it's his loss. You can depend on me."

"Thank you, Daryl. It means a lot to me to have such good friends. The doctor has assured me I can work on up to the delivery time. The due date is July twenty-first. We'll have the store opened and running well before then."

"That's right. You won't have to worry about anything once that little one is born. You'll be able to enjoy your time with him." Daryl tried to reassure her.

"Or her, Daryl." Marilyn laughed.

"Right, or her. Still, I'm a bettin' man, and I'm thinking it's going to be a strong fellow you have there. Us, Texans have got to stick together or get lost in this freezing state."

Daryl stood up and went around Marilyn's desk. He took her hand and pulled her up close to him. "You remember I'm here if you ever need me. I'm not going anywhere like David." Daryl bent his head and placed a gentle kiss across her brow.

She smiled. "I'll remember." Marilyn watched Daryl leave. I guess this is a start of how it's going to get out. One by one and then everyone will know.

She heard the door open and looked. It was Lauren. "Well, I guess it's going to start getting out.

"I know. It just goes to show you can't hide pregnancy forever. It's going to get out sooner or later."

"I'm sorry I came in with this blanket. I never expected to see Daryl in the office this early."

"That's okay. I think it's great. Give it here." Marilyn took the blanket. It was soft and made of terry cloth. It would keep a baby nice and warm in the winter. "It's pink. What if the baby is a boy? Daryl said it's a sure thing."

"Then we'll have to exchange it. I couldn't keep from shopping yesterday. You were sick and I was fine. I now have a reason to spend money. I love it." She laughed.

"Next time you go, I'm going, too. Guess what? Dave and Hillary have given me the house."

"What? Are you serious?"

Marilyn nodded. "As soon as they heard I was going to raise the baby here in Sherry, they wanted me to have the house. They amaze me."

"That's for sure."

Marilyn smiled. "So, I want to start on a nursery." Marilyn knew of exactly which room to use. There was an old nursery down the hall and she knew David used to stay in there when he was an infant. All the Lang children did when they visited David's uncle.

“Well, I better get back to my office and leave you to your daydreaming. I have an interview in about fifteen minutes. Do you want to do lunch today?”

“Sure, I’ll see you at noon.” Marilyn pulled a breakfast bar out of her desk and snacked on that for a while.

The receptionist rang Marilyn. “Ms. Rogers, you have a visitor. Her name is Cheryl Bridges. Would you like me to show her in?”

Marilyn couldn’t believe the woman had the gall to show her face here. She laid the bar down, suddenly feeling sick. “Yes, you can show her to my office.”

Marilyn stood and met Cheryl at her door. “Come in, Cheryl.” She watched as the woman sat in one of the chairs opposite her desk. Marilyn walked around and sat down in her chair, her legs quaking. “What do you want? This could be called harassment.”

Cheryl slipped her purse from her shoulder. “I wanted to talk to you about the other day.”

“I don’t see what we have to talk about. I’m sorry I interrupted you and David. I thought I left quick enough for the two of you.”

“Well, that’s not the point. When are you leaving the house? You know there’s no hope in you and David so why are you still there? I know you could afford a place in town.”

Marilyn laughed. “Cheryl you have no business telling me how to live my life. If David finds it so hard to be in the same house as me, then he can tell me.”

“I thought I would do you a favor so you wouldn’t have to hear it from David himself. He doesn’t want to hurt you anymore.”

“I’m sure. Well, thanks but I don’t need any favors from you Cheryl. If you don’t mind, I’m busy right now. Would you leave?”

Cheryl picked up her purse and walked to the door. As she put her hand on the knob, she turned back. “You know, David has always loved me. You were just a fling.”

Marilyn stood where she was, staring at the spot Cheryl had occupied. She closed her eyes and tried to calm the anger boiling at the surface. She heard the door open and looked. Daryl was standing there watching her. “You heard.”

Daryl walked in and closed the door. “No, but I can guess. You want to talk?”

She shook her head. “No.”

Daryl approached her and pulled her into his arms. “She’s a rattler, Darlin. Pure and simple.”

She could feel her body shaking. “I know. She said David sent her.”

“I don’t believe it. David would take care of things himself. He wouldn’t send Cheryl to do it.”

“I don’t know. I thought I knew David, and I was wrong.”

“No, you stay away from that woman. There’s something here not kosher.”

“Don’t worry about that. I’m surprised she had the guts to come in here.” Marilyn could see the venom coming from Cheryl’s eyes. Like a threat.

“You want to go home? I’ll take you. You have to think of the baby.”

“No, the last place I want to go to is the house. That’s probably where she’s headed. I have lunch planned with Lauren. I’ll be fine.”

“Call me if she comes back. Do you hear?” Daryl asked seriously.

“Yes, I’ll let you know but I don’t think she will.” Marilyn prayed she wouldn’t. What if Jax had been here or Dave? She didn’t want to think what could have happened.

Daryl looked at his watch. “I’ve got to get out to the site. I’m serious, call me if anything else happens.”

Marilyn sat in her chair. “I will.” She watched Daryl walk out the door and then dropped her head onto her desk. What should she do? Tell Jax? She didn’t know. She did know that Cheryl scared her. She was a sick woman.

Marilyn was looking over the jewel financials when Lauren and Karen walked in. They both had their purses and were ready to leave.

Lauren took the pen out of Marilyn’s hand and laid it aside. “We are taking you on a shopping excursion. You have gotten bigger in the last two months and you look about to pop all those buttons on your suits. It’s time to quit hiding your pregnancy and start acting like a blooming mother should.”

Isn’t this what she said she was going to do? However, actually doing it was different than telling herself she was. She knew if she walked into the house wearing maternity clothes, David would know. Was she prepared for that? She was starting to look like a beached whale and she’d already gained eighteen pounds. She knew the girls were right.

She closed the folder on the financials. “I guess this can wait until after lunch. You do know if I go buy maternity clothes the secret will be out. One look at me in maternity clothes and the world will know.”

Lauren stood there with her sternest look. “Marilyn, you can’t hide it any longer. People are going to think you’re getting fat. They probably already do. It’s time for you to be happy and enjoy this pregnancy. Now get up.”

Marilyn laughed at the outrageous look on Karen’s face. Karen was married and had three children and had loved being pregnant. She and her husband were trying again. “Okay, let’s go. You’re both right; it’s about time I did this anyway.”

The first store they went to was Daddy’s Baby. They all had a great time. Marilyn thought she must have tried on every outfit available. Luckily, Midwest Viking was paying for all her living expenses, so Marilyn had

plenty of money for a full wardrobe. She looked in the mirror and couldn't believe how very pregnant she looked. She'd hidden her pregnancy from the beginning and didn't let herself notice how big she was getting. With the maternity clothes, she looked almost ready to deliver.

Lauren and Karen were enjoying themselves at her expense. They handed her several pair of maternity panties that Marilyn thought would fit a circus lady. The sad thing was, they almost fit her and she knew they would in another month. Then they started picking out maternity bras for when she breast fed her baby. She tried one on and felt embarrassed. She knew she was going to need them, but wasn't ready to think about feeding the baby yet. She bought everything Lauren and Karen picked out.

They stopped at a restaurant in the mall to eat lunch. Marilyn was wearing one of her new dresses. She felt happy and free. She was showing everyone who saw her that she was pregnant. There was no way to hide it. She ate everything on her plate and drank two glasses of water. "Thank you both for making me come shopping. This is exactly what I needed. I don't mind telling you both that I'm a little nervous about walking back into the office dressed like this."

"Well, don't be. If you think everyone doesn't know you're pregnant then you've got a big surprise. You look every bit as pregnant as you are, even without your maternity clothes. Don't worry about anything. The only reason David doesn't know is because he's self-focused right now."

Karen was smiling and listening to the two of them talk. Marilyn looked great. "Marilyn, you look wonderful. Don't be embarrassed, show the world how happy you are. You're going to be a great mother and businesswoman. You can do anything you put your mind to."

"Thank you. Well, are you two ready to go back to the office and face the crowd?" They all laughed and got up.

When the elevator doors opened, Marilyn wanted to sink back behind Lauren and Karen. She just knew everyone was going to look right at her stomach. She held her head up and walked off the elevator towards Cindy.

She was sorting through the messages when they arrived. "You all have messages. Here are yours, Ms. Rogers. Lauren and Karen, you both have messages here." She pointed to theirs and Marilyn noticed the receptionist didn't take much notice in them at all.

Marilyn was completely relieved. She headed to her office and watched everyone around her as she went. No one was staring at her or her stomach. She guessed she had looked pregnant all the time and hadn't wanted to face it herself. She had a spring back in her step and walked in her office refreshed.

There in her office setting in a chair was Mr. Vandergriff reading one of her magazines. He looked up and saw her entering. He stood and extended his hand. Marilyn shook his. "Mr. Vandergriff, I didn't know you were here. How long have you been waiting?"

“Not very long. There was no one out front when I walked in, so I just made myself comfortable. I hope you don’t mind.”

“No, not at all. I’m sorry, I don’t remember us having a meeting scheduled today.” Marilyn couldn’t believe she had forgotten about a meeting.

“We don’t, dear. Please sit down. I was in the area and decided to stop by. I’ve been wondering how Mr. Lang is doing and we never have a chance to talk about it after our meetings. So, tell me, how is he?”

“David is doing quite well. He has been in therapy for a month now and is slowly getting feeling back into his lower body. It could take several more months for him to recuperate. The human body is very tricky.” That was about all Marilyn knew about David. Hillary had decided not to tell Marilyn everything so she wouldn’t worry.

“My family and I pray for his recovery all the time. By the way, Daryl will probably tell you I stopped by the site this morning. It’s coming along quite well. Mr. Davis told me the building would be finished in another month or so. That is remarkable. I don’t think I’ve ever seen a store come up that fast.”

“Daryl has a way with his contractors. They work to the bone for him and they seem to love their job. I’m pretty amazed myself. We’re going to be opening way ahead of schedule. Thank you for all the help you’ve given with the jewels. I don’t think I’ve ever seen such a display before. They’re exceptional.”

“Thank you, I agree.” He stood up. “Well, I won’t keep you any longer. Keep me in touch and let me know if there is anything else my company can do to help.” He kissed the top of her hand. “You’re a beautiful mother, Marilyn. Congratulations on your pregnancy.”

Marilyn blushed and could feel the heat slowly climb up her face. “Thank you, Mr. Vandergriff. I’ll let you know when we schedule the opening day.”

Mr. Vandergriff walked out the office and Marilyn collapsed in her chair. She knew the time for David to find out was near. There was nothing she could do about it. He had made his bed and now he had to lie in it. It was his fault he didn’t know about the baby. He didn’t want to see her. In fact, he refused to let her even come in his room. She wouldn’t worry about it anymore.

She decided to go out to the site. Daryl was nowhere to be found when she arrived. The place looked wonderful. The outside had high pillars in the front and a twelve-foot glass door. She walked into a wide spacious first floor. There were no separate rooms. It was open and all white. There were glass cases along the walls for displaying. The ceiling in the center of the room displayed a large glass chandelier. It looked like water drops falling from the sky. There was a large two tiered water fountain in the center of the floor and cushioned seats all around. The tables were silver

with gold trim for the displaying of the jewels. David would be proud if he could see it now.

She saw a worker coming off the elevator and she asked him where Daryl was. She took the elevator to the third floor. This floor looked the same, except the color was different. It was decorated in soft pastels and floral prints. This would be the family floor. Everything a mother or child would want. They would buy for each other or themselves. Lauren had a display already purchased and ready to bring in for babies. The jewels were exquisite and small. Personalized cameos were the main attraction. A customer could bring in a picture of their child or themselves and the designers would create a cameo to their likeness. Marilyn had thought of the idea after she'd grown accustomed to the pregnancy. Dave and Hillary were excited about it and couldn't wait for the results. Midwest had never stocked infant jewels, so this was a first.

Daryl spotted and waived her over to him. He hugged her and kept his arm around her. "You look great, Marilyn. It's about time you started wearing maternity clothes. I don't think I've ever seen a mother as beautiful as you."

Marilyn knew Daryl meant what he said. Daryl had taken her under his wing ever since he found out she was pregnant. He always wanted to know what the doctor had said and how she was feeling. He was just like family. "Thank you, Daryl. At first I was embarrassed, but now I think I like it." She turned in a circle for him.

"Well, don't turn to many circles. The last thing we need is you falling over." He laughed and she hit him on the arm.

"What do you think of the place?" He kept his hand on her back and guided her around the room. "It looks different than the other floors, but that's what you asked for."

Marilyn liked feeling his hand on her back. It wasn't romantic on his side. It was like a brotherly affection. "Daryl, it is exactly what I wanted. It looks perfect. It's turning out just like I dreamed it would."

He tilted her face up to his. "Are you all right? You look a little tired."

"I'm fine. I just can't wait for the store to be open and on its way." Marilyn had been feeling a bit tired and she had more things she needed to take care of than hours in the day.

"We are way ahead of schedule. You need to slow down. It can't be good for you or the baby to push yourself so hard."

"I know, it will be over in a few months and then I can rest. Really, I'm fine. I just need a nap today." She walked over to one of the glass displays. The insides of the displays were lined with light pink felt. It looked so soft. She leaned over and touched the material. It was as soft as it looked.

Daryl walked up behind her and turned her around. He pulled her to him and hugged her. "Hey, you're doing a fine job. Quit pushing yourself so hard."

She let him hold her and absorbed his strength. He was a good friend she could depend on. He knew when there was something wrong and he told her the bold truth when she needed it. She took a deep breath. "Thank you for everything."

Daryl didn't say anything. He knew she just needed someone to hold her. He felt like she was the little sister he never had. If things didn't settle down with David he would have to go over there and have a man to man. This was getting out of hand. The thought of Cheryl Rogers in her office infuriated him. Right now, the important thing was to keep Marilyn happy.

"Have you had dinner?" Daryl knew she hadn't. She never ate early dinners.

"No, the girls and I went on a shopping trip this afternoon and we had lunch out." She turned in a circle showing off her dress. "Do you really like the new me? All of me?"

"You know I do. You look great. How about if we both go for dinner and then we can go for an ice cream? I'll even buy you a double dip."

"All right, you're on. But, you may regret it. I have a big appetite now. I can't seem to stop myself." She laughed while Daryl followed her to the car.

Daryl made a big production of checking how much money he had in his wallet. "We may need to stop by the ATM. Do you think we can eat on a hundred?" He was the one laughing this time.

Marilyn noticed Dave and Hillary were home when she pulled up. She looked around the house and couldn't find them so she decided to check the garden. They were both seated on a bench and were very quiet. Marilyn walked right up to them and they didn't even notice. "Hi. How long have you been home?"

They both looked up surprised. "I like the clothes, Marilyn. You look gorgeous."

"Thank you. So, how long have you two been sitting out here?"

"Oh, not long." Hillary motioned for her to sit on the bench across from them. "We need to talk, Marilyn. Have a seat. Have you had dinner?"

"Yes, I had dinner with Daryl. You wouldn't believe how far the store has come. It is unbelievable. You two need to go out there tomorrow."

"We will, thank you." Dave took a deep breath. "David is doing much better. As you know, he's been in physical therapy for the last couple of months and he's been having great success. Today, David walked four steps by himself. Not with the bars, but on his own." Dave waited and watched for Marilyn's reaction.

Marilyn was thrilled David was beginning to walk on his own. Her heart started beating faster. He was improving rapidly. She whispered. "That's wonderful. I'm sure you were proud of him. Did the doctor say how long it would be before David was completely healed?"

"No, he can't say for sure. He thinks it won't be but another month or so."

"I'm very happy for you all." Marilyn swallowed the sudden lump in her throat. This confirmed that David hadn't changed his opinion of their relationship. He must not have cared as much as he had said or surely he would have talked to her by now. She had been such a fool. "I know this is a stupid question and I know I shouldn't even ask it, but did David say anything about me today. Did he want to see me?"

Hillary and Dave were both watching and she could tell by their looks that he hadn't. "No, Marilyn, he didn't."

Marilyn stood up slowly. She motioned for them not to get up. "Don't worry, I'm fine. I should have known. Everyone has always told me I'm too trusting. David never truly loved me. I guess I just wanted to believe him." She removed the ring from her finger. She had worn it this entire time hoping David would change his mind. The sapphires and diamonds twinkled in the late evening lights like stars. "Would you please give this to David or return it to Michael's. It used to be on display there and Michael said there were people interested in it." She turned around and walked back to the house.

She was crying, of course, just like always. She got mad at herself and wiped the tears away. She could now get on with her life and quit worrying about David. It hurt but she knew it was for the best. She had to think of the baby. Her baby would be her one and only love.

As she was about to step into the house a figure loomed up from the side. She looked and Jax stood silently watching her. She didn't have to say a word, he knew. Jax opened his arms and Marilyn rushed into them. His arms came around her and Marilyn knew she could trust him to stand by her side.

Jax looked across the garden and met Dave and Hillary's eyes. They looked away and Jax guided her around the house. He wasn't going to make her walk in there and face David. She'd been through enough already. He knew what Dave and Hillary were going to talk to her about. He'd been there when it happened.

Jax opened his car door and helped Marilyn in. He shut the door and walked around to his side and got in and pulled away from the house. He drove down to the bay and parked. Marilyn was quiet, too quiet.

Jax stepped out of the car and walked around to her side. He opened the door and pulled her out. "Come on, let's go for a walk."

Marilyn didn't argue. She let Jax lead her closer to the water. The waves lapping against the rocks, sounding angry. She felt Jax's hand in hers and leaned into him. His arms wrapped around her waist and Marilyn closed her eyes. Why couldn't he be David? What happened? She'd been such a fool.

The air was cool, but Marilyn was warm in Jax's arms. He brushed his face next to hers and Marilyn shivered. Wasn't this wrong? How could she stand there and let Jax hold her this way? David may not love her or want her but she still loved him. She couldn't hurt Jax this way.

Marilyn tried to pull away from Jax's arms, but he held tight. "Jax, let go. It's not right. I won't allow you to be hurt, too."

"Marilyn, don't worry about me. I'm not a child. All I'm asking is for you to let me hold you."

Marilyn nodded. She couldn't turn him away, didn't want to. Why was Jax always in the background giving her the support she needed? Jax moved her closer and Marilyn relaxed.

The moon was hovering high in the dark sky, stars twinkling around. Marilyn looked down at the water. It was beautiful. It reminded her that she wasn't in control of her life. No matter how hard she tried to do what was right, it was never in her hands.

Sure, she'd made a mistake. She should have waited until she was married, but she didn't. There's no turning the clock back. She was pregnant. It wasn't the child's fault. She would try to do what was right. She'd lean on God for understanding and help, not on her own desires. That was the hard part.

David was going to be fine. Isn't this what she'd prayed for all along? It just wasn't God's will for her to be the woman in David's life. What was she going to do? Trust in God.

Jax's hand went down to her stomach. Marilyn held her breath. No one had touched her stomach but her and now Jax was. Her heart was racing. She didn't want to pull away, God help her but she needed the contact. His hand rubbed her stomach lightly and Marilyn relaxed. It felt right.

Jax whispered. "Marilyn, it's amazing. Every time I think of the baby you're carrying it leaves me speechless. I know it's not mine, but I love him all the same, sort of like a nephew."

The word reassured Marilyn. Nephew. Jax wasn't thinking of her child as a father. David was the father and nothing could change that. "Yes, it's pretty amazing." She placed her hand over Jax's. "You know, he moves now. It's not real noticeable if you're watching, but I can feel it."

Jax spread his hand wider. "Are you serious. Could I feel it?"

"Yes, but he's not moving now." Marilyn giggled.

"Maybe someday." Jax moved his hand off her stomach and held her close. "Do you remember when I proposed to you?"

"How could I forget?" Marilyn whispered.

"It still stands, Marilyn. I didn't say that lightly."

"I know, but you know I can't. I love David." She didn't want to hurt Jax.

"I know." Jax whispered. "I just want you to know I'm here and nothing's going to change that."

Marilyn took a deep breath. Maybe this was a sign from God. Was Jax the man for her? She turned her face to the side and looked up. Jax was watching her and his face tilted closer. He was only a breath away. He'd left it up to her.

She closed her eyes and leaned forward. Gently she felt Jax's lips on hers. They were firm but oh so gentle. He whispered her name and Marilyn turned into his arms. Jax pulled her even closer and Marilyn stiffened. This was Jax. He'd come to mean so much to her, but not this.

Marilyn pulled her face back and opened her eyes. Jax was watching with a smile. She started to say his name but Jax put his finger over her lips.

"I know. It's not meant to be. You love David."

Marilyn closed her eyes. "Yes. I love you, too but it's not the same." She opened her eyes and Jax watched her intently. "Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Yes, I feel the same. You're a beautiful woman, but your heart lies elsewhere and obviously mine hasn't found that elsewhere either. I'll still be here for you, Marilyn."

"I know and I'm going to need you." She turned around to face the water and leaned against his chest. "You know, I feel better now. Thank you."

Marilyn felt Jax's chest rumble with laughter. She poked him in the ribs with her elbow. "You know what I mean."

"Yes, I know what you mean." They stood in companionable silence watching the ocean. The weather was getting colder. "Are you ready to head back?"

"Yes, might as well. We can't stay out here all night."

"You could move out of the house if it's too much. The stress isn't good for you or the baby."

Marilyn shook her head. "No, I'm not leaving. That's my house and he's not running me away. He can be the one to leave." She looked at Jax. "They did tell you they gave me the house didn't they?"

"Yes. I was a bit shocked, but I understand. They don't want to lose contact with their grandchild or you. You've carved yourself a place in their hearts."

"I know. I love them too."

Jax took her hand. "Come on, let's go home."

Jax got her settled in the Jag and then got in on his side. "You don't know what you could be walking into. Has David seen your clothes?"

"Nope, and I have a feeling he's not going to be too happy."

"Well, that's too bad isn't it." Jax started the engine. "David will either learn to live with it or there's going to be some major changes in his life soon."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The lights in the front of the house were off and Marilyn let out her breath. "Looks like everyone's asleep."

"Appears that way. I'll walk you in." Jax opened her door and helped her up the steps. He had a key to the house so unlocked the door and guided Marilyn into the hallway. "You make it up okay?"

"Yes. Thank's for being there for me. I don't know what I would have done tonight."

Jax brushed her hair over her ear. "Anytime, Marilyn."

The light was abruptly switched on and Marilyn and Jax froze. Standing behind Marilyn was David. He looked over Marilyn's head and stared at Jax. "Well, isn't this convenient. How long has this been going on, the entire time?"

Jax straightened and dropped his hand from Marilyn's shoulder. "David, don't say something you're going to regret later."

"You mean like why you've got your hands on my fiancé? No, wait a minute. Don't tell me. You've been sleeping together this whole time that she's been walking around here supposedly praying I'll be healed."

Before Marilyn could say anything, she saw Jax's fist fly past her head and hit David in the jaw, knocking him against the wall. Marilyn screamed and threw herself at Jax. "Stop! You could hurt him."

"You care if I hurt him after everything he just said?" Jax looked away from Marilyn at David. He was standing still as stone staring at Marilyn. He pointed at David. "If you so much as say another foul thing about her, I'll kill you! Do you hear me!"

David didn't say anything, he continued to look down at Marilyn stunned. Jax looked at her to see what had caught his attention and stopped. She was wearing her maternity clothes. How could he have forgotten? He put a protective arm around Marilyn and pulled her close to his side.

"You're pregnant?" David couldn't move. He looked up at Jax and then back to Marilyn. "It's mine isn't it?"

Marilyn nodded. She couldn't bring herself to say a word. Thank God Jax had his arm around her or she'd collapse. "This child is my responsibility. I haven't asked you for a thing, David."

“Why in the hell not? It’s my child.”

Marilyn stood straighter. “Let’s see. You practically told me to jump of the nearest bridge. As far as I see it, it’s none of your business what I do with my life.” Something drew her attention down the dark hall and she looked. Standing in the corner of the hall was Cheryl. “I see it didn’t take you long to find a replacement.”

Jax watched Marilyn turn and storm from the room up the stairs. Her door slammed and Jax looked back at David. “You just made a crucial mistake. That woman has been through enough. She’s dealt with this pregnancy on her own without your support and not thrown a thing your way and now when you had your chance you blew it. I can’t believe you.” Jax shook his head.

“What was I supposed to think. You two are talking in the dark and your hands are on her. My hand was brushing her hair back, not all over her body.” Jax stepped closer to David, nose to nose. “It wasn’t by lack of trying either. That woman loves you.”

Cheryl put her hand on David’s arm. “David?”

David shrugged her hand off his arm. “Leave me alone Cheryl. Didn’t I tell you to leave earlier? What are you doing here?”

“I thought you might need me, so I stayed in one of the other rooms.” She tried to pull him closer to her.

“I said let go! Get your stuff and leave. I don’t want to talk to you right now.”

“Well, that’s too bad! She is a nobody, David. I’ve been by your side all these months. You owe your gratitude to me, not her.”

“Cheryl get out of my house now! How many times do I have to tell you there is nothing between us? I’m getting sick of it. Get out!”

Cheryl looked at Jax. “What about him? He doesn’t deserve to be here. I saw him and Marilyn together on the couch one day.”

David looked back at Jax. “I said get out Cheryl. I never want to see you again.”

Cheryl grabbed her purse from the table in the hallway. “You know what David? You’re nothing. That accident has turned you into a whining spineless jerk.” She opened the door and stormed out of the house letting anyone awake know she’d left.

David turned back to Jax. “Tell me the truth. Was there anything between you and Marilyn?”

“No, but I did offer her marriage. I’m not about to let her raise this child alone.”

“What did she say?”

“No.”

David took his cane from the wall and slowly walked into the living room with Jax following behind. He went to the wet bar and poured himself a drink. “I’ve lost her haven’t I?”

Jax sat down on the couch. "I don't know David. For some reason that woman keeps forgiving you."

David sat across from him. He saw the light in the kitchen switch on and closed his eyes. "I guess Cheryl woke everyone."

Dave walked into the living room with a cup of coffee. "You see Marilyn?"

David looked up at his dad. "Yes. Why didn't you tell me? You're my father."

"Son, I promised Marilyn. She's our daughter now too and carries our grandchild. We couldn't risk her pregnancy on your anger. You've been irrational since the accident."

David looked at Jax. "What do you think? You've become close to Marilyn."

"David, if you truly love her, you need to let her know. Otherwise, leave. Don't make her continue through this. She's too far gone in her pregnancy to have to continue this way. It's not safe."

David stood. "I'll talk to her tomorrow."

Jax stood and so did Dave. "I'm going to leave. If you need to talk, call me David."

David pulled Jax into a hug. "I will, brother."

David watched Jax leave and he turned to his father. "I've really messed up, dad."

"Yes, son, you have. But with time you can fix it. It's not going to happen overnight."

Dave pulled David into a hug. "Go to bed, son. Tomorrow's a new day."

Marilyn tried to sleep, but it just wouldn't come. She tossed and turned but no matter what position she was in, the baby continued to kick. Marilyn turned on her back and put her hand over her stomach. "Be still, mommy needs to sleep."

She closed her eyes and thought of the beautiful garden outside and how much fun her child would have running through it and playing with the fishponds. As she was drifting slowly to sleep, she thought she felt someone touching her stomach, but realized it must have been something she had ate. The baby was moving like mad. Marilyn turned onto her side, trying for a more comfortable position.

David had been there watching her and had gently brushed his hand across their child. When she rolled over he stood up and left not wanting to disturb her.

After Marilyn was dressed for work, she slowly walked down the stairs praying all the way, David wouldn't be waiting for her. She wasn't in the mood to deal with him. He was no where in sight. She looked down his

hall and saw his door was still closed. "Thank you," she said, knowing her prayers had been answered.

Her car was parked back in the garage so she had to walk through the kitchen to get there. As she stepped through the door she looked at the kitchen table. David was eating breakfast with Dave and Hillary.

Marilyn stopped. After seven months, he finally decided to make an appearance with the family. Marilyn walked around the counter and tried to make it through as quickly as possible.

"Marilyn, please we need to talk." David stood from his chair, leaning slightly on the table.

Marilyn saw the cane hanging from the back of his chair and tried to turn away. "I don't have time, David. I have a meeting."

David looked at the clock over the refrigerator. "At seven thirty?"

"Some people have to work to make a living." She knew that wasn't fair. It wasn't David's fault he'd been in the accident. Still, it was his fault he'd been away from people for seven months. "David I don't have time. Maybe another day."

Marilyn grabbed her keys off the hook by the door and walked straight out the kitchen door without looking back. She didn't want to see the pain in David's eyes or the disappointment she might see in Hillary's or Dave's.

The office was quiet when she arrived. Only security and a few others were around. Marilyn walked into her office and left the door open. There was no use in shutting it. No one who'd want to speak with her was in at this time. She had another hour of peace before work began.

She went through all her messages and sorted out the top priorities. A shadow stopped in her view and she looked up.

"Good morning." Jax smiled.

Marilyn stood. "Good morning to you, too. What are you doing here so early?"

"Probably the same reason you are. Didn't want to sit around where certain people could contact me." Jax smiled at her approvingly. "I like your suit."

Marilyn looked down at herself. "She did look good, a navy, long maternity suit. The only thing, she looked as big as a beached whale and felt like one, too. "Thanks."

Jax came over and sat on the edge of her desk. "Have a seat. How are you feeling this morning?"

"Okay."

"Did you eat."

Marilyn shook her head. "No, David was in the kitchen. I'm not ready to deal with him."

"I understand. We had a long talk last night." Jax waited.

"And..." Marilyn asked.

"You need to talk with him, Marilyn."

Marilyn stood from the desk and walked to the large window overlooking the ground below. "I will. Just not today. Today's a big day."

"I know." Jax came to stand behind her. He put his arms around her and pulled her against his chest. "He loves you, Marilyn."

"It may be too late, Jax."

"No, it's not. If you love each other, it will never be too late." Jax turned her around and tilted her face up to his. "I'd never lie to you Marilyn. Give him a chance. He may surprise you."

Marilyn closed her eyes. "We'll see."

She walked back to her desk. "Well, dear friend of mine. Do you care enough about me and my child to go get us a doughnut?"

Jax laughed. "Why don't I go pick up doughnuts for the entire office, today being the grand opening?"

"Sounds like a wonderful idea." Marilyn watched Jax leave her office. She looked out the window to the beautiful sunshine and flowing pine trees. Nothing like that dreaded day so long ago. Could things really work out for them? Could she trust David with not only her life but their child's, too?

She laid her hand over her stomach. She had to try one last time didn't she, for the baby's sake? Marilyn closed her eyes and prayed. "God don't let me mess this one up."

Marilyn was having a meeting with Daryl, Lauren and Karen. "I want to let you all know how much you all mean to me. You have not only been the best employees ever, but you have all been my best friends. I couldn't have made it through the last several months without you all. Thank you."

She patted her now very extended stomach. She was seven months pregnant and felt like she would burst any day. She had gained weight in just about every place a body could. Even her feet looked like they had gained a couple of pounds. Everyone in the office called her the roly-poly of Midwest Viking. It didn't help that she ate every piece of food that came her way.

"Our big day has come. Tonight we'll have our Grand Opening. You have all done such a fine job that I don't know what to say. Without you, we never could have pulled this off so quickly. Thank you so much for everything." She dabbed at her eyes. "I ought to buy stock in tissues. I've never cried so much in my life until I moved here." They all laughed. "Is there anything that needs to be taken care of that you can think of?"

Lauren was the first to answer. "The security is set in place and the jewels are already displayed. I've taken care of it all. I'm just waiting for the Grand Opening."

Daryl laughed. "Well, there's nothing I can think of. If there were, we'd all be in big trouble. The roof would probably fall in on our heads."

"Employment is full and everyone is already setting up. I think everything is ready Marilyn." They were all smiling at her.

"Well then, I guess there's nothing else. You can leave and I'll see you at the Opening." They hugged and left the office. Marilyn walked over to the window and placed her hand on the glass. It was warm outside. The temperature reaching in the eighties.

Marilyn turned, picked up her purse and approached her door. Daryl was waiting outside, tapping his boot. "Daryl, I thought you left."

"Nope, wanted to talk with you. You have a second?"

"Like I would tell you no. Come in. What were you doing standing in the hallway?"

"Thinking about what I had to say. How are things with David?"

Marilyn gave a dry laugh. "Well, he's now walking with a cane. Apparently he wants to work things out, but I don't know if I want to anymore." Marilyn looked away from Daryl. He could read her so easily.

"Darlin, if you love him, give him a chance. We all react differently and granted David went a bit overboard, but if you can find it in your heart to forgive him, then try. David's a good man."

"All you men stick together don't you?"

"Who you been talkin too, Jax?"

"Who else? He pretty much said the same thing."

"Smart man. What do you have to lose?"

"My dignity, what's left of it."

"Is your pride so important? Or are you just scared?"

Marilyn didn't answer. She looked out the window. "What if he does it again?"

"Then you know you did all you could and you kick his sorry butt out of your house."

Marilyn laughed and turned back to Daryl. "You're right. Give me another day. I want to make it through tonight without any disasters. Okay?"

"Agreed. Come on. I'll walk you out."

Marilyn let Daryl walk her out to her car. She waived bye and climbed in. It was time. Not only to open the store but to hopefully get her life back in order.

She drove carefully down the valley to the house and then turned into the drive. Parking in the back she walked through the kitchen. She listened for any voices and heard none so she quickly walked upstairs to her room.

She'd bought a dress especially for tonight. Marilyn opened the closet and pulled out the long red dress. It was a maternity dress, but Hillary had assured her it was appropriate for the opening.

Marilyn slipped it over her head and let it slide down over her body, encompassing her stomach. The back was open and draped low, down her spine. Marilyn pulled her hair up and pinned it high letting small tendrils fall around her face.

She looked in the mirror and smiled. The dress did look beautiful. It showed her pregnancy to everyone, but appeared elegant also. She looked even more so pregnant than before.

Marilyn heard the doorbell. "Must be the driver." She quickly picked up her handbag and turned off the room light. As she walked down the hall, pictures of David and his family watched her. Yes, one day her son's picture would grace the hall also.

She held onto the banister and slowly walked down the steps, thankful the driver wasn't still ringing the bell. As she stepped onto the bottom step, she saw Jax. "Jax, what are you doing here?"

"Hillary asked me to come by and pick you up. You look beautiful."

"Are you sure it's not too much? I look like a whale." She giggled.

"No you don't. You look stunning." Jax smiled. "Ready?"

"No sense in waiting any longer. Let's go." Marilyn handed Jax her wrap and he draped it across her arms.

"How did I get so lucky to be able to walk in with the most beautiful woman on my arm? I'll have every man jealous." He wiggled his eyes. "Maybe it will make the women throw themselves at my feet."

"It probably will. Come on my Lord. We have an opening to attend."

They laughed and Jax helped her in the car. "This may be your last ride in this jag, dear. It's hard enough to get you in and out now. Another week, and you'll just have to stay in there."

"Are you saying I'm getting fat?"

"Definitely not. Just pleasantly plump." Jax jumped out of the way of her swinging fist.

They drove through the streets of Sherry, the lights of the bay illuminating the horizon. Marilyn closed her eyes and listened to the winds moan through the pines as they drove down the wooded streets toward the stone. When they pulled up front, Marilyn was surprised at the turnout. It was beautiful. The front was lit up and you could see straight in through the windows. The bright chandelier was shining down on the workers. She wished David could have seen the opening. Before Jax could get out, she put her hand on his arm. "Thank you, Jax, for everything. I've loved our times together, you're a wonderful friend."

"I'll always be here for you."

"I know."

Jax took her hand and escorted her through the entrance. It was breathtaking. She could never have imagined how wonderful it would be. She had worked so hard all year on the store and now was the time they had all been waiting for. She looked around and everyone was watching her. "Congratulations, you have all done a wonderful job." Everyone laughed and applauded.

Hillary and Dave saw her and came directly over. "Darling, you look beautiful."

Dave kept hold of Marilyn's hand. "It's just about that time. Are you ready for the crowd?"

"Yes, I saw the cars lined up outside." She was nervous. She had never opened her own store before. It was so different when you weren't responsible for its success.

"When Hillary gets back over here, we'll open the store together." He leaned close to her ear. "You really do look wonderful, Marilyn. We're very proud of you."

"Thank you. I'm so glad I have you two." She squeezed his hand back.

Dave turned to Jax and they began to talk. Marilyn looked around in amazement. Everything was perfect. She so wished David could be here. The baby started moving around in her stomach and she placed her hand over it. She applied a little pressure like Dr. Fry showed her and the baby stopped.

Hillary walked over. "Are you feeling well, Marilyn? I saw you touching your stomach." Hillary placed her hand on Marilyn and laughed. "Wow, he's really moving tonight. He must be excited about the opening."

"Either that or he's reacting to my excitement." Marilyn smiled. "Come on, let's open the doors."

The four of them walked to the doors and unlocked them. Security stepped aside and people started entering, one after another, couples and families. Marilyn smiled and gripped Hillary's hand. Her dreams were coming true with the store; it was a hit.

The fourth floor was held for the dinner and dancing. All private guests were already up there so they headed up, too. Marilyn took one look back and relaxed. The opening couldn't have gone any smoother. The doors opened up to the dining area. There were fifty tables set up. Most were already taken. They walked to the front of the room and found theirs.

Dave asked Hillary to dance and they left Marilyn and Jax with Karen and her husband. "Where's Daryl and Lauren?"

"They're on the dance floor. They couldn't keep their feet still. We decided to sit this one out." Karen laughed. "I haven't had this much fun since the Dallas store opened. It has turned out great. We're one hell of a team, Marilyn."

"I know. It's turned out wonderfully." The dance ended and everyone returned to the table. She watched as Daryl helped Lauren into her chair. She hoped they came to care for each other. They were wonderful people.

They were enjoying their drinks when another song started. Dave leaned across the table and took Marilyn's hand. "Come and dance with me, Marilyn, this is your big night."

Marilyn shook her head. "Oh no, I can't. I'm too big. I'd look like a beached whale out there."

"Marilyn, I must insist. You do not look like a beached whale. You are talking about my grandchild and I don't want you to say that again. Now get up and come and dance with me." He demanded.

"Oh, all right. You better not let me fall." She took Dave hand and let him lead her onto the dance floor. It wasn't as difficult as she thought. Dave knew exactly what he was doing. She felt comfortable and safe dancing with him.

The song ended and they headed back. Mr. Vandergriff stopped them right as they exited the dance floor. "I've been looking for you this evening, Ms. Rogers. You've done a wonderful job." Marilyn wasn't paying much attention to what he was saying. She saw a commotion at the back of the room and was watching to see what was going on. There were some people stepping out of the elevator and she couldn't see who it was. Then they moved out of her line of vision. She felt dizzy all of a sudden and she couldn't breath. There standing in front of the elevator door was David—her David.

Mr. Vandergriff turned to see what Marilyn was looking at. He saw the younger David standing there. He looked over and saw Dave looking at his son and then glance to Marilyn. She looked like she was going to faint. Both men grabbed for her and took her to her seat.

Hillary saw how pale Marilyn was. "Dave, how dare you dance her so fast that she became pale. Look at her." Dave looked at her and pointed his head towards the back. Hillary saw David coming their way. She gasped. "Don't worry, Marilyn, we'll take care of everything."

Dave left Marilyn and stopped his son. "Hello, David. I thought we agreed you would stay home tonight. She's not ready to see you. This is Marilyn's night and I don't want to see her upset. I'm glad you're here, but I don't want you to cause her any pain this evening. I think you should leave."

"Don't worry, Dad. I know it's her show. She's done a wonderful job. I'm proud of her. I won't bother her this evening. Where's Mom?"

"She's with Marilyn. Stay here and I'll get her for you."

"Don't worry about it. I'm going to go over to the table with The Vandergriffs. I'll talk to her in a little while." David left his father standing there.

Dave walked back to Marilyn and Hillary. "He's planning on staying. Do you want to stay or leave? It's up to you dear."

"I'm not leaving the opening." She looked across the room to where David was standing with a group of men, leaning on his cane.

"Fine, but if you change your mind, I want to know." Dave said.

"Don't worry, everything will be fine." Marilyn sat back down and watched the couples on the dance floor.

Jax turned to her and took her hand. "I'm proud of you."

Marilyn laughed. "Nothing and no one is running me away from my own opening."

Jax stood. "Then dance with me." He held his hand out to her.

Marilyn took his hand and stood. "I would love to." Jax lead her out on the dance floor. Jax was large enough that she didn't feel like she outweighed him as he moved them gracefully across the floor.

She found herself looking across the room from time to time watching for David. He was always in conversation with someone. Then she couldn't find him. She turned her head and looked towards her own table, but still didn't see him.

Jax stopped in the middle of the song. She looked at him and smiled. "What is it?"

"May I cut in?"

Marilyn stood paralyzed. That voice, it was David's. Jax looked at her questioning. She knew Jax would refuse David if she told him to. She took a deep breath and nodded. The last thing she wanted was a scene. Jax stepped aside and David moved in front of her.

"Thank you." His dark eyes gazed into hers. She tried to tell her body not to react to him, but it didn't listen. Goose bumps raised on her skin and her heart started beating faster to a beat all its own. David took her hand in his and then laid his other hand on her waist. It was the first time he'd touched her since the accident.

Marilyn couldn't move. She stood immobile and swallowed several times. Calm down, she told herself. It's only a dance, but her heart knew it was so much more.

David moved and Marilyn followed. It was the same as the first meeting and dinner with The Vandergriffs when David had held her in his arms and they'd danced under the moonlight. The same night that had changed their lives forever.

She couldn't help but rest her head on his shoulder. Their bodies seemed made for one another, moving in perfect harmony. She felt his hand move from her waist to lie half on her dress leaving his fingers lying on the bare skin of her back. Marilyn leaned even more so into David. His touch was all she'd wanted. "I'm sorry, Marilyn about everything."

Marilyn stiffened and lifted her head. "David, now's not the time, please."

"I know, but I couldn't hold you and not tell you I'm sorry."

"Words have come to not mean a whole lot to me, David."

"You mean, you'll never forgive me? There's no hope?" His hand tightened on her back.

Marilyn pushed away from David. "I said I don't want to talk about it here. Don't you understand anything?" She turned and walked away leaving him standing on the dance floor. She didn't care about any embarrassment he may feel at being left standing alone.

Marilyn pushed through the crowd towards the elevator. She would call a taxi. The opening was wonderful and the rest of the night was only

for celebrations. Her celebrating had come to an end. She wouldn't stand here and be the talk of the party.

The doors opened and she stepped inside. As the doors were closing a hand reached out and stopped them. She started to tell them to let go but saw it was Daryl. "What are you doing, Daryl? Go back to the party."

Daryl stepped into the elevator. "I've had enough of this party and saw you were leaving. Mind if I go with you?"

Marilyn knew there was more to it, but didn't care to talk. "Fine but don't ask me any questions I'm not prepared to answer right now. Got it?"

"Sounds perfect to me. Where you headed, Darlin? Any clue?"

"Anywhere but here."

"Mind riding in my pick-up?"

"No, sounds fine as long as you don't drive too crazy. I can't take much bouncing in my condition."

Daryl laughed. "Deal, I'll drive smooth just for you pretty lady."

The bottom floor was filled with customers and Marilyn smiled. It was a hit. They walked through the front door and Daryl handed his ticket to the valet. There wasn't a line, so the truck was brought around quickly.

Daryl had to help Marilyn up in the truck. "Maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all?" He laughed.

"Oh shut up, Daryl and let's go." Marilyn smiled and slammed her door shut. Daryl drove out of town and pulled into a small café.

"Want a cup of coffee?" Daryl looked at Marilyn. "If you'd rather I took you home, I will."

Marilyn shook her head. "No, I'm not ready to face David. He'll probably be there waiting."

"You can't hide forever, Marilyn."

"I know it but I didn't want to have to deal with this tonight. David wouldn't listen. No, he just had to keep on. He made me so mad. All those months, I wanted to talk to him and he wouldn't give me the time of day and now he wants to talk."

Daryl sat quietly letting her calm down. "I think you should go home. You need to get this settled once and for all. Either forgive the man or get on with your life. One of the two."

"All right." Marilyn sat back and closed her eyes. They would be home before she knew it and she wanted to be ready. What would she say to him? What did she want to say to him?

The house came into view and Marilyn sat up. "Thanks Daryl, for getting me out of there. I appreciate it."

"Anytime, Darlin. Just give the man a chance to explain." Daryl opened his door. "Don't even think about trying to get out. Wait for me."

Marilyn opened the door as Daryl approached. "Think you can't get me out of this truck, big boy."

“Sure thing, mam.” Daryl easily lifted Marilyn into his arms and carried her up the steps.

“Put me down, Daryl. Good grief!” Daryl put her on her feet and laughed. “I’ll see you Monday, Marilyn. Call me if you need anything.”

“I will. Thank you.” She leaned forward and gave Daryl a kiss on the cheek.

CHAPTER TWELVE

She turned, placed her hand on the doorknob and opened the door. The hall light was illuminated, but David's hall was dark. Marilyn gave a sigh of relief. She turned to go up the stairs but heard Hillary call her name.

Marilyn turned towards the living room and took a deep breath. "God give me strength." She took one step then another until she was in front of the living room. Hillary and Dave were sitting on the couch. Marilyn walked into the living room relieved that David was no where in sight.

As she walked in, she sighed. David was leaning against the fireplace with a glass in his hand, watching her, appraising her from head to toe. She looked away from David to Hillary. "Yes, you called me?"

Hillary raised her brows. "I wanted to tell you good night, dear."

Marilyn smiled but knew Hillary wanted her to talk to David. "Thank you, but I think I'm going to bed."

David stepped away from the fireplace and reached for her. "We need to talk, Marilyn."

Marilyn jerked her arm out of David's reach. "Well, just because you're ready to talk doesn't mean I am. I'll let you know when I'm ready to listen to you."

Marilyn turned on her toe, and left everyone watching after her. Her back was aching, and she tried to rub it as she held onto the banister walking up the stairs.

David turned to his parents. "I've really messed up this time haven't I?" He turned away and looked into the fireplace. "Do you think she'll ever forgive me?"

Dave looked his son straight in the eye. "David, it's up to you. That lady stood by your side during the most tragic time of your life and all you did was shun her. Still, Marilyn loves you. She'll forgive you, but it might take a while. She has a lot of pain to get over."

"Dad, I'm going to talk to her. I can't leave it like this another night."

Dave nodded. "Fine, but don't get her too upset. It wouldn't be good for the baby."

David nodded. As he was leaving the room, Dave stopped him. "Here." He tossed something at him and David caught it. He looked down

in his hand and his heart dropped. The ring. She'd given his father the ring. How was he going to straighten this out?

David walked up the stairs trying to think of what to say. How could he make her understand and forgive him? He knew this was his last chance to make Marilyn see how much he loved her.

As David stepped on the top step, he saw something on the floor and gasped. "Marilyn!" David ran to where Marilyn was bent on the floor with her hand over her stomach. "Darling, what happened?"

Marilyn looked over his shoulder and David turned to look. Cheryl was standing in the corner watching, her hand over her mouth. "What did you do?" David demanded.

Cheryl started shaking her head. "I didn't mean to hurt her. I tried to tell her that we were going to be married but she wouldn't listen. I tried to shake her, make her see and she just fell." Her voice showed no remorse.

David pulled Marilyn close to his chest. "Get out of here Cheryl! Now! I had better never see your face again if you know what's good for you."

Hillary and Dave rushed up the stairs. "What is it?" Hillary gasped.

David threw his head in Cheryl's direction. "Get her out of here and call an ambulance. Quick!"

Hillary grabbed Cheryl's arm. "I don't know why you're up here, but I'm warning you now. Get out of my house and don't ever come near my family again."

Cheryl lowered her head and raced down the stairs. Hillary heard the front door slam shut and turned to David.

Dave hung up the phone. "The ambulance is on its way. David, let's get her downstairs."

As Dave made Marilyn comfortable on the couch, David sat next to her and Hillary knelt on the floor beside her. "It will be okay, dear. The ambulance is on its way. Tell me. Are you having contractions?"

Marilyn was biting her lip in pain. "Yes. It just hit." She gasped when another contraction took over. She looked up at David. He was holding her gently in his arms. "I tried to call for you, but I couldn't. I couldn't." Tears were flowing down her cheeks.

David held her tightly. "I've got you. Don't worry, everything's going to be fine. I promise. Hang on, Darling." Tears fell unheeded down David's cheeks.

Dave rushed to the front doors at the sound of sirens. The paramedics entered the house with a gurney and Dave laid her gently on the bed. David moved in front of his father. "I'll be right here with you."

The paramedics looked at David. "I'm sorry sir, but you'll have to follow."

Marilyn looked frantically at David. David swallowed. "I'll be right behind them sweetheart. Trust me. I know you don't have any reason to, but please don't give up on me now."

Marilyn nodded as the paramedics lifted the gurney and carried it to the ambulance. The contractions came one right after the other and Marilyn tried not to cry out with the pain. Something was wrong. She cried, no there couldn't be anything wrong with her baby. She prayed, God please keep my baby safe. Don't let anything happen to him.

The ride to the hospital was quick, and in a blur. The paramedics had inserted an IV and were giving her some type of medicine to slow the contractions down. It didn't seem to be working.

They arrived at the hospital and rushed her into a special room filled with monitors and equipment. Her doctor popped his head around the door and shouted orders to some of the nurses in the room. Marilyn looked for David but didn't see him.

She grabbed a nurse. "Please find David Lang. He's my child's father. He should be in the hall or waiting room."

She left the room and Marilyn waited hoping David would come around the corner. The nurses had set her up on a heart monitor and started adding more medicine to the IV. She started feeling light headed and the nurse said it was normal. The medicine was to stop the contractions.

Marilyn closed her eyes and tried to relax as the nurse had ordered. She could only focus on the beeping of the machines and the steady humming of the baby's heart. Tears fell from her eyes. Marilyn didn't bother wiping them away. She sniffed and kept her eyes closed. It was better not to see what was going on than to watch.

She felt a hand on the side of her face and opened her eyes. "David, you came."

"Of course. I had to set Jax outside the doors to hold my father and mother back, but I made it." He pulled a chair up to her bed.

Marilyn laughed. "I can just see Jax now. Dave and Hillary threatening to disown him if he didn't let them through."

David laughed. "Right, but Jax can hold his own." David wiped her tears away. "Pain going away? You look better now."

Marilyn nodded. "I don't know what happened. My back started hurting and then all of a sudden it just hit."

"It's my fault. I should have known Cheryl was up to something. She'd been acting so defensive. I put you and our child in jeopardy. Please forgive me. I can't live without you in my life. I was such a fool."

Marilyn nodded. "I forgive you."

David brushed his lips over hers. "I love you."

Marilyn sniffed and tried to hold back her tears. "I've been waiting a long time to hear those three little words."

"Well, you won't have to wait any longer. I love you."

"I love you, too."

David pulled the ring out of his pocket. "Will you wear this again?"

Marilyn bit her lip, trying not to cry. She nodded. "Yes." David slipped it on her finger and Marilyn watched it sparkle in the light. Just like the love that had new hope.

The doctor walked into the room. "Well, you've had a rough night, Marilyn. Thankfully your contractions are stopping, but you might not be so lucky next time. You're going to have to take it easy these next two months."

"Yes, sir." The doctor looked at the monitor. "Looks like you're going to be in here for the rest of the night. I want to keep an eye on you. If everything continues to slow down, then you can leave in the morning. You need to think about possibly quitting work the next two months. Your contractions came on too quick for my liking."

David looked at the doctor. "Whatever you think, doctor."

"I like this young man. Where have you been hiding him?" The doctor left the room.

David smiled. "He likes me."

Marilyn laughed. "Right, just because he thinks you can control me."

"Well, I think I just might have to. I've got to keep you and our baby safe." David moved his hand to encompass her stomach. The baby jerked and David yanked his hand away. "Did that hurt?"

"No, he's just trying to get acquainted with his father." Marilyn said.

David placed his hand back over the baby. "I don't plan on missing another second."

Marilyn watched David's eyes as they misted over watching the baby move. God had showered her with another blessing this day. How much more could He bless her if she only threw all her cares upon Him?

Marilyn laid her hand over David's. Thank you God for all you've seen fit to give me. Marilyn closed her eyes and smiled as she dreamed of her and David and all the happiness soon to come to their lives.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Kimberly Roberts lives in Grand Prairie, Texas between Fort Worth and Dallas. She's been an avid reader since she was young of many genres, especially romance. Her favorite authors were always Jane Austen and Janette Oke. Kimberly writes Romance, Young Adult, and Inspirational. *Everlasting*, is her first published book and she's thrilled to have it published in the Ebook Industry through DiskUs.

Kimberly reviews books for several authors and publishing companies. "It keeps me on top of the publishing industry and I see what the publishing houses are looking for." Marilyn Nesbitt with DiskUs was the first to ask Kim for a review and it started growing from there. Recently interviewed by Peter Gumble of "The Wall Street Journal", Peter wrote, "Kim is a revolutionary arbiter." <http://kimgaona.com>

Foremost in her life, are Kimberly's husband Richard, of twelve years and her two children, Richie and Kristen. Richard has been a wonderful supporter of Kim's work. When she needed time to write, he would gladly spend time with the children and allow her her time needed. Her children think it's "Cool!" that she's published.

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