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Dirty Little
LIES



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TAYLOR

The destruction of a historical landmark sparks a treacherous chain of events...and Reed Harris's life isn't all that's in jeopardy.

Dirty Little Lies

Tawny Taylor

Tall, dark and sinfully seductive, Bain Kavanagh won't stop until he gets his ex-fiancée, Reed Harris, back in his life and his bed. Danger and unbridled desire keep her there, for now. But with gun-toting treasure hunters thwarting their search for answers, Bain's resolve, his strength and his love will be tested.

A sweet little old lady drags freelance writer Reed Harris into a world of dark intrigue. Not only does Reed have merciless killers chasing her heels, but one ruthless male pursuing her heart. Spurred on by a lifelong dream of becoming an investigative reporter, Reed casts aside caution to help Bain solve a deadly mystery. Unfortunately, she has no idea what she's in for. It'll take more than her sharp wits and a nail file to get her out of it.

Warning, this title contains the following: explicit sex, graphic language, mild violence...and a man with a killer body.

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Acknowledgments

To the wonderful people at the Plymouth Historical Museum.
Thank you for your generous help.

HOME, 10th April, 1881.

Well, my dear Bertie, here I am again in your postbox. It's not a fortnight since I wrote you that great long letter, and yet you see I have news enough to make another formidable budget. They say that the art of letter-writing has been lost; but if quantity may atone for quality, you must confess that (for your sins) you have a friend who has retained it.

~The Stark Munro Letters by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930)

Chapter One

Reed Harris had received many a bizarre gift on Valentine's Day, but there was no question that this one had them all beat. A scrap of twisted metal. From a little old lady. Who just happened to drop dead in the middle of her living room.

What girl wouldn't wish for that?

She, for one.

Between the horror of seeing her neighbor collapse and die in the middle of her living room, being questioned as the prime suspect of the murder, and suffering the humiliation of dragging her exhausted, bedraggled self to her very ex-fiancé's house on the other side of town, she was ready to crawl into the nearest cave and live the rest of her life in private misery.

But she couldn't do that, dammit.

Why? Because the old woman who'd just gulped her last breath on Reed's living-room floor had trusted her with a secret, and Reed simply couldn't let a dead person down. Plus, the reporter in her was dying to know what the intriguing scrap of twisted metal was. She just knew she'd find a great story in there somewhere. A story that might finally earn her a better gig than editing the obituaries or freelancing for a magazine no one had ever heard of.

But, oh the agony of what she would be forced to endure.

Dreading the cocky grin sure to greet her when the door opened, she dragged her feet over the welcome mat one last time then lifted her fist to knock. She heard his approach after the third rap and steeled herself for the exchange that would no doubt be profoundly unpleasant.

The black-painted door swung open, and her ex-fiancé, Bain Kavanagh, greeted her with a silent tip of the head and a pair of quirked eyebrows. The shadow of a smile drifted across his face as he motioned

her inside. He reached a thickly muscled arm behind her to push the door closed.

She shuffled to one side, feeling small and vulnerable and extremely awkward standing next to him. Had his foyer always been this tiny? Or more appropriately, had Bain always been so huge?

Silly question. Of course he had been.

She'd just forgotten. Somehow. As unlikely as that might be.

It had been a couple years since she'd been this close to her former fiancé, a man who could easily be the epitome of the Black Irish, save the deeply tanned skin and sharply hewn cheekbones he'd inherited from his half-Ottawa grandfather.

She'd caught a glimpse or two of the gorgeous heartbreaker as he'd either been coming to visit his grandmother or leaving, but she'd made sure they were never within striking distance. Even after all this time, there was no telling what she might do. She might kick the jerk into the next county...or more likely loop her arms around his neck and kiss him into the next galaxy.

There was nothing good to come of either one, so—being sane—she'd kept a safe distance. Until now.

Bain being Bain, he didn't say a word as she stood there. He waited for her to break the uncomfortable silence hanging like a towering thundercloud over their heads.

"I-I'm sorry about your grandmother," she stuttered.

Sweet Mother Mary, that boy was big.

"Thanks." A perfect specimen of sinew and muscle—grade A prime beef—he motioned to the hallway. "I'll make coffee." He waited for her to move toward the kitchen before he fell into step behind her.

As they walked, his breath gusted her nape and the heat of awareness smoothed up and down her back. She stopped suddenly, her heel caught in the loops of a throw rug. She half-expected—Half-hoped? Certainly not!—he'd press his entire length against her back.

Flustered, she kicked her kitten heel free from the tangled fringe and continued into the kitchen. "I know you loved your grandmother very much." One hand in her jacket pocket, she circled the table in the eating

nook, putting as much distance as possible between them. Thankfully, Bain headed in the opposite direction, toward the narrow galley kitchen.

Relief. Oxygen. Ahhhh.

Suddenly weary, she slumped into a chair and watched the man fill the coffeepot with tap water. Caffeine. Yes. That's exactly what she needed. Although mainlining it might be the only way to get it into her system fast enough. Her eyelids were so heavy it took concerted effort to keep them lifted. How many hours had it been since she'd rolled out of her cozy bed this morning? Eighteen? Twenty?

How long would it be before she headed back home? Or more importantly, did she have the energy to get herself home safely? If not, where would she sleep? In Bain's bed?

A rush of sensual hunger shot to her belly. She might have to sleep in Bain's bed.

As quickly as that thought registered in her head, she shook it away. She was an idiot. Pathetic. This wasn't a social call. Now was not the time to think about rekindling old flames. She was here on an errand, and then—exhausted or not—she was heading home, to her own bed.

And her living room.

And the horrific memories of what had happened there a few hours ago.

A shiver zigzagged up her spine.

She really didn't want to be home alone tonight. But, despite Bain's obvious physical gifts—including a physique that put some professional bodyguards to shame and a strength of presence that made everyone in a room aware of him, male or female—he was not her idea of the perfect bodyguard. He was far more likely to leave the body to be guarded in worse shape than the bad guys.

Kind of like trusting a wolf to watch over the henhouse.

While she mentally ticked off the many things about Bain Kavanagh that she despised, her fingers mapped the intricate swirls curling around the metal piece in her pocket. She suspected the bizarre thing, about the length and thickness of her pinky, was some kind of key—an unusual

one. Like nothing she'd ever seen before. She had no idea what it might open.

"Yeah. I loved that woman more than she ever knew." Leaving the coffeepot to gurgle and burp, he turned to pull open the refrigerator. "Do you still take your coffee with cream and sugar?" His gaze met hers as he peered over the appliance's open door.

Another wave of erotic tension wound through her body. This whole thing was just too inconvenient. Too uncomfortable. Too...painful. She wanted to get out of there, her promise be damned. "Yes," she answered, fisting the metal piece and pulling it from her pocket. She unfurled her fingers. "Look, I came here tonight because I promised your grandmother I would give you something. She handed me this before she died. So, here you go." Her arm extended, she watched at least a half-dozen emotions play over his features before his face settled back to normal.

The milk and coffee forgotten, he strode across the kitchen and plucked the object from her hand, inspecting it closer. "I've always suspected there was more to this."

"Then you know what it is?"

She was not going to react to the warmth spreading across her chest. Oh no, she was not. Of course, it would be much easier to deal with the heat if he didn't stand so close. Yes, tons better. Because there wouldn't be any heat at all.

But didn't he look sooooo good? Rumpled, like he'd just rolled out of bed. It was simply not fair how great he looked.

He inched closer, dragging with him a gust of intoxicating air.

Like the shameless dork she was, she desperately drank in the scent, relishing the tangy aroma. She'd always loved his cologne. *Obsession*. Back when they'd been dating, she used to spray it on her clothes, her pillow, her...self.

Another whiff of Obsession-scented air drifted her way. Desperate to hide from the memories the scent exhumed, she turned her head. Life was so unfair. Why couldn't she be stuffed-up with a cold so she couldn't smell anything? Maybe if she held her breath...or didn't breathe through her nose?

“No, I don’t know what it is. Yet. My grandmother gave me something years ago, for my twelfth birthday, and she made me promise not to tell anyone.” His attention focused on the metal piece in his hand. He ran a tapered finger down its length.

Those hands. Fingers. Oh, the memories. Her mouth went dry.

He continued, “When I was younger, I thought it was just part of a child’s game. But the older I got, the more I realized it was no game.”

“What do you think it is then?” she whispered, her eyes focused on his hands, her brain swamped in nostalgia, recollections of the wicked pleasures those fingers had brought her. Why oh why couldn’t she focus on the here and now? Why did the memories, painful-sweet, have to haunt her, even as they talked about a dear, innocent old woman who was now dead? Murdered.

He gently set the key on the table and crossed thick arms over a chest that renewed her faith in angels. “Not sure. My grandmother was a very private person, didn’t talk much about anything. There was a story my grandfather had told me once. He worked in construction and claimed something had been found when they’d torn down the old Daisy factory in downtown Plymouth. But I can’t say for sure his story had anything to do with these metal pieces or not. My grandmother could’ve gotten these from her parents or from my grandfather or...who knows? She could’ve found them on the side of the road.”

“You think? But they must have been important or she wouldn’t have made me promise to come here...” Their gazes met and tangled, and Reed swore the air in the room crackled with electricity. She needed to get out of there now. Forcing herself to look down at the metal thing, rather than at the man who had pulverized her heart two years ago, she jumped to her feet. “I have to go. It’s late.”

It was still there between them—the wanting. The attraction. The lust. Physical attraction she could accept, to a point. Plenty of men on this earth made her heart drum against her ribcage, some she’d never even met, had only seen on a movie screen or in her *Playgirl* centerfolds. Lust was only lust. But damn if she was going to let a little sexual temptation drag her back down Heartbreak Highway.

Two years ago this man had decided she wasn't good enough for him. No, he hadn't said those words exactly. But she could read between the lines—especially when the writing was in glaring neon.

He'd left her for another woman. A woman with the world's most perfect body, perfect face and perfect life. What's-her-face, Miss Perfect, was from the right side of the tracks, a family with a name, an Ivy League education and a trust fund.

He'd be slumming if he came back to Reed now. *Oh, the shame*, she silently scoffed.

He stepped to the right, blocking her path through the dining nook. "What about the coffee?"

"Another time. It's late," she said to the most amazing pecs this side of heaven. "Both of us need to get up for work in the morning." When he didn't move aside, she twisted to inch her way between his bulk and the wall. She got exactly one step before he stopped her with a hand on her shoulder.

Her gaze slowly climbed to his face.

"Wait," he said, dark eyes pleading.

Her brain screamed to keep going, but her body refused to obey. "No." She shuffled another six inches to the right but he blocked her from going farther.

"If my grandmother sent you here, there was a good reason for it. And if she gave you that"—he motioned toward the metal thing, still sitting on the table—"then she wanted you to have it. Not me."

"No, she wanted me to bring it to you. And I have. So I'm going home now. Goodnight. And again, I'm sorry about your grandmother." This time she tried to shove her way past, but the big lug refused to budge.

Why was he being so difficult? She was being nice.

Annoyed, and deciding nice was not working, she slanted her most threatening mean eyes at him.

He stepped to the side and turned, sandwiching her between six feet four inches of wicked Black Irish temptation and the wall. He knew she was still attracted to him, and he was taking advantage of her weakness, manipulating her. Bastard!

She really, really hated him. Really. Kinda. Oh hell...

"You think it's smart to go home?" he challenged.

Glowering, she crammed her hands between her tingly breasts and his chest. Her nipples strained against her bra, tight and hard. "Yes. Now move, dammit. I'm not hanging around here so you can harass me—"

"Harass? Is that what you think I'm doing?" He palmed her cheek. His thumb grazed her lower lip, sending annoying little zaps across her face and down her spine. "I've missed you, baby. More than you know."

Her heart dropped to her toes.

He didn't say he missed her. No, no, no. She hadn't heard him say those words. She was hallucinating.

Staring at a set of perfect lips, she sucked in a shallow gulp of thin air and murmured, "Time for me—"

He stepped backward, and the oxygen finally returned to the room. "My grandmother was murdered. Someone *shot* her." He strode to the table, snatched the metal piece up and waved it at her. "Don't you think it's possible whoever killed her is after this?"

Fully prepared to get while the getting was good, she turned and shrugged. "Sure, but now you have it. Your problem." To her own ears she sounded like a callous bitch. But she couldn't afford to get involved in this...whatever it was. Adventure? Mystery?

She was no Stephanie Plum. Or even Nancy Drew. She didn't even own a magnifying glass.

Forget about her lack of qualifications as a sleuth, there was the minor issue of the heartbreak barreling her way like a runaway bull if she didn't get a grip. Now. She so did not like getting gored in the ass. The scars from last time still hadn't healed.

The safety of her backside her prime concern, she rushed down the hallway, making a break for the front door.

"Doesn't mean you're safe from them," he called after her.

Of course, she'd be safe from the killers and from Bain if she left now. Right? She halted at the door, her right hand curled around the doorknob. Did he know something she didn't? "Why not?"

"If whoever shot my grandmother was still in the building when she came to you for help, they could have watched her give this to you. Do you think someone who shot an old lady would think twice about attacking you to get what they want—or find out where you took it?"

He had a point.

The glimmer of triumph in his eyes, he continued, "Anyone who shoots an elderly woman who couldn't hurt an ant is apt to do anything. What do you think they'll do next? And to whom?"

A possibility she'd been trying not to think about. Until now.

Removing her hand from the doorknob, she mirrored his pose, arms crossed over her chest, feet planted shoulder width apart on the polished wood floor. She added a hip thrust to one side, a touch of attitude. "Yeah? Well...why didn't the Big Terrible Bad Guy take what they came for before she left her apartment?"

"Maybe he didn't have the chance."

"Uh..." Was she really in danger? Or was Bain just using scare tactics to manipulate her into staying with him? Could he be that underhanded? That cruel? He never had been intentionally mean before, not in the year and a half that they'd dated. Well, except for that whole breakup thing.

Doubt sapping the conviction from her voice, she reasoned, "The police are still investigating. I doubt the bad guy would risk coming near the building, at least for the next few days. It'll be flooded with detectives, crime scene investigators, whatever they're called."

"Do the authorities know about the key?" Once again, he closed the distance between them.

Once again, she found it impossible to inhale.

Lust. It's only harmless lust. "Key? Is that what it is?" She shook her head. "I thought it might be. No. The police don't know anything. She made me promise not to tell anyone but you."

"Then she believed the only one you could trust is me." He reached around her and pushed the deadbolt into place. It struck home with a metallic clack.

The spark of sensual energy charged the air between them. Her spine stiffened.

"I'm not going to let you leave until I know it's safe." He took her hand and pulled her toward the stairs.

Oh no! If she went up there. With him. She couldn't say what might happen next. She twisted her arm, jerking it free from his grip. "My job."

Undeterred, he took her by the elbow this time and pulled her up the first step. "You can do your job anywhere. Call in sick. Tell them you need to work from home for a few days."

She could do that. But was it necessary? She was so tired, worn out by the shock of the evening's events. Confused by her conflicting emotions. Muddle-headed. She didn't know what to do.

Maybe it was better to play it safe? Even if playing it safe meant jumping from the proverbial frying pan into the enormous bonfire?

"This is silly," she argued, clomping up the stairs behind him. "We don't know if that little scrap of metal has anything to do with your grandmother's murder. We don't know if anyone is after me. We just plain don't know anything."

"Exactly my point." On the landing, he turned to her. "Do you really want to take that kind of chance? Or would you rather play it safe and..." his eyes glimmering, he motioned toward the guest room, "...get comfy in a big, cozy bed and listen to a story?"

She knew what he was up to, irritating man. Plan A, the seduction approach, had weakened her resistance. Plan B, the scare tactic, had nearly wiped out her defenses, but he still hadn't convinced her to stay. He was moving onto Plan C, also known as "playing to the reporter in her".

She didn't stand a chance against all three strategies combined—seduction, taking advantage of her fears and tempting her with intrigue. The white flag of surrender went up. "What story?"

"It's a treasure hunt," he declared, sparkly eyed.

"Aw, come on. A treasure hunt?"

He tipped her chin up with an index finger, forcing her gaze to meet his. "You're curious. I can see it." His eyes warm, his expression playful, he poked the tip of her nose. "Let's go. We'll get you all snugly warm and then I'll tell you everything I know."

This close to throwing herself at him to discharge some pent-up sexual tension, she scrambled for one last excuse to leave. "But I don't have my stuff, my computer, my makeup." Why oh why did she have to be so damned attracted to the man? He was bad for her. For too many reasons to count.

Triumphant, he pushed the nearest door open and stepped to the side to let her enter first. "We'll worry about those things tomorrow. You can sleep in a pair of my sweats." He rested a hand on her shoulder as she wiggled past. When she hesitated in the doorway, his hand slid up to her neck. His fingers curled loosely around one side, fingertips gently massaging the knots at the base. "I've always told you, you look beautiful without makeup. Besides, all we're going to do is sleep. Who wears makeup to bed?"

We? All we're going to do is sleep?

She stared into eyes so dark and fathomless she simply couldn't wrench her gaze away. "Quit with the charm. It isn't going to work," she heard herself mutter.

His smile made her knees wobble. "Be right back." Humming a song she didn't recognize, he turned away, heading for a door across the hall.

"Kay." Eyes glued to the world's nicest ass, she half-walked, half-bobbled into the room and flopped on the bed. She was tired. Completely worn out. Beyond exhausted. Tight knots, no doubt from tonight's stress, in her neck and shoulders throbbed. The start of a migraine was radiating up the back of her skull. She closed her eyes and pressed her fingers to her temples.

"I dumped the coffee, since it doesn't look like either of us is in the mood for caffeine. And I brought your favorite pair of sweats," he announced from the door a minute or two later. He stood framed by the doorway, his ankles crossed, one shoulder propped against the doorframe. Straightening, he gave her a concerned look and hurried across the room. "Are you sick?"

"Just a touch of a headache. You remember how I used to get migraines when I was overtired?"

"I remember." He sat next to her on the bed and nudged her hip with a knee. "Roll over. I remember something else, too."

Oh, he was offering one of his famous Bain Kavanagh back and shoulder rubs. The man had the hands of an angel.

There was only one problem. All too often, one of those backrubs led to other things, things she didn't want to happen. Not tonight. Not ever again. At least not between her and Bain.

"No. I'll be fine. Thanks." Tempted to take him up on his offer, she pulled the clothes out of his hands and headed for the bathroom to change. The second she was behind a closed, locked door, she pulled in a deep breath.

Tonight was going to be agony. There was more chemistry in that bedroom than in a perfume factory.

Than in ten perfume factories.

How would she keep her head together?



It had taken two years. Two agonizing years. But Reed was here. In his home. And he would be damned if she'd leave without giving him the chance to make up for lost time.

His heart ached at the loss of his grandmother. The dear woman, so conniving. So clever! He never would've guessed she had the key all this time. Nor would he have expected she'd give it to Reed moments before dying.

If only that darling, ornery woman had trusted him with all her secrets. Her stubbornness had cost her a dear price—her life.

He felt hollow inside. Empty and cold and even a little angry. Given the chance, he could have protected the key. At least the sweetest woman on earth would still be alive.

Now, Reed was in danger, too. She had no idea how grave the situation was. Not yet. He'd explain what he could as soon as she came out of the bathroom. And then he'd hold her until she fell asleep.

Tonight, there'd be no rest. Not for him. He would protect Reed. And he would safeguard his grandmother's secret. At daybreak, they'd search

for the remaining pieces of the puzzle. Come hell or high water, justice would be meted out to the bastard who'd shot his grandmother. He or she would pay.

No more blood would be shed over this. Not another drop.

Chapter Two

Reed was in heaven and hell, both. And oh, what a wonderfully agonizing place to be.

She was flat on her stomach, the back of her shirt gathered up above her shoulders, and Bain was performing magic with the most gifted hands this side of paradise, rubbing out the kinks and knots with the skill of a professional masseur.

Unfortunately, he was sitting on top of her, his adorable butt parked on the back of her upper thighs. His body's warmth had slowly seeped through her loose cotton sweat pants and was now pounding through her blood vessels, surging between her legs. It took everything in her to lie still. How she ached to roll over, part her legs and beg him to let certain parts of their anatomy become reacquainted.

No no no! Couldn't happen. No.

Why? Well, that was simple enough. Even though she had learned to keep sex and love separate—a basic survival technique—that man didn't deserve a single night with her. Not even a hand job.

Another thing, her life had been so much...simpler without Bain Kavanagh in it. Not so complicated. Complicated was bad. Simple was good.

Boring, but good.

Lonely, but good.

At least her emotions remained on an even keel. She wasn't sailing on the clouds one minute and trudging through the depths of hell the next. Yes, emotional stability was not to be underrated. In the very least, it meant she spent less money on clothes these days because she wasn't binging on chocolate every other day. When they'd been dating, Bain had done serious damage to her waistline, or rather, the insanity he inspired in her had done damage to her waistline.

As if out-of-control emotions and a sense of pride weren't enough reasons for not sleeping with him tonight, there was one final rationale. The very reasonable and mature grounds for not leaping merrily into Bain's bed. She had no time for any kind of a relationship, serious or casual. Not even a spare sixty minutes. Too many other obligations to juggle. She had work. And her second job. Plus the college class she was starting soon. It only met once a week, but she expected to have hours of homework to do every weekend.

So, it was easy to see why she needed to keep her clothes on and why she had to resist the temptation to shove all her well-thought-out arguments aside and go with her libido.

She heaved a sad sigh into the mattress. Would there ever be an end to her nookie dry spell? Or would her nether regions shrivel from disuse?

She could only hope. Might make the lack of sex a little more tolerable.

"Still have your headache?" he asked.

She'd forgotten how deep and sexy his voice was. How the sound sort of vibrated through her body like waves from a dropped pebble in a still pool of water. Ripples that increased in frequency, growing faster, bigger, more urgent...

He had to get off her *now*.

"It's pretty much gone. Thanks." Trapped beneath him, she squirmed, sending him the signal that she'd had enough.

He read her vibe and climbed off, settling next to her on the mattress. "About ready to hear the story now?"

She was just about ready to jump his bones, but the story was a much safer alternative. "Sure." On her back, she folded her arms under her head and gave him an encouraging nod.

He pulled the covers up, tucking her in. Such a sweetie. She couldn't help giving him a great big thank-you smile. Had he always been so attentive? She'd definitely forgotten how wonderful it felt to be pampered.

He shifted into position, reclining against the headboard, scrumptious arms folded over his chest. Long, tapered legs stretched out in front of him, ankles crossed. "The story starts in the late 1800s in

downtown Plymouth, back when the trolleys rolled down dirt roads in the summertime and horse-drawn sleighs were the only way to travel in the winter. There was a church on the outskirts of town. A small church with a very loyal and committed following. Many of the most powerful families in the town belonged to that church, and at the prodding of the pastor, a Mr. Carver, they handed over enormous amounts of gold and jewels to support the church and its work.”

At a lull in his soliloquy, she asked, “A church? You think your grandmother was shot over some kind of religious secret?”

“Not just any secret. A big secret. One that involved money.”

“Ah, yes. Money. The root of all evil.”

“Actually, it wasn’t money but gold, jewelry. The leader was corrupt. Greedy bastard hid all of it, hoarding it for himself instead of using it as it was intended. But when the church’s members went to the police and had Carver investigated, nothing turned up. Not a single nugget or gem.”

“Did she have the gold, your grandmother? Was it a lot of gold?”

“No, I don’t believe she found it. But I am beginning to think she had either figured out where it was hidden or was close to figuring it out.” A heavy silence hung between them for a painfully bloated minute. A dark shadow passed across his features and he blinked, dropping his gaze to his hands, restless in his lap.

Sensing he needed support, comfort, she fell into old habits, donned the invisible cloak of nurturing friend and reached for his shoulder. Fear made her jerk her hand back before she touched him.

Bad move.

Now was not the time to send conflicting, confusing vibes. Bain was hurting. It would be easy for him to turn to her for comfort. They shared a history, both with each other and with the woman he’d just lost.

But she couldn’t let him think they were bonding over this. That there was any future between them, as friends, as lovers, as anything. They were history. It was best for both of them if the past stayed firmly in the past.

A faraway look in his eyes, he raked his fingers through his hair. “From what I remember, it was a lot of gold, worth a fortune.”

A sweet old lady had been shot for a pot of frigging gold. Made her sick. "A lot of money in our terms or a lot of money in the late 1800s' terms?"

"Millions."

"That's a lot to me." She was working two jobs to eke out a meager living. Millions of dollars was a king's ransom to the average freelance writer. Sure bought a lot of paper and ink cartridges. "Okay, but I have to ask, how would your grandmother find out about such a thing? It wasn't like she got out much. She didn't talk to anyone but you. Didn't watch television or even own a telephone. She was pretty much a hermit."

"Her father was the church's pastor."

"Oh."

"Evidently, she found one clue when she was a teenager. She didn't know exactly what it meant, but she was wise enough to keep her discovery to herself. No one else knew about what she'd found...until recently."

"What did she find? That metal thingy?"

"No. That came later. It was this." Gently, he slid his hand into his sweatshirt pocket and withdrew a rusty, old hunk of metal. It resembled the handle from a cheap screwdriver, though slightly bigger.

And a lot heavier.

She weighed it in her hand, turned it over once, twice.

A chunk of steel? That was his grandmother's Big Secret Discovery? Someone had killed her to get their grubby, murdering paws on a piece of scrap metal? Why? "Forgive me, but I'm not seeing the whole picture here. Or something. That looks like a hunk of scrap from a machine shop." She flipped it over and inspected the underside. Nothing particularly interesting on either side. Unlike the piece his grandmother had given Reed earlier tonight, this larger chunk had no fancy swirls or engravings. It was literally a hunk of ugly, rusty steel.

Disgusted and confused, she handed the metal object back to Bain. None of it was worth that dear old lady's death. Not that ugly thing. Not the gold or jewels. What was wrong with people?

He traced one sharp edge with a fingertip. "I think it's a piece of a key. She gave you the second part. They work together somehow."

"You know this for a fact?"

"They have to. There's no other reason why she'd lie to keep them separated."

"Lie to whom? Sounds like she lied to a lot of people. Or rather, kept secrets from a lot of people."

"She never lied to me about anything...but this." He dropped his hand on her back and gave it a friendly pat. "Time for sleep." Still seated, he reached to switch off the lamp on the nightstand, in the process putting the bulk of his body in very near proximity to her own. Inches. She could literally feel the heat radiating off his torso.

She squeezed her eyes closed and tried not to inhale.

Snap went the light switch and the mattress tipped as his weight shifted away.

She pulled in a deep breath.

He didn't move.

She lay there in the dark, keenly aware of the fact that he was a mere handful of inches away. On the bed. In a bedroom. Soooo close.

Would he leave already?

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Fine. Really tired, though." *Hint, hint.*

"I understand. Well, goodnight." He scooted down a bit and with a flash of heat she realized what he was about to do.

No effing way was he sleeping in this bed.

She hiked herself up on one elbow and shoved at some hard, solid part of him with her free hand. "Hello, you are not sleeping in here with me."

"I know." He lifted the covers, kicked his legs underneath, rolled over and punched the pillow to fluff it.

"Then what do you think you're doing?" His leg was most definitely too close. As he moved, it brushed against hers. Once, twice, three times. Furious, she inched to the left.

“Isn’t it obvious? I’m getting comfortable,” he said matter-of-factly as he rolled onto his back and dropped his head onto the pillow. “Sweet dreams.”

Still propped up on one elbow, she stared down at him, sending him a *move-or-risk-the-well-being-of-your-most-treasured-body-parts* vibe. Her eyes had adjusted to the darkness and she could see that his eyes were closed, his features relaxed. Of course, he didn’t have her fooled. He was no closer to sleeping than she was.

She cleared her throat. “Bain.”

About three racing heartbeats later, he glanced her way. “What’s wrong?”

He had to ask? “You’re in my bed, that’s what’s wrong.”

He crossed his arms over his chest. “I promise to behave. You know I always keep my promises.”

“That’s not the issue,” she said, unable to quit staring at his bulky biceps. Clearly, he still spent a lot of time in the gym. Some things—some people—never changed.

One corner of his mouth lifted into a lopsided grin. “Ah. I get it. Can’t trust yourself?”

Obviously, more than one thing hadn’t changed in the past two years. The man still had an ego the size of Texas, California and Utah—combined. “I said no such thing.”

“If you trust me and you trust yourself, then what’s the problem?”

Infuriating man! “It’s wrong, after everything...”

“I just told you I think you could be in danger. I’m not going to let you out of my sight until I’m sure you’re safe.”

“But...but...”

“My grandmother was shot. She’s dead. I’m not budging. Not unless you can give me a really good reason.”

Argh!

Clearly, she was not going to win this debate, at least not with her pride intact. She could not, would not, admit she was still attracted to him. No way. He might sense it, but she wasn’t about to confess any such thing.

She rolled to her side, facing away from him, and snapped her eyes shut.

The jerk spooned her from behind, kicking a leg over hers.

“Get off me,” she ground out through gritted teeth.

“My body will block the bullets,” he reasoned.

Impossible jackass!

She squirmed, but at the awareness of one very rigid bulge rubbing against her rear end, her efforts to fight her way free came to an instant halt.

Yikes! He was...aroused. Typical man. They got horny if the wind blew too hard. Another blast of heat surged through her body, igniting her scalp and scorching her cheeks.

It was going to be a loooooong night! But dammit, she would sleep. She closed her eyes again and consciously relaxed her shoulders, arms, legs.

Warm.

Safe.

Cozy.

Ahhhh...



She was alone. She knew it before she opened her eyes. Bain had left her sometime in the night.

Some bodyguard.

Bleary-eyed, she rolled over and blinked at the clock.

Ack! 9:52? Had she really slept that late? She shot upright too quickly. Twinkling stars obscured her vision.

She had to call work. Phone? Purse? Where'd she leave them last night? She slid out of the bed, padded to the bathroom to take care of a pressing matter then, after checking the bedroom for her purse, she pulled the door open. The scents of coffee and bacon greeted her in the hallway. Her stomach rumbled loudly as she descended the stairs.

Caffeine and food. Two things she could most definitely use. But phone first.

Bain greeted her with a bright smile when she entered the kitchen. "Good morning, sunshine." Coffeepot in hand, he filled a cup with steaming java and handed it to her. "Figured you could use this. Didn't look like you slept very soundly last night."

Wonder why?

"I guess you have a lot on your mind," he said, grinning.

Understatement of the year.

Making a conscious effort to ignore his needling, she sat at the table and doctored up the coffee to her taste. "Did I leave my purse down here somewhere?"

"Yeah, you left it in the foyer, on the bench next to the closet."

"Thanks." She sipped. Hot. Smooth. Yummy. Stomach grumbling, she stood, heading around the table.

"Where are you going? Coffee isn't that bad, is it?"

"No, silly. I need to call work before I'm fired."

"Oh, uh...well," he said, looking guilty, "I already called for you."

No. Frigging. Way. It was starting already? She'd been here for less than twelve hours, and he was already causing trouble. The man just couldn't resist controlling people, getting overinvolved in their lives. It was no wonder his marriage had lasted less than six months.

"You did not!" she snapped.

"Sure." He tipped a frying pan and two perfectly cooked eggs slid onto the plate he held in his other hand. "Since you were sleeping, I figured I'd better call for you. Didn't want you to get into trouble." The uber-controlling domestic god in sweats and a snug tank shirt returned the pan to the stove, pulled a couple pieces of toast out of the toaster and arranged them on the dish with the eggs, then spooned some buttery hash browns before handing the full plate to her. "You're not back to the vegan thing, are you? I could never remember what you could and could not eat."

"No, I discovered I can't live without my dairy. Thanks." Still fuming about him calling her work, she snatched the proffered plate, set it on the table then headed toward the foyer. "I should still talk to Bill myself."

“He was very understanding. Said not to worry about it, take a few days off. They know what happened. It’s on the front page of every paper in town, including the *News*.” He produced a copy of the newspaper, waved it at her.

Grumbling, she pulled it from his hand and sat down to read the write-up while she ate. No new or surprising updates. It was kind of creepy reading her own name in print. Made her almost believe the whole thing had happened to someone else. Except for the fact that images of the gruesome scene kept flashing through her mind as she read, memories pulled to the surface by the writer’s description of the crime.

“We have to start right away.” A second plate of eggs, potatoes and toast in his hand, Bain strode into the dining nook, set the plate on the table and sat down.

“Start?”

“Yeah, you know. Tracking down the treasure.” He lifted a forkful of food into the air. “Someone was here last night,” he added casually.

Was she supposed to be worried? Scared? What? “Someone? What kind of someone?”

Chewing, he shrugged. “Don’t know. They didn’t knock. They didn’t call and leave a message. I think they were after the key.”

“That’s quite an assumption.”

Was he messing with her? Was this whole thing some kind of setup, just to make her come back to him? Why would any man go to so much trouble, especially a man who’d decided long ago that he didn’t want her?

A niggling ache, familiar and aggravating, thrummed in her belly. Had to be her ulcer acting up. Right?

“It’s not safe to go back to your apartment,” he added between mouthfuls. “At least not by yourself.”

His final statement doused her appetite completely. She pushed the full plate away. God help him if he was making all this up.

She just wanted her life back. She wanted to go home, forget about the stupid hidden money and monsters who slaughtered innocent little old ladies to get it. “Maybe we should go to the police, take the metal things with us and let them straighten it all out?”

"I would. Honest. Beats having you in this kind of danger." He leveled a serious look her way. "But..." He sighed. "I just learned my grandmother was planning on doing exactly that—going to the police. Someone shot her before she had the chance."

"Oh," she squeaked. Her heart shot up her throat then dropped to her toes.

So much for step one of *How to Get Reed's Life Back*. Was there any other option? One that didn't involve spending hours upon hours with her manipulative ex-fiancé?

Anything? She was desperate.

"What if we...take the metal thingies and dump them somewhere? Someplace where no one will find them? Like a...uh, deep well?"

Between bites, he dragged his toast across the plate, picking up some watery egg yolk. "You want to walk away from the opportunity to solve a real mystery?"

"Hey, if it means I'll be able to go home without having to be afraid, then maybe it would be worth it."

He shook his head. "You see, that's why I told you, you shouldn't become an investigative reporter. You have to be willing to take some risks. You've always been the play-it-safe kind—not that there's anything wrong with that." He softened the blow of his words with a smile. "You're smart enough, Reed. You've proven to me that you can accomplish anything you really want. But I'm not sure you're serious about getting into investigative reporting."

Damn it, he was right. Yes, his words stung. But only because they were true. She *was* all talk and no action. No doubt her boss saw the same thing. Which was why she hadn't been promoted last month when a position had opened up at the paper.

Ha. She laughed silently, humorlessly at herself. Play-it-safe Reed Harris an investigative reporter? Traveling to war-torn countries? She did everything in her power to avoid traveling through Detroit, let alone Iraq.

She'd only been fooling herself.

"My grandmother died protecting this secret. Damn if I'll just walk away. Not now, after... I loved that woman. I can't." He stood, stomped

into the kitchen, both plates in his hands. He dumped them in the sink with a glass-striking-metal clatter then returned to the nook, his expression fierce, determined. "I hate that you're involved in this. I would've given anything to keep you out of it. I did two years ago..." He let his words trail off, which just about killed her.

Hold up!

Keep her out of this? Two years ago? What had he meant by that?

About an hour later, or so it seemed, he continued, "It's impossible now. You're neck-deep in this shit. I have to protect you."

It took her a moment, but she finally yanked her tongue out of her throat. She kicked the chair back and jumped to her feet, meeting his gaze dead on. "What's this bullshit about two years ago? You broke up with me because of Cindy or whatever Miss Perfect's name is. I wasn't good enough for you. There's no sense sugarcoating the truth now, Bain. Not after all this time."

He heaved a weary sigh and raked his fingers through his hair. "You're right. There is no sense disguising the truth anymore. So I'll tell you the real reason why I broke up with you." He reached forward, wrapped his hands around her upper arms and dragged her against him. "It was because...I loved you. I still do."

Chapter Three

Bain's insides twisted at the agony he saw in Reed's eyes.

What had made him say such a stupid thing? Her knowing how he felt...it would make things a lot more complicated.

If he could've taken back the words, he would have. Hatred was so much easier to endure than heartbreak. He should have let her continue to despise him.

He dropped his hands to his sides and watched Reed back slowly away, her eyes—red and teary—narrowed on his face. Her lips were parted slightly, as if she wanted to speak. Yet no sound came out but a soft hiccup. Finally, after what felt like a century, she turned and ran from the room. He heard her light footsteps trip up the staircase.

A distant slam of a door signaled both her literally shutting him out, but also figuratively.

Dammit, he really knew how to fuck up a woman.

"Gram, why did you do this to us? Why?" he said to the ghost of his grandmother, who had to be perched on a nearby cloud, wagging a finger at him. He could practically hear her sharp voice chastising him. *Bain, why don't you think?*

"You know why, Gram. Because when I'm anywhere near that woman, I *can't* think. My brain becomes as useless as the cell phone I gave you last Christmas for emergencies—the one you never turned on. And now my lack of intact gray matter has just made things ten times worse." He heaved a sigh and loaded the dishes in the dishwasher. Then he stood at the bottom of the staircase, looking up.

Reed.

He wished he could afford to give her more time to herself, but with a murderer hot on their tails, he knew they'd better get going sooner rather than later. At least, if they were going to avoid catching some lead in

their bellies or skulls. The footprints he'd found this morning in the flowerbeds under the living-room windows were a wake-up call.

He had to face her. But what would he say?

To delay the inevitable a few seconds, he reread the letter his grandmother had mailed him, folded it and tucked it into his pocket. Then he read a few pages in his grandmother's diary, also mailed to him the day before she'd been killed. He skimmed an entry dated July 10, 1941. It was the day she'd met her first love, a guy named Benjamin Schimmel. Her father had forbidden her to marry him.

He could relate to the pain he read in his grandmother's words. Boy, could he ever.

And speaking of pain, it was time to face the fire.



Reed had been in enough no-win situations to recognize one from a hundred paces. Oh yes, this was very likely—no, most definitely—a bad, bad deal. She'd be lucky to come out of it with her heart intact, not to mention a few other vital body parts.

So why not give Bain the key and cut her losses?

As if she hadn't had good reason to run for the proverbial hills, now she had even more reason. But that same motive kept her here, in the house she'd once called home, too. Not to mention, firmly entrenched in the memories the house and the man who owned it brought back.

He hadn't explained fully what his supposed love for her had to do with their breakup, but she knew deep down that he was telling the truth. This morning's blurted explanation—two years too late—answered far more questions than the pages of convoluted logic he'd mailed to her back then.

It hadn't been another woman after all? He'd broken up to protect her for some reason. For what reason?

He still loved her now?

But what about Miss Perfect? He'd married her. She'd seen the proof. Obviously not realizing how much it would kill her to see them, his

grandmother had brought over the wedding pictures and insisted on showing them to her.

A soft knock on the door dragged her attention from the confusing thoughts and agonizing memories. "I need to rest," she shouted. As if to prove she was telling the truth, she rolled onto her side, turning her back to the door, and buried her head under the pillows.

Why her? Why had Edna come to her apartment last night, instead of going to one of her other neighbors for help?

The pessimistic voice in her head screamed she was a fool if she believed anything Bain told her. He'd lied to her once. He'd lie to her again.

The door slowly drifted open. She knew it, even though she couldn't see it. There was a tense silence.

"Reed? About what I said downstairs..."

She ignored him for a good ten seconds before throwing the pillows off and rolling over. "I don't want to talk about it." She searched his eyes. What she saw, she couldn't label.

"Okay. But we have to go," he insisted.

He was mighty hot for that treasure. His ambition irritated her, like the scraping of fingernails on a chalkboard. With so much going on—a grandmother to bury, and a handful of important issues to resolve with the woman he supposedly loved, a treasure hunt seemed so insignificant.

"It's only money," she heard herself saying.

She immediately wondered if she'd gone completely loony. Only money? Only money! Dead presidents were hardly marching gaily into her bank account. There'd been many a time when she would've sold her soul for an opportunity to get her hands on the tidy fortune Bain was talking about here.

"I don't think you understand." The mattress shifted under his weight as he sat beside her and the air between them warmed. "I'm not keeping the money."

Her heartbeat screeched to a dead stop.

"You're not?" At the shake of his head, she added, "Then why bother?"

“Like I said, I can’t stand to see another person dead over this. It needs to end. The money needs to be found, and if it’s possible, it needs to be returned to the people it rightfully belongs to.”

That was so...honorable. Honest. Wow. She could respect that motivation. Even if she still harbored mixed feelings about the man. “So, you’re sort of acting like Robin Hood?”

“Yeah, in a way. Although I imagine the people who are due this money are probably filthy rich already. Doesn’t matter. Until the money is found, there will always be selfish people willing to do things...” he audibly swallowed, his expression dark with grief, “...terrible things to get it.”

“Bain.” The agony she witnessed in the depth of his eyes doused the lingering heat of her anger. She ached to reach out to him, to soothe the hurt. But she knew nothing she might say or do would bring even the slightest relief from the pain.

She’d been there. Ironically, Bain had been the one who had faced the formidable task of helping her cope with the sudden and unexpected loss of both her parents.

He looked down at his hand, resting no more than an inch from her right thigh. After an impossibly long time, he flipped it over, palm up. “What do you think? Want to be my Maid Marian?” His gaze slowly returned to her face. The usual glimmer in his eyes was shadowed somewhat, but a slight flicker flashed in the gloom.

Her hand landed on top of his and their fingers twined. A blast of sensual heat rippled up her arm as their gazes tangled and held. Her heart immediately broke into a gallop and a whoosh of desire washed up her chest. “Like I’ve always said, I’m no one’s maid,” she teased, desperate to lighten the mood and disguise her reaction to him.

His warm, rumbling chuckle filled the thin air around them. Twisting at the waist, he leaned forward, closing the distance between them to mere inches. Too few for Reed’s comfort.

Yet she didn’t back away.

“Would you rather I call you Little John?” he whispered, his breath warm and sweet on her lips.

She gulped. "I suppose that's better than the alternatives."

He tipped his head to kiss her and she braced herself for the blast of emotions and sensations sure to follow. His mouth slanted over hers, a gentle caress. A taste. A promise.

The kiss was soft, teasing, torturous...and far too brief. She was left breathless, slightly delirious and most definitely wanting another. Soon. Like right this very minute.

And then she wanted a hug. And a night spent in his arms...and then...

Oh, this was crazy. One kiss. They had shared one kiss, and her mind was racing ahead. What happened to keeping sex separate from love? Why couldn't she keep her head when it came to Bain? She could see the future already—the proposal, wedding, honeymoon. Oy vey! The honeymoon.

But what about that whole wife thing? If he'd loved her all this time, why'd he marry another woman?

She swallowed a lump the size of a small planet, lodged in her throat, and stood.

Space. She needed space. Lots of it. And a new brain. The one she had was most definitely broken. "So, uh, what's first?"

"We'll swing by your place so you can get some clothes. Then we're headed downtown to the historical museum to do some research. I received a letter this morning and a diary. Both from my grandmother. I think the letter's a clue." He produced an envelope from his pocket and set it on her lap. "I'll be downstairs waiting."

"Ooookay." Confused and weary from the twists and turns her life—a virtual carnival ride—had taken the last day, she thumbed the top flap of the envelope and pulled out the folded piece of paper inside.

Built by a Baker

Who ruled a blossoming dynasty

She keeps his secrets

Cradled close to her bosom

A Mother's tender protection

Did Bain know what this riddle meant? She had no clue, no pun intended. Ack. Hopefully he wasn't counting on her to help with this.

She tucked the paper back in the envelope and, after freshening up in the bathroom, headed downstairs. Bain already had his car running, and as she followed him to the vehicle, she discovered he had two fresh cups of coffee in metal travel mugs, nestled safely in the cup holder between the front seats.

"You've thought of everything." She couldn't help giving him a wavering smile.

"I'm expecting today to be a long one." He slammed the door after she took her place in the passenger seat, then walked around to the driver's side.

"Ready?" he asked, palming the stick shift.

"I guess, Robin."

He shot her a grin before shifting the car into reverse, tossing an arm over the back of her seat and twisting to look over a shoulder to watch where he was driving. Once he'd navigated the vehicle out of the driveway, he turned back around and faced front. Eyes on the road.

While he was being so dutifully attentive to where he was driving, she stared at him.

It had been only two years since she'd seen him last, at least this close. He hadn't aged in that short time. But there were some subtle differences in his appearance, things about him that she couldn't help but notice. He'd always worn his hair on the long side, had never been the kind to follow trends. But the shaggy layers now cut into the thick ebony waves gave his hair a flattering shape and style it had lacked before. And the carefully trimmed line of facial hair running from his sideburns down his jaw and across his chin made him look both slightly wild and dangerous.

His smile still came easily, even one day after his grandmother's death, but the expression didn't exactly reach his eyes.

"You're staring at me," he pointed out.

Busted! “No, I was just thinking. You know. Er, haven’t you ever stared at something but not really looked at it?”

“Sure,” he drawled, his mouth quirking into a seriously wicked grin. He winked at her as they rolled to a stop at a red light. “Almost there.”

“Where’s there?” She glanced out the window, realizing she hadn’t been paying attention to where they were headed. “I thought you were taking me back to my place first.”

“Change of plans. We’ll go there after the museum. It’s only open for a couple hours today. We don’t have time to waste.”

She huffed the sigh of the weary.

If she’d known they were going to be in public, she would’ve taken a few minutes to fix herself up. And made him stop at the first drug store they’d passed for some basic necessities—lip gloss, hair spray and blush. She would’ve liked to at least look human. “That’s fine.”

He tossed her one of his trademark waggle-browed gazes. “You look gorgeous as always. No worries.”

Her face blistering, she turned her head before he had a chance to see what his offhanded compliment had done to her complexion. Obviously, Bain was still as charming—if not more so—as ever. No need to feed his already uber-inflated ego. “I wasn’t fishing for a compliment,” she mumbled to the vehicles and buildings rolling by, outside her window.

“I know.”

The remaining ten minutes of the drive were endured in silence. Her nerves frayed like tissue paper fed through a shredder, Reed toyed with the envelope on her lap. She wasn’t sure which was worse—the possibility of being shot by treasure hunters carting 9mms with silencers, or the reality of spending another minute with Bain.

This was agony. Plain and simple.

He parked the car in the lot next to the red brick Greek revival building that housed the Plymouth Historical Museum. As always, he insisted she let him get her car door. This put her way too close to his hulking body as she stepped out of the vehicle.

Foolishly, she tipped her head as she stood to thank him. The instant their eyes met, her insides melted to the consistency of custard. Her knees wobbled, threatening to leave her sprawled on the asphalt.

“Th-thanks,” she stuttered, leaning against the car door for support.

“Time’s a-wastin’. Let’s go.” Oblivious to her less-than-stable state, he turned on his heel and headed toward the building’s columned entrance in long ground-gulping strides. She slammed the car door and tripped along, in no hurry to catch up to him. The more time she spent within arm’s reach, the less of a grip she had on her mental faculties.

A few minutes later, she found him inside, talking to a gentleman from the archives department. The kindly man, sporting a tag with the name Bob, led them to a room housing floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, a large table, an array of maps and a microfilm machine.

Bob ran through a brief history of the town before stating, “I have maps going back to the late nineteenth century.” He produced a portfolio from a nearby stand, laid it on the table and flipped open the cover.

“This is perfect.” Bain studied the map on top, dated 1896. “Thank you.”

“They go back over two hundred years, to before the fires.”

“Fires?” Reed inched closer. The ancient, faded maps were fascinating. She’d lived in the area all her life and yet had never realized what a rich history the town boasted.

“Sure. Fires were very common back then.” Bob handed her a paperback book with old black-and-white photographs on the cover. “Pretty much all of downtown was destroyed at one time or another. There were several devastating fires in the late 1890s.”

“Hmmm...” With narrowed eyes, Bain carefully flipped the delicate maps over, stopping to scrutinize one dated 1905. “Is there something in particular you’re looking for?” Bob asked.

“Maybe.” Bain pulled a chair out and sat, reaching for the book Reed had forgotten she was holding. “Would you happen to know if there was a bakery downtown? Right around 1900?”

Bob’s eyebrows drew together and deep lines creased his forehead. “Sure. There was one on Main Street, across from Kellogg Park. But it’s

gone now. Most of the older buildings downtown have been demolished, either by fire or simply torn down to make room for new construction.”

Reed and Bain swapped defeated looks.

“Most?” Reed asked.

“Yes. With the exception of a couple churches and a few cemeteries. Of course, many of the private homes are still standing. If you’re interested in the houses, I have a book.” Bob went to the shelf and pulled out a second paperback. “Some of them are now registered historical landmarks. Like this house, built in 1891.” He flipped the book open and handed it to Bain. “This is the Curtiss House. It’s on Union, behind our building. And the Baker house is just down Main—”

“Did you say Baker?” Bain asked, his eyes snapping to Reed’s.

He was on to something.

“Yes. George Baker was one of the founders of the Plymouth Iron Windmill Company, which of course was renamed Daisy Manufacturing in 1895.”

“That’s it!” Bain exclaimed, jumping to his feet. He beamed at Bob and thrust a hand forward, catching the older man’s hand in his. After giving it a couple of pumps he released it, caught Reed’s and pulled her toward the door. “Thank you for your help. Where did you say the Baker house is?”

“If you walk out the back door and then head northeast on Union, you’ll see it on the right, just before you reach the Daisy Square Condominiums. One sixty-eight’s the address.”

“Is someone living in the house?” Bain asked, over his shoulder.

“No, there’s a law office in it now.”

“Great. Thanks again.”

Shuffling along beside Bain, Reed smiled a thank you to Bob then jerked her hand out of Bain’s iron-fisted grip. “No need to drag me out of here,” she grumbled, waving goodbye to the kindly woman standing at the front counter.

“Sorry.” He halted on the sidewalk running along the south side of the building. “Got a little excited. This has to be it. The clue said ‘Built by

a Baker who ruled a blossoming dynasty'. Daisy. Blossom. I know I'm right."

"Sounds right to me." She couldn't help noticing how his excitement sparkled in his eyes, the same eyes that had been so full of sorrow earlier. When they reached the end of the walk, she glanced down the road. Looked like less than a quarter of a mile away. "Do we walk? Or drive?" The sun had finally broken through the heavy clouds that had hung overhead, threatening to dump rain on the city for the past few days. The air was sweet scented and warm. The birds were singing. It was one of the few nice days they'd seen so far this month. She was all for walking.

"We'd better not take any chances. I'd feel safer if we drove."

The reminder of their current situation dampened her lifting mood. "Fair enough. But we're stopping at a clothing store first. I'm wearing the same clothes I had on yesterday. The same underwear. Yuck."

"Anything you want, baby." Bain slowed his gait to accommodate her shorter stride and gathered her hand in his. A wash of contentment wound through her, warming her insides.

She needed to think about this thing with Bain, decide how she really felt about him. For now, though, she would try to stick to helping him solve a mystery, uncover the secrets that had ended his grandmother's life. Neither of them needed more complications in their lives. At least in the near future.

Chapter Four

“You go first. Women are better at this sort of thing,” Bain insisted, motioning her up the front steps of 168 South Union Street—the Baker House—a gorgeous red brick Italianate home with a mansard roof and white gingerbread trim.

Stomping up the first couple of brick stairs, she turned pleading eyes his way. “But what’ll I say? I’m still clueless about what the rest of the rhyme means. Where do we need to search? Do houses even have ‘bosoms’?”

He shrugged then gave her fanny a light tap, sending her racing up the rest of the staircase. “Evidently, this one does.”

She gave him a semiserious warning glare. “Hands off Little John’s butt.”

One step below her, his eyes twinkling with mischief, he raised his arms in surrender. “I can’t help myself. Your butt looks so purrrrrfect in these jeans.” At her scowl, he sobered. “Fine. Just convince these guys we need to see the house.”

“Ack. How?”

“I don’t know. Wing it. Charm them. I have faith in you.” He reached around her and opened the front door. A bell above the doorway tinkled a greeting as they stepped inside the building.

The first thing she noticed was the smell. It wasn’t a bad scent. Quite the contrary, it was a charming combination of lemon oil, aged wood and history.

A tidy woman sat at a U-shaped reception area, smiling a greeting just as charming as the tinkling bell and old-house aroma.

Reed’s footsteps clacked on the polished hardwood floors. “Hello,” she said, sounding as nervous as she felt. “My name’s Reed Harris. I’m um...”
What? Think!

"We're doing some research into the historical landmarks here in Plymouth," Bain finished, offering the woman his hand. His other found a handy perch on the small of Reed's back. "Jack Kavandish," he said smoothly.

A lie? They came so easily to the man. Made her wonder how much of a fool she was for even thinking about trusting him.

She stepped forward, hoping *Jack* would get the hint and remove his hand from her person. What did he think he was doing? Big lug. Even an insignificant touch was distracting, unsettling. The last thing she needed right now was a distraction. They were here on a mission.

"Is that so?" The woman's gaze bounced back and forth between them. She looked skeptical. Undecided.

"Sure." Reed forced a smile. "We're...uh...writing a book, and Bob from the Plymouth Historical Museum mentioned this building."

The reserve in the woman's mien melted away. "Yes, Bob," she echoed. "He helped us research the house's history, back when we did the restorations. He knows a great deal about the town's history and the buildings."

"Yes, he does." Reed took a moment to admire the stately interior. "Looks like you did a wonderful job with the restorations." The moldings around the doors, the baseboards and, of course, the crown—they were beautiful. The floor was polished to a gleam. The walls papered with reproduction Victorian wallpapers. Even the room's ceiling was gorgeous.

"Thank you. We're all quite proud of how it turned out. Now, how can I help you?"

Reed hated asking people for favors, especially strangers. Why had Bain put her in this position? He knew she had a problem with this kind of thing. Had he assumed she'd gotten over it? "We were wondering if you'd allow us to take a look around? So that we can write more accurate descriptions in our book?"

The woman eyed them for a moment then gave a curt nod. "I'll have to accompany you and you'll have to stay out of the offices. Too many sensitive documents, you understand."

Willing to take what she could get, Reed was quick to accept the woman's terms. "Not a problem. We wouldn't want you to get into any trouble. Thanks."

"Certainly. We'll start here with the parlor." The woman rattled off a brief history of the house and its former owners as she led Reed and Bain through one beautifully appointed room after another. Some of the rooms off a narrow hallway toward the rear, she explained, had not yet been restored as they weren't generally open to the public. One of them, the tiny, white-walled break room, had once, years ago, been the kitchen.

"Things sure have changed," Reed mused, following the woman back toward the front of the house, where a wooden staircase led to the second floor. "That kitchen was miniscule. And could you imagine life without refrigerators and microwave ovens?"

The woman halted at the base of the stairs. "I'm afraid that's the end of my tour. The partners' offices are on the second floor. I can't take you up there. Besides, I should be getting back to work."

Disappointed, Reed nodded. "Thank you for your time. We really appreciate it." She still had no idea what they were searching for. Sure, the kitchen was said to be the heart of the home.

Heart. Bosom. They were related. Right?

Problem was, she wasn't sure the kitchen was the heart of the Victorian family's home like it was for today's American family. Besides, even though the room had not been completely gutted, it looked like there wasn't much of historical value remaining. No trim. No old appliances or fixtures. It was a nondescript box with one tiny window.

Growing more desperate by the second, Reed followed the woman through the maze of meeting rooms toward the reception area. Her eyes scanned every surface—wall, floor, ceiling—as she walked. The distant sound of Bain and the woman chattering didn't quite register in her head, thanks to an ongoing internal monologue that pretty much drowned out everything but her thoughts.

While the woman returned to her seat, and Bain bought time by yammering on about something meaningless, Reed took one last look around.

That's when she saw it, or rather *her*.

She rushed across the room to the painting, eager to get a closer look. "Is this picture original to the house?" she asked, trying not to sound like she was so excited she could scream.

"Yes, it's a portrait of Mr. Baker's mother, Hattie. It's signed and dated."

"I see that. Who is this artist?" Reed pointed at the scrawling, illegible signature in the lower right corner.

"That was a Sam Montgomery, out of Ann Arbor. I heard he painted portraits of several notable Plymouth residents around 1900."

Directly behind her, Bain murmured, "What do you have there, babe?"

Her spine stiffened when his hand found its prior resting spot. "Take a look here," she whispered, pointing at the painting. "She's holding something to her bosom. It looks a lot like...you know..."

"I've been wondering what she's holding," their unofficial tour guide said, making Reed jump with a start. The woman, now standing less than a foot behind the two of them, extended her arm, indicating the exact same thing that had captured Reed's attention. "That painting has been hanging here since my first day, over ten years ago. I've stared at it plenty. Do you know what is in Hattie's hand? It's very strange."

Reed glanced at Bain. "Yes, strange. I have no idea what it is, though." She traced the intricate scrollwork on the picture's frame with her fingertip. "This is quite lovely." Was the next clue taped to the back? Hidden in the carved frame? Or was it part of the picture itself? She studied every inch of the picture.

The phone rang. The woman excused herself to answer the call. Thankfully, whoever was on the line kept her busy for a while. It gave Reed and Bain a few precious moments.

"What was the clue again?" Reed whispered over her shoulder.

"She keeps his secrets, Cradled close to her bosom, A Mother's tender protection," Bain read. "Mother, I guess, would refer to the painting of Baker's mother. And the key is there, in the picture, cradled close to her bosom. But where is the next clue?"

"Excuse me," the woman called. "I have to go upstairs to find some documents."

"That's okay. We were just leaving." Bain gave Reed a pointed look and turned toward the door. "We'll let ourselves out. Thank you again for your help."

"Good luck with your book." The woman hurried toward the stairs.

The second she was out of sight, Bain dashed in the opposite direction, grabbed the picture frame, slid it up to free the wire on the back from the nail in the wall and ran for the door.

Oh. My. God!

Speechless, Reed ran after him. She didn't say a word as they got into the car. She didn't speak when he started the vehicle or drove away. She didn't mutter a word until they were almost a block away.

"You stole it!"

"I borrowed it."

"That lady doesn't know that we're 'borrowing' it." In full panic mode, Reed waved her hands like a lunatic. "The nice lady who works for a law office knows my name. Law office. As in lawyers. She knows what we look like. Oh my God, I'm going to go to jail!"

"It'll be okay."

"Easy for you to say, mister. You gave her a fake name, *Jack*."

"Which is precisely why you'll be okay." He patted her knee, no doubt a pathetic attempt on his part to ease her worries. "Stay with me and you won't be caught."

Stay with him? The one who'd done nothing but make matters worse since she'd stumbled onto his porch last night? Reed opened her mouth and let loose with an eardrum-splitting shriek of frustration. "Aaaaack!"

"Feel better?" he asked calmly.

"No," she snapped. "You are insane. Why did I not realize that before?"

He shrugged. "I guess it takes an insane person to know one, eh?" He glanced in the rearview mirror as he navigated the car onto the freeway. "Shit," he murmured.

“What?” That word, shit, following the commission of a felony, couldn’t be good. Visions of concrete prison cells, handcuffs and butch dykes staking claims to her fully hetero self blasted through her mind.

She so did not want to be some lesbian’s plaything.

“We’re being followed. Hold on.” Bain downshifted the car and hit the gas, simultaneously jerking the steering wheel to sandwich the speeding vehicle between a semi truck and a minivan in the far left lane.

One arm braced against the dashboard, Reed twisted around to look out the back window. “Is it the lady from the law office? Is she chasing us?”

“Not unless she’s grown a beard.” Bain wrenched the wheel hard to the right, sending the car skidding across three lanes of traffic.

She held on for life. Jail? She wasn’t going to prison. She was going to hell.

Reed squeezed her eyes shut and prayed. She asked for forgiveness for every sin she’d ever committed or even been tempted to commit, including slaughtering the maniac next to her, who was sure to get them both killed. Then she made heartfelt promises. More than she could count. Service to the homeless and needy. Kindness to animals. Even regular church attendance...on religious holidays, of course.

The car came to a skidding stop some unknown time later.

She inhaled. Exhaled. Was she alive? There’d been no impact. No long tunnels or bright lights. No shadowy demons dragging her down to the abyss.

She blinked open her eyes just in time to see Bain lunge her way. One of his hands cupping the back of her head, the other pressing between her shoulder blades, he dragged her across the space between the seats. His mouth claimed hers. His lips and tongue devouring, taking, dominating. The unbound hunger in his kiss made her quake. She battered his chest with her fists for all of three seconds and then surrendered to her building desire, moaned and sank into his embrace.

This was the kiss of a man who wanted her desperately. Who ached for her touch. Who would stop at nothing to possess her.

And crazy as it was, she was beyond thrilled.

At least for this moment, this magical, intoxicating bit of time, she would surrender to the urges pulsing through her body. What was so great about logic, anyway? It hadn't gotten her very far these last couple of years.

Hadn't she promised God she'd live life to the fullest if she was spared? That she'd quit avoiding stuff? Hiding from her feelings?

Oh hell. Who needed to justify anything? There'd be time for that later. Plenty of time.

Giving him the kiss of a lifetime, she caught one of his hands in hers and plopped it in her lap, and then parted her legs to allow him access to their blue jean-covered heated juncture.

Yes, oh yes. This was magic, the intoxicating combination of adrenalin, fear, lust, thrill and wanting.

The spray of shattered safety glass instantly sobered her.

Chapter Five

“Shit!” Flush-faced, Bain forced Reed down, nearly suffocating her by jamming her face in his lap, as he simultaneously threw the car into gear and maneuvered it into a tight three-sixty. She turned her head to drag in some much-needed air. A second window shattered, spraying pebbled glass all over the side of Reed’s face. She cupped her hands over her eyes to protect them and let out a shriek.

Of all the stupid things to do! Duh!

They’d just pulled off a heist—talking hardcore criminal lingo now—and they’d pulled over to get a little jiggy. They had to be the world’s worst criminals ever. They deserved to get shot at.

The car lurched to one side then swerved to the other, eliciting a squeal of rubber against concrete. They took a corner so quickly the g-force made her dizzy.

She inched up, turning to peek out the rear window, and asked in her best Italian mafia princess voice, “Is it the pigs?”

“Pigs?” he echoed, his gaze leapfrogging from mirror to windshield to window and back.

“Yeah. You know, the heat, the cops, the uniforms...”

“Not unless Plymouth’s finest has resorted to driving Saturns.”

“Hey, I drive a Saturn,” she objected, dropping the accent. “What are you saying?”

“Nothing.”

They took another corner going at least fifty and then the car rocketed down a two-lane industrial road lined with nondescript warehouses and machine shops.

He sighed. “I think I lost them this time.”

“Thank God. Can we just get rid of the painting? Please? Before they find us again.”

Still focused on where they were going, he grinned. "I thought by that little mafia-girl act you were embracing this new life. Don't tell me, you've had second thoughts already."

"Let's face it, we both know I'm not cut out for this running-from-the-police-committing-crimes thing. I nearly died from guilt the time I accidentally left Meijer's with a pack of gum I hadn't paid for. I didn't sleep all night, sure the police were going to bust through my door and arrest me."

"You're kidding, right?" he asked dryly. "Because no one is going to care about one pack of gum."

Her face warming, she turned to look out the window.

"You're serious? Oh my God." His belly-busting guffaw filled the interior of the car. She bristled, his raucous laughter doing some serious damage to her pride.

She slugged him.

That shut him up, although he still let a chortle or two slip through his lips.

"Done having your fun at my expense? It's not like this whole crime-committing thing is old hat for you, too. Who do you think you are, John Dillinger?"

He snorted. "Hardly. Although I think you like dangerous, bad-boy guys." He looped an arm around her shoulders and gave them a brotherly squeeze.

Twisting to pull herself out of his embrace, she snapped, "You don't know anything about what I like."

"Are you sure about that? I could swear I had something figured out a little bit ago." He gave her a cocky sneer.

Heat shot to her face then spread down her chest.

Jerk. That comment warranted no response. Once again, she reminded herself that her life had been oh so stable and pleasant during the last two years—twenty-four glorious Bain-free months.

She decided her best bet was to just be silent the rest of the ride...to wherever they were going. She was dying to know where they were

headed, but didn't dare ask. Bain was in the mood to tease her and she was in no mood to take it.

The car finally came to a stop outside of a Red Roof Inn.

"Stay put. I don't want to risk having anyone see you at this point, not after what happened back at the law office. I'll go check us in. Stay down."

"Fine." Nervous as heck, she ducked low and watched out the windows, looking for signs of a white Saturn. This was scary. It was almost noon yet the heavy clouds that had returned sometime since they'd been at the museum snuffed out most of the sun's light. The air was charged with the energy of the impending storm. The hairs on her arms stood on end.

She hated to admit it, but she breathed a huge sigh of relief when he returned to drive the car around the back of the building. Staring curiously at the painting under Bain's arm, she tramped behind him up a metal staircase to the second floor.

"Looks like this'll have to be home for the next couple of days." He shut the door, set the painting on the bed—there was only one?—and snapped on the lamp. The weak light barely cut through the shadows on the farthest side of the room.

"Where are you sleeping?" She motioned toward the bed. "Is there a reason why you didn't get a double?"

"I didn't have enough cash. Don't want to risk using a credit card, just in case..."

Shoot, she hadn't thought of that. "Here, let me help." She dug through her purse, to see how much money she had. She pulled out a couple twenties and a handful of singles and thrust them at Bain. "It's not a fortune, but it's all I have. I don't carry much money anymore."

"No."

That was Bain, ever the gentleman. And too effing stubborn for his own good. A trait they had in common.

"I insist."

"I'm not taking your money. Put it away." Grimacing, he stomped to the door. "What do you want to eat? I saw a few fast-food restaurants down the street. Neither of us ate much of our breakfasts."

"A burger and fries are fine. And a diet cola." She tucked the rejected bills back in her wallet and then lifted her head to give him a grateful smile.

Bain was annoying. And irritating. And difficult. And maybe they wouldn't be in this situation if he hadn't taken it on himself to *borrow* the painting. Then again, maybe the gunman in the Saturn wasn't after the painting.

Didn't matter. At the moment, she was genuinely grateful she wasn't in this alone. This was no doubt the most terrifying situation she had ever faced.

"Thank you," she said, her gaze meeting his. The heat of sensual longing rippled down from her face to her chest and lower to her nether regions.

She really needed to do something about her out-of-control libido. The *Playgirl* subscription and handy-dandy vibrator obviously weren't doing it for her anymore.

"I'll be back in a little bit. If I don't return in thirty minutes, I want you to leave. Go wherever. Out of state." His sharp gaze pierced her eyes, drilling to her very soul. "Don't trust anyone. Lock the door behind me."

And then he was gone.

Her hands shaking, she forced the bolt in place then flipped on the television for background noise. Desperate for a distraction, she turned her attention to the painting.

The frame was beautiful. Wood. Hand carved. Intricate. She skimmed her fingers along the whorls and curves, searching for a loose piece, a hole, anything. Next, pretty certain the clue wasn't hidden on the frame, she flipped the painting over to inspect the back.

A brown paper was affixed to the back of the frame with browned, brittle masking tape. The glue had loosened in several places, allowing her to lift the paper away to peer underneath.

Was that an...envelope? Taped to the back of the paper?

She gently pulled the paper, peeling away a larger section of tape, then carefully removed the envelope.

This had to be it.

The only writing on the outside was a name—Mrs. Penelope Hammond—no mailing address. No return address. No postal mark. She flipped it over and oh-so-slowly thumbled open the flap. The glue was ancient. The envelope dry and brittle. She didn't want to tear it, but couldn't help ripping it a little. Working slowly, she did manage to keep it somewhat intact.

Inside she found a single piece of paper, folded into fourths. On it was scrawled a series of numbers, separated with decimals and slanted dashes.

Great. Just great. The clue was written in some kind of code. How the heck would they figure out what it said? She was no cryptologist...or whatever they were called.

She took a good long look at the numbers. Some were big numbers, in the hundreds. Some were small numbers. There was no pattern that she could see. Obviously, they hadn't use a simple code, like, *A equals one, B equals two*, and so on.

Maybe Bain would know what the numbers meant?

At least they could return the painting, now that they had the clue. No sense keeping it.

She wondered exactly how Bain planned on accomplishing that minor feat, without ending up in jail. Wasn't like they could just walk into the law office and hand it back.

Knowing Bain, that was exactly what he'd propose. He was no dummy, but sometimes he oversimplified things. He tended to dismiss the possible consequences of his actions if said consequences didn't fit with his plans.

A light rap on the door startled her.

Police? Or Bain? Or a bad guy with a gun? Which would it be?

She tiptoed across the room and dropped into a squat, pulled back the lower corner of the drapes to take a look.

Bain.

She hurried to the door and announced proudly, "I found the clue," as he entered.

"You did?" He grinned over a bag of burgers and cardboard holder cradling two huge plastic cups of soda. He set the food and drinks on the table in front of the window and clapped his hands together, looking like a guy ready to dig into a steak. "What'd you find?"

"This." She dashed to the bed, snatched the envelope up and handed it to him, then went to the door to secure the deadbolt.

"Looks like some kind of code." His mouth twisted into a grimace. "Not one of my strong suits."

Not what she was hoping to hear.

She slumped into a chair, unwrapped one of the hamburgers and took a bite. She was starving. "How will we solve it? I don't even know where to begin."

Scowl still in place, he sat in the chair opposite her. "I'm thinking the library is the best place to start."

"The library?" she repeated around a mouthful of French fries. "Now it's my turn to say, 'you can't be serious'."

He leveled a serious-as-death look at her. "It's the only place I can think of where we can get our hands on some books about codes."

"But what about the guy with the gun?"

"I'll have to take my chances."

She swallowed the huge lump in her throat. She wasn't sure what had congealed just below her voice box, French fries or terror, but it wasn't budging. "You?"

"Yeah, me. Nowhere's entirely safe, but I think you're best off staying here, out of sight. At this point, I'm confident no one has tracked us to this hotel so I'm going to copy down the code, but leave the original here. Oh, and I want to get the car cleaned out so we're not sitting in broken glass. I'll hurry."

She wanted to object, but the chicken in her held her tongue hostage and refused to release it until it was too late. Once again, she found herself alone in the hotel room, jumping at every noise outside and imagining every terrifying scenario possible.

She really needed to put her overactive imagination to use someday. Maybe she should write fiction, hang up her reporter hat? She doubted fiction authors had armed felons chasing them.

Then again, she'd heard about a few authors who had been stalked by overzealous fans.

Eek. Maybe all forms of writing were too dangerous? Maybe she was better off choosing a new career. Something safe. Like...fast-food cook. Yes, as soon as this thing was over, she was going to rework her resume. A career change was definitely in order.

Her mind going in a million different directions, she paced and stared blindly at the images playing on the television screen.

How much longer would he be?

How much longer could she wait before going completely nuts?

She checked the clock for the tenth time. It measured minutes in agonizingly slow ticks and tocks. Surely more than twenty minutes had passed since she'd last checked. She'd made herself wait extra long before looking again.

Just as she'd resigned herself to the fact that he'd been either shot or nabbed by the police, a tap sounded at the door.

Thank God!

Just like before, she ducked down and peered through the window. But unlike before, it wasn't Bain standing outside. There were two men. Both dressed in nondescript black pants and jackets. The one closest had his head turned.

"I thought you said he'd gone by himself?" she heard him ask.

The second man's answer was muffled.

The door's handle jiggled with a metallic clicking.

Time to make like Houdini and vanish. But where should she hide? Bathroom? No, too obvious. That would be the first place she'd look if she were an armed bad guy. And the shower. Ack! The shower scene from *Psycho* flashed through her mind, accompanied by that horrific music.

The shower was out of the question.

She did a quick three-sixty, but a popping sound, followed by the whirr of a bullet sent her diving for the bed. She logrolled across the mattress and landed on the far side with a painful thud. Thankfully, this one wasn't a platform. The frame's legs were extremely short, though, leaving barely enough room for a curvaceous girl like herself to wedge her body underneath.

She dragged her feet out from view a split second before the room's door gave way with a wood-splintering crack. Two sets of heavy footsteps pounded into the room, a gust of rain-scented air followed.

"Looks like she's gone," one of her visitors said.

"Looks like? You were supposed to be watching," the other growled.

"Had to take a toilet break."

"Then it's damn lucky the big fucker hadn't come back yet. Kavanagh isn't a guy to be messing with."

"Yeah, well, everything worked out fine. Look here?" A set of boots stomped directly toward her, halting inches from her face. She held her breath, afraid to make a sound.

The mattress springs squeaked, the weight of a body making it sink so low, she had to turn her face to keep from having her nose squashed.

"Here's the painting and what's this?" the guy sitting on top of her asked.

What did they find?

Oh, shit!

The weight lifted.

Still terrified beyond reason, she sucked in a shallow breath and held it.

"The envelope looks old. And check this out. Numbers. It's gotta be a code."

She gave herself a mental ass-whipping for not hiding the clue.

"Where's the fucking key?"

The sound of frenzied movement commenced—scraping wood, dresser drawers opening. One of them tore the blankets and sheets off the bed and threw them on the floor. The pillows, shucked from their cases, landed on top of the mountain. The contents of her purse fell to

the floor with a metal-striking-plastic jangle. “Look what I found. Kavanagh must have the other half with him.”

“Dammit. Take that and those. Let’s go. We’ll get the other part later.”

Both sets of feet stomped toward the door. Their footsteps echoed down the metal steps outside.

She counted to thirty-Mississippi before finally inhaling a deep breath and, trembling, wormed her way out from under the bed.

Where the hell was Bain?

A quick glance at the bed confirmed her fears. The bad guys had the clue, the envelope, the painting and the metal piece Bain’s grandmother had given her. They also knew Bain’s name.

This was bad. Very bad.

Worse yet, they’d be back for the other piece. Bain didn’t know.

She had to find him and warn him.

Chapter Six

A stack of books teetering in his arms, Bain rushed toward the exit. Was that Reed, eyes wide with terror, stumbling through the vestibule?

Although she was visibly shaking, pale and terrified, she looked like she hadn't been hurt. But he had to be sure.

Ignoring the screech of the alarm at his hasty exit with a pile of unchecked books, he ran to her, dropping half his load to free a hand.

The shouting librarian behind him put a stop to any thoughts of dialogue until they were outside. And he figured going back inside and checking out the materials under his real name was probably a bad move, too. He'd return the books tonight, he vowed.

As he caught her hand and pulled, heading toward the car at full speed, she made a little squeak and stumbled along behind him. Her faltering steps slowed him down, but not enough to keep them from reaching the car long before the library's security guard caught up.

He tossed the books he'd managed to keep in the backseat, gave Reed a gentle shove until she was also sprawled adorably across the books, slammed the door, then hopped into the driver's seat and cranked the car to life.

He couldn't help chuckling when she called him every ugly name in the book as he threw the vehicle into gear and whipped it around a tight corner.

He didn't bother going back to the hotel. Instead, he turned east, toward the freeway. "What happened?" He peered into the rearview mirror. She was still pale. Her bottom lip was trembling. Her hair—caught in the wind blasting through the shot-out windows—was lashing across her milky cheeks. Blinking, she tucked it behind her ears.

It killed him that he couldn't hold her now, that she'd been so scared and he hadn't been there to protect her. He wouldn't leave her alone again. No matter what.

"I ran here. Some men came in and stole the painting, the clue and the key," she chattered. "I was terrified. They know your name. I thought you said you checked into the hotel under a false identity?"

"I did."

"Then how did they find us?"

"I don't know." He maneuvered the vehicle onto the freeway. Where to go? Where would they be safe until he could figure out what the clue said and what this latest development meant? The men had tracked them to a room registered under a false identity. How?

"We need to change cars," he thought aloud. "That'll make it harder for them to tail us."

"They said they were coming back for your piece of the key." Her voice wobbled. She sniffed. Again. Then she snorted.

Aw, damn, she was crying.

"Baby, I swear everything'll be okay." He had to take care of this. He had to take care of her. His insides felt like they'd been ripped out and run over by a Hummer...several times.

Between hiccups, she stuttered, "I-I think we should go to the police. T-tell them everything. Please."

He wanted to go to the police, too. But he knew that was the wrong thing to do, at least at this point. His grandmother had called the police and the next thing he knew, she was dead. "Give me a minute to think."

"Kay," she acquiesced in a quavering voice.

In the immediate future, they needed two things—a car and a safe place to stay.

Where to go? Where, where, where?

Only one place came to mind. A place Reed was not going to appreciate being dragged to. In fact, she would be furious. But in a life-or-death situation if a guy couldn't rely on his ex-wife for help, who could he trust?



No. Fucking. Way.

Reed knew she was acting like an irate child, but she was not going in *Miss Perfect's* house. No way. No how.

Bullets be damned. She'd rather share a jail cell with a randy woman nicknamed Big Bertha than spend a minute with Bain's ex-wife.

What had he been thinking?

"Please." Mr. Heartless climbed out of the parked car and hit the garage door opener's button, and the motor came to life with a rumbling growl. The door rolled down, shutting them inside. "This was the only place where we'll be safe."

"Why's that? Is your wife in the CIA?"

"Ex-wife. No."

"FBI?"

"No. But...she's really good at keeping secrets."

Reed rolled her eyes. She twisted, to send the woman in question a glower. "I'll bet she is."

Bain dragged his fingers through his hair. "Baby, I know how this looks—"

"Would you stop with the 'baby' thing?" she snapped, motioning to Miss Perfect, still standing in the doorway between the garage and the house. "You might make your wife jealous." Miss-Perfectly-Nosey just couldn't mind her own damned business. Then again, Bain had made all of this her business by coming here.

"Ex-wife," he corrected a second time. "Take my word for it, there's nothing you could do that would make her envious."

Was that a stinger or what? Did he have to remind her that she was so much uglier than Miss Perfect Ass? Her eyes burned, but she blinked back the tears. How cruel could this man be? "What's that supposed to mean? That I'm so ugly all she could feel for me is pity? Is that it?"

"You're not ugly! Whatever made you think that?" He caught her hands in his and lifted them to his mouth to place a kiss on the back of each. "I think you're the most beautiful woman on earth. And if it'll make you feel any better, I'd be glad to say that to her face."

His soothing words and tone simultaneously eased the hurt and stoked the flame of desire simmering inside her. The effect he had on her.

She felt like she was locked in a bumper car with him and he was doing the steering. No matter how much she braced herself for each impact, the jarring of each strike made her teeth rattle.

She hated feeling so out of control. So vulnerable.

He scooped up the books with one hand. "I'm probably setting myself up for some grief by introducing the two of you," he whispered. "But I have to tell you, I think if you gave Cindy a chance, you'd like her."

"Heh. Right."

"It's only temporary." He pulled out the fail-proof Bain Kavanagh sad puppy eyes, lowering his voice even more. "Please. Let's go inside. There's nowhere else. It's for your safety. Believe me, I don't want to be here either."

All the fight in her melted away. "Fine."

He insisted on holding her hand as they went inside. He audibly sniffed as they walked past the stove, dropping the stack of books on the kitchen counter next to a loaf of Italian bread. "Is that lasagna I smell? You shouldn't have. And wine, too? What do you have there? A primitive?"

Miss Perfect, standing in front of the open refrigerator, a bottle in one hand, a set of glasses in the other, eyed them both warily. She looked no more thrilled about the situation than Reed was. "Bain, if I could speak to you for a minute." She set the wine and glasses on the counter.

"Uh...sure." He quirked a tense smile at Reed. "Be right back, baby."

Between gritted teeth, she growled out, "Sure, lovey-kins." Grrrr. She both bristled at the endearment and melted. He'd called her *baby* in front of his ex-wife.

The two of them walked around the corner. Being weak, not to mention nosey—hey, if it was okay for Miss Perfect then it was okay for her, too—Reed decided she'd take a little walk...to the corner to eavesdrop.

"Tonight is not a good time," Miss Perfect said. "You can't just show up here unannounced and expect me to welcome you with open arms. I have a life, Bain. I'm allowed to now. Remember? We're divorced."

"We'll stay downstairs. You won't even know we're here."

"That's not the point."

"What is the point? I wouldn't have come here if I'd had a choice. Please, Cindy. We need a place to stay for a couple days—"

"Days? Days! Oh no. You can't stay here that long. No. Are you crazy?"

Reed couldn't help chuckling. "Yes, he is," she whispered to no one.

"I have a date," she continued.

"It's Friday afternoon. You have a date in the middle of the day?"

"He's a doctor. He works nights. And that's beside the point. You can't be here. A date. My ex-husband? That's too Jerry Springer for me."

"Then the lasagna wasn't for me?" Bain asked, sounding pathetic and adorable.

"No, of course not. I didn't know you'd show up here with your ex-girlfriend in tow. Why would I make lasagna for you?"

"Please. My grandmother's dead. You know that much. But someone shot at us. This is serious. A lot more important than a date with some proctologist—"

"He's a plastic surgeon," Miss Perfect Ass boasted.

Ha, wasn't that convenient, Reed silently scoffed. Miss Perfect would get all the Botox injections she could want for free.

"Go stay in a hotel," Cindy snapped. "If you need cash, I'll loan—"

"We tried that. Somehow they found us."

"Dammit. No no no!" She was going to give in. Reed could hear it in her voice. "Dammit, Bain," Cindy repeated. "You can't leave me out of your insanity?"

"Sorry."

"No, you don't know the meaning of that word. But you will. I promise."

Reed had no doubt that much was true.

"Then we can stay?"

Silence. More silence.

Cindy sighed long and loud. "I don't want to hear you, see you or smell you. The first hint of trouble and you're both out. Got it?"

"Can we eat first?"

Miss Perfect laughed. "You're never going to change are you?"

"No. Why would I? I'm perfect the way I am."

"That's a matter of opinion," she responded dryly, her answer echoing Reed's opinion to a T.

A moment later, a grinning Bain, followed by a grimacing Cindy, returned to the kitchen. Silent and aloof, Miss Perfect served two dishes of lasagna. Then she poured two glasses of wine and motioned to Bain. At the chime of the doorbell, she shooed them toward the stairs. "Please, for once don't cause trouble. I'm so going to regret this. I know it." She directed the plea at Bain.

"You won't know we're here." He snatched up both plates, leaving the glasses, silverware and napkins for Reed, and headed downstairs to the most luxurious basement Reed had ever stepped foot in.

To have a home like this. Life was so unfair.

The drywall was painted a rich golden beige. The sofa, matching loveseat and wall unit were nicer than the furniture in Reed's living room. They looked like they'd just been delivered off the designer showroom floor. The carpet was so thick and well padded it felt like she was stepping on an air mattress as she followed Bain across the room. He set the plates on the coffee table then flopped onto the couch. An evil come-hither grin spreading across his face, he patted the cushion.

She sat.

On the loveseat.

He frowned.

Really, did he expect her to get all frisky in his ex-wife's basement? That was...ick! Like Cindy had said, too Jerry Springer.

Intentionally ignoring the injured expression on Bain's face, she arranged her napkin and silverware on the coffee table.

"Your dinner."

Their fingers grazed as she accepted a full plate from him. A zap buzzed up her arm, but she resisted the instinct to flinch and instead muttered a terse, "Thanks. But we just ate lunch." With a sigh of frustration, she set the plate on the table and stared blindly at it.

The chemistry between them just wasn't going away. No matter where they were. No matter how much she wished it would disappear forever. No matter how wrong she knew they were for each other.

Talk about uncomfortable. Frustrating.

Inconvenient.

She could just imagine them getting busy and Miss Perfect traipsing down the stairs in her stilettos and teddy just as they were about to reach the Big O, a basket of laundry in her hands.

Yet she was sorely tempted to drag her fingers through those silky-smooth waves at his nape, pull him flush to her and invite his mouth to devour hers like it had earlier.

Another blistering wave of desire coursed through her body.

Was it hot down here or what?

Her cheeks stinging, she lifted her gaze. Bain looked like a man who knew exactly what she was thinking. Undisguised desire narrowed his eyes to slits and widened his pupils until the deep blue of his irises appeared as a thin outline. The tint of a sexy flush gave his tanned complexion a slightly ruddy tone. His tongue slipped between his lips, laying a slick path along his lower lip as it swept from one side to the other before disappearing into the world's most scrumptious mouth this side of heaven. His body tensed, muscles cording, veins roping.

Oy vey, in the blink of a lust-filled eye, this situation had just gone from bad to worse. Now, she wasn't just dealing with her ex-fiancé. She was running from ruthless killers. Hiding out in Bain's ex-wife's house, which could be next month's feature in *House and Garden*. Not to mention the woman herself possessed the face and body of a cover model. Plus, the bad guys had the key and the clue. And they knew who had the other piece of the key and had vowed to come after it. And yet, all she could think about at this moment was how absolutely amazing it felt to have Bain's hands on her body.

How she longed for her simple, uncomplicated, Bain-free life!

"Did you find anything useful at the library?" In a desperate attempt at distracting herself—despite the fact that she wasn't even remotely

hungry—she cut a piece of lasagna and lifted it to her mouth, fully expecting it to be perfect, like the woman and the house.

“Uh...Reed,” he muttered. “I wouldn’t take such a big bite...”

She placed a healthy-sized portion onto her tongue and slowly pulled the fork from her mouth.

It took until the count of three before the flavor of the food registered in her head. Her throat imploded. Her eyes bulged. She scrambled for her napkin and ejected the grotesque substance—it couldn’t possibly qualify as food—into it. Napkin wadded, tears wiped from eyes, she chugged half her glass of wine in an effort to wash away the wretched aftertaste.

Bain gave her a knowing smile and motioned to his untouched plate. “The woman is the world’s worst cook. She’s even managed to wreck oatmeal. And that was after she dragged me on this luxury cooking vacation in San Sebastian.”

Whether it was relief that Miss Perfect could now be called Miss Not-So-Perfect or just because she was giddy from all the stress they’d been facing, but she found herself doubled over in laughter. “Then why ask for it?” she said between guffaws.

He shrugged, explaining over her rising laughter, “I thought you might appreciate learning a thing or two about my ex-wife.”

Bain patiently waited until the sniggering had eased and the tears streaming down her face had cleared before he answered the other question she’d posed, about the library.

“Actually, I did find out some things.” He took a few swallows of wine, then pushed aside his plate. “Be right back. I left my books in the kitchen.” He unfolded his hunky form and ran up the stairs.

She took those precious few moments to fortify her anti-Bain defenses. Once again, she ticked off all the things she disliked about him, although this time, it seemed that the list was shorter. What had she forgotten?

He was controlling.

And he was egotistical.

And...and...

He returned before she could add to the brief list, wedged himself between her body and the arm of the loveseat—he had to realize how uncomfortable that would make her—then flipped the pages of the top book.

There was a nice big couch over there. Why did he insist on sitting so close? She figured the skin of her cheeks had to be hot enough to fry an egg on.

Dry throat. Dry mouth. Thirsty. Liquid.

Their thighs rubbed as she leaned forward to snatch her glass of wine from the coffee table.

Sweat beaded on her forehead.

Her hands started trembling.

She lifted the glass and gulped down the tangy wine, relishing the soothing warmth slowly filling her belly.

“...so all we need to figure out is what’s the key, and then we can decode the message.”

“Huh?” she asked, realizing he’d been talking the whole time she’d been quaffing down the fermented beverage like a dehydrated camel guzzling water in the desert. “What key?”

At least the wine was making her feel a little calmer about all of this craziness. In fact, she was a little giddy. Because she rarely drank alcohol, that one glass would no doubt have a pronounced effect on her outlook on a number of things, Bain included.

In fact, it already was.

“...some kind of document, or book, or even a street sign could be the key.” He blinked once, twice, three times. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Like what?”

“Like you have something on your mind.”

Oh, did she ever. “I don’t know. I was just thinking about what you were saying.”

“Then do you have an idea?”

Sure do! Handcuffs might be fun. “About what?”

“The key.”

Drats, back to that. “Um...no. ’Fraid not. Sorry. I’m too...erm, tired to think about codes and keys. Maybe we should rest for a while? ’Til dark. Wouldn’t it be smarter to go out after dark?”

He nodded. “Yes, that does make sense.”

“In fact, I think best when I’m lying down.” She glanced meaningfully at the couch.

“Oh, no. We can do a lot better than that.” He stood and reached a hand down to her. She let him pull her to her feet and gaily skipped along behind him. He led her toward the back of the room, where a pair of doors stood along one wall. He swept open the door on the right and flipped a light switch on the wall, illuminating a gorgeous bedroom boasting a massive four-poster bed that made her green with envy. Who kept stuff this beautiful in their basement? “W-w-w-wow,” she stammered.

He slid a smile her way that made everything inside her warm and toasty, especially specific bits of her anatomy that had been neglected the past couple of years.

She knew this was a major step, that once she slept with Bain, she wouldn’t be able to keep this thing between them from fully consuming her.

She was kissing her simple, carefree, safe—and lonely—life goodbye. And opening herself up to potential heartbreak all over again. But she couldn’t deny it any longer. He loved her. She loved him, still. Despite everything. It was a simple truth. And it was a given that sooner or later they would come to this point. She was done fighting her feelings.

And as far as the ex-wife was concerned, the distant, rhythmic thump, thump, thump of a bed two floors up told her Miss Perfect could care less what they were doing down here. Bain’s ex-wife had moved on with her life and would no doubt be extremely glad to see Bain move on with his, especially if it put an end to his surprise visits on Friday afternoons.

God, she hoped she wouldn’t regret this.

Chapter Seven

Bain had always been a very dominant lover. That had been one of the reasons why she'd never been able to move on. It was as if he knew her mind as well as her body. His allure wasn't so much about what he did physically to her body as what he said, how he looked at her, how he made her feel inside.

She could see already that he hadn't lost that gift. His hooded eyes spoke to her very soul, both promising her most secret desires, and demanding her full surrender. Submission.

"Undress for me, baby."

A quiver of delight shook her entire body. His gaze was like a literal touch. Hot. Scorching. A brand. She peeled off her shirt first, enjoying the dangerous glimmer in Bain's eyes. The warmth of her mounting desire churned in her belly and gathered between her legs.

Next came her bra. She kept her eyes focused on his as she unclipped the clasp and let the straps slide down her arms. The garment fell away, and she cupped her hands over her tight nipples, thrilling in the sweet friction.

"Oh, yes. Play with them." Perched on the edge of the mattress, Bain shifted, running his flattened hand over the visible bulge in his pants. "Look what you do to me."

There could be no doubt what she was doing to him. Just like there could be no doubt what his I'm-going-to-eat-you-alive expression was doing to her. It was sheer agony, this game they played. They toyed with each other, delaying release until they were both clutching each other in trembling arms, their bodies slick with sweat.

It was only the beginning. Her body anticipated the delights sure to come.

After driving herself nearly crazy by pinching her nipples and rolling them between her fingers, she was finally granted permission to remove

the rest of her clothing. Within moments, she stood before Bain's hungry eyes, nude, vulnerable.

Bain motioned for her to come closer. Still seated, he gripped her hips between his hands and dragged his tongue down her torso, from the center of her breastbone to her belly button.

Reed's knees were quaking. She was going to fall to the floor any minute now. She just knew it. She grabbed his shoulders and widened her stance.

Of course, the change in position opened up new opportunities to Bain, ones he didn't hesitate to take advantage of. He slid a hand between her legs and teased her slick labia with a fingertip.

Quickly losing herself in the urgent need pounding through her body, Reed let her head fall back and moaned. Bain's mouth devoured her nipples. His hand possessed her pussy, stroking, taking, claiming. She was his. She had always been his.

With hands, mouth and body, he turned her around until she was lying on the bed, legs dangling over the edge of the mattress. Through blurry eyes, she watched him undress.

That glorious body. Muscle and sinew. Fully masculine. Powerful. Her pussy clenched around aching emptiness.

"Please, I can't wait much longer."

"I won't make you suffer too long. This time. I promise." Bain lowered to his knees and lifted her legs, setting one on each shoulder. Then, being cruel beyond words, he used his tongue, lips and fingers to torture her, driving her to the brink of ecstasy once, twice, three times, but stopping no more than a second before she'd found release.

"How I love the way you taste. How your body responds to my touch." He climbed up onto the bed, easing her into position farther up the mattress with gentle hands. "We're perfect for each other, don't you agree?"

Did she ever.

He wedged his hips between her parted thighs and teased her nether lips with the head of his cock, spreading slick juices down over her

perineum and up over her clit. “We fit together in every way. Body. Mind. Soul.”

His body was hard and hot over top of her. Rigid, with a latent strength she craved to experience more fully. She ran her hands up his chest, over his shoulders, down his back. His muscles rippled beneath satiny skin as he levered himself lower to kiss her.

She could taste herself on his lips, tongue. The smooth, sweet flavor added yet another sensation to an already overwhelming mix. She wanted release. No, she needed release. Whimpering, she begged into their joined mouths, “Bain, please.”

He broke the kiss. “Soon, baby. You’re not ready yet.”

She was about to combust. Not ready? Could a girl get any readier?

He set about proving that indeed, a girl could. He entered her in an agonizingly slow inward stroke and left her in an equally unbearably deliberate outward one. Lifting his upper body, he changed the angle of his penetration, while exposing her clit. This allowed him control over the speed and depth of his thrusts while stroking her clit.

At his mercy, she clawed at the bedding beneath her. Eyes shut, she rode the rise and fall of arousal, tossed about on the waves like a rowboat in the ocean.

And then it was there. Release. Sweet bliss. He gave it to her before taking his own. They clung to each other, their bodies one. Their mouths joined. Their hearts hammering out a glorious song of joy and fulfillment.

He whispered, cradling her trembling body in his arms, “I will always love you, baby.”

A single tear escaped the corner of her eye, trickled into the hair at her temple.



Bain smiled at Reed’s sleeping, peaceful expression before gently sliding his arm out from under her heavy head. Let her rest for a couple hours. She’d dealt with a lot of stress the last thirty-six hours or so, a lot more than she’d ever had to endure before, he was sure.

He slipped on his clothes and padded to the den area of the finished basement, heading for his grandmother's diary. Already, he'd learned more about the woman by reading that book than he had in the many hours he'd spent talking to her. Why had she kept everything to herself?

Her hopes. Fears. Sorrows and joys. They were all in this fragile leather-bound book, scrawled in her handwriting. She'd started the journal after graduating high school.

After an hour of leafing through its pages, he realized this precious manual contained almost every significant event of her life. Her wedding day. The birth of her first child. The death of that same child in Kuwait. The birth of her second and third children, their childhoods and later weddings. The birth of her first grandchild, Bain. His heart swelled as he read her account of their first meeting. His first Christmas, first day of school and other firsts. She'd chronicled every single one of them.

Then, teary-eyed, he flipped to the last few pages she'd written, hoping he'd find a clue to the identity of her murderer.

His insides twisted into knots. It wasn't what he'd expected or even hoped to read, but it explained so many things.

The doctor told me the cancer has spread. I have less than a month. I continue to refuse the chemotherapy. He doesn't understand, but he can't force me to take it. I'm ready to go. I've lived a full life, seen my children to adulthood, and my grandson. I haven't told Bain because I know what he would do. I love that boy dearly, which is why I'm not strong enough to fight him. He won't understand. I just want the pain to end. My last wish is to go swiftly, although I fear that's impossible...

Cancer. She hadn't told him.

Why? Because she knew he would've insisted on taking the chemotherapy.

She was right. He would've refused to let her go. Selfishly would have pressured her into taking the drugs, to delay the inevitable for how long? A month? Two? Six? The woman was eighty-six years old.

That bullet had, in a perverted, despicable way, been a blessing in disguise. At least she'd died quickly. Her suffering was over.

Dropping his face into his hands, he wept. A murderer had given his grandmother her last wish, not he.

"I'll learn from this, Gram," he vowed, a flattened palm stroking the journal's worn cover. "Thank you."

Chapter Eight

Reed stretched lazily, like a cat perched in a sunny window. Ahhhh... She had aches in places that hadn't ached in ages. And it felt oh. So. Good.

Bain had once again left her. He had a habit of doing that. She quickly redressed and hurried out of the bedroom, finding him in the living area, pouring over a pile of phonebooks. He lifted heavy, bloodshot eyes to her as she padded barefoot across the soft carpet.

"What's wrong?" She eased herself onto the couch next to him. Something had happened. Something terrible. She'd never seen him like this. He looked devastated. Eyes watery, dark with grief. "What is it?"

He blinked several times and audibly swallowed before responding, "My grandmother's journal. I had no idea." He handed her an old, leather-bound book. "She was dying."

"She was?" Reed glanced down at the book in her hands. She laid it on the coffee table, beside the leaning stack of phone books and swept one of his hands into hers, sandwiching it between them. "Bain."

"She wouldn't tell me," he said in a shaky voice. His gaze met hers. "She was suffering. And she just wanted it to end. Goddammit, the bastard who killed her did her a favor."

Reed had no words of comfort or wisdom to share. What could possibly be said? Instead, she did the only thing she was capable of—wrapped her arms around his tremulous shoulders and held him. And she didn't release him until he pulled away.

He motioned to the phone books. "I've tried looking up that name, the one from the envelope. It was the only thing that could distract me from..." His words trailed off, as if he lacked the strength to utter them.

"Did you find anything?" she queried, gently helping to steer the conversation away from a subject he obviously wasn't fully capable of discussing yet.

“Nothing. Not a goddamn thing.”

“Well, it was a long time ago.” She recalled how old that envelope had appeared to be. “It’s entirely possible the woman is dead by now.”

“I did think of that. But how the hell does a person find out where someone who is now dead lived decades ago?”

“Hmmm...let’s think for a moment.” She fingered the piece of paper Bain had copied the name and code onto. “If this clue was meant to be significant years after it was written, we must assume whoever had left it would expect the clue to mean the same thing years or even decades after it was created. Otherwise, it would be useless. Which means...”

“...Mrs. Penelope Hammond might have been dead even then.” He dragged the nearest phone book toward him and started flipping through the pages. “Cement...cemeteries. Here we go.” He read down the list with an index finger. “There are dozens.”

“But not all of them are old enough.”

“True.” Bain shifted forward and crammed his hand in his back pocket, extracting his cell phone. “I guess we start with Anderson’s and work our way down.”

“I’ll read off the numbers,” she offered, pulling the book toward her.



Hours later, they were standing at the head of Mrs. Penelope Hammond’s grave. In the dark.

Between the chilly, drizzly weather, the heavy shadows cloaking the entire cemetery, and Reed’s runaway imagination drumming up images of bad guys lurking behind headstones, Reed was a jumpy bundle of nerves. Literally quaking, her teeth chattering, she wrapped both arms around one of Bain’s and squinted to read the writing on the headstone.

There was the usual year of birth and death. But a lengthy poem followed.

In one hand—attached to the arm that Reed was currently clinging to—Bain gripped the paper with the clue and a spiral notebook he’d borrowed from Cindy. In the other, he held a pen.

"Baby, I need my hand," he urged when his efforts to bend his elbow were thwarted by her tight grip.

"S-sure." She released his arm and stooped down to get a closer look at the poem. "Have any idea how the code works?"

"I'm guessing the numbers are letters. And the decimals separate each letter in a word. Then the dashes indicate the end of a word."

"You mean we're going to have to count every letter? Ack. What about spaces?"

"Don't know. I guess we try a couple to see."

"Okay. What's the first number?"

"Two hundred two."

It took her a while to count to two hundred two. She didn't include spaces or punctuation. "T."

"Okay." He wrote it down in the notebook, then read the next number, "Fifty-three."

She counted out fifty-three letters. "H. Say, at least that makes sense."

"Looking good, babe."

In this fashion, they worked their way through the entire message. They were on the last word when a car rolled up the road, headlights off. It stopped about a hundred yards from them.

"Shit! No time to get the last three letters." Bain caught Reed's arm in his fist and dragged her to her feet.

"I can count fast," Reed argued. "Or we can wait until they leave—"

"No. Let's go. I think we can figure out the rest."

Trying hard to be silent, they sprinted toward Cindy's car, hidden behind the caretaker's building, one of two structures on the premises. Reed zigzagged through the ancient oaks and pines dotting the hilly landscape, while simultaneously taking care not to step on any sunken headstones. The crisp air whirled past her ears as she ran, stinging her nose and burning her oxygen-starved lungs. Frantically, she pumped her arms in an effort to build up speed. While she heard no sign that anyone was following them, she sensed it. There was that telltale tingle between her shoulder blades.

And then some bark exploded off a nearby tree, striking her face.

"They've seen us!" Bain shouted, dragging her behind a thick tree trunk. "Dammit!" He spun around, wedging her between the rock-solid tree and his equally strong and unyielding body. She clung to him and consciously dragged in one burning gasp after another. Bending slightly, he peered around the tree then twisted to look over their shoulders. Since Reed was positioned with her back against the tree, facing Bain, she could see around Bain's bulk. The car was still a distance away. A long distance away.

They couldn't outrun a bullet.

Trapped.

A twig snapped under someone's foot and Reed jerked with a start. Bain wrapped his arms around her, just about forcing what little air she'd managed to drag into her lungs out again. He loosened one hand, cupped her chin until she met his gaze, then lifted a forefinger to his mouth.

She nodded, understanding his meaning.

Footsteps crunched on fallen leaves to their left. Whoever it was, he was close. Too close. Certain any movement would catch his eye, even the tiniest twitch, Reed literally held her breath. Her eyes followed the dark shadow creeping between the trees.

A sudden scurry of movement made her flinch. She caught the white of a rabbit's retreating tail as it raced toward them.

The man's shadow shifted and crouched low to the ground and she suddenly had an appreciation for how little furry critters felt during hunting season. To be tracked and hunted... She shuddered. Bain tightened his hold on her.

The shadow stood and moved quickly back toward the road. A shrill whistle echoed in the dark, the sound seeming to come from the grave they'd just abandoned. A second one, closer, answered the first.

Reed sagged against Bain with relief. They were giving up the chase? More prayers answered.

She owed God a lot for that one.

Bain clasped his hand around hers and tiptoed past the tree. They inched their way toward the vehicle, Bain stopping at every tree they passed to check and make sure no one was following. Reed didn't start breathing regularly until the car was within sprinting distance. She was about ready to break into a run when Bain stopped her with a swift jerk to her elbow.

She staggered backwards, losing her balance. He caught her underneath the armpits, and whirling, somehow turned her around and pinned her to the back of the tree. At her questioning glare, he subtly tipped his head toward the car.

Had there been more than two bad guys? Had one of them found the car?

Once again, she found herself smooshed between Bain's bod and a tree, petrified, shaking, cold, teeth chattering. God, was this all worth it? She was tempted to toss them the clue and the remaining piece of the key and call it a day. The only thing keeping her from doing just that was the memory of Bain's tear-filled eyes as he'd talked about his grandmother. If she'd been in his shoes, would she even think about throwing away the one thing her grandmother had valued more than her life?

Hell, no.

Maybe it made no sense to her right now, but she had to trust that it was important enough for his grandmother to sacrifice her life to protect it.

Bain slowly searched their surroundings. She could only guess he was looking for some way out of the cemetery, a way that didn't involve a stroll past an armed felon. Problem was, there was a ten-foot-high brick wall skirting the entire premises. She couldn't climb for nothing. And at best, a hand up might gain her three feet, which meant she'd still be reaching over her head to grip the top. How the heck would she make it over?

Wasn't going to happen.

She decided they'd simply have to sit and wait it out. She started slowly inching down. The back of her clothes caught on the tree's rough

bark until eventually the skin of her lower back had been bared. Lower she scooted, pulling on Bain's arms to hint at her intentions. He resisted, and she released his hands to continue her journey to the ground. It took less than four seconds to recognize why he hadn't wanted to sit. Although the drizzle had stopped, the grass was still wet. Now, her backside was sopping, the cotton denim and her panties underneath clung to her skin. Nothing more uncomfortable than wet pants.

She didn't bother standing at that point. Her butt was wet. Standing up wouldn't change that fact. So, she'd walk around looking like she'd had an accident. If that was the worst that happened to her tonight, she was in good shape.

As it turned out, the bad guys were less patient than she and Bain proved to be. Although they took a good, long look at Cindy's car, and seemed to be willing to stick around a while to wait them out, in the end, they left.

Reed sagged against Bain as they drove home. She was mentally and emotionally numb, freezing and ready to indulge in a long, therapeutic cry. After all, she had plenty of reason to cry. Her butt was soaked. Her eyes burning. Her head spinning. Instead, she sniffled and shook...and concentrated on not letting her teeth chatter.

Bain smoothed long, slow, soothing strokes down her arm, murmuring promises that it was almost over, that they'd soon be safe.

She could only hope. She was trying to be strong, dammit. She really was. But how many times in her life had she faced anything nearly as terrifying as armed killers in a cemetery at night? Never.

And hopefully never again.



What the hell was he doing?

Bain had to practically carry Reed into Cindy's house, she was trembling so bad. She'd been terrified out there, and for good reason. He'd been a little scared himself. How they'd made it out of that cemetery with their bodies and souls still intact was beyond him. It was a minor miracle.

Which brought him back to his original question—what the hell was he doing, putting Reed through this?

Yes, his grandmother had perished and she was due justice. Her killer needed to be stopped. But it was time for Bain to face a few facts.

First, while he loved his grandmother more than life itself, he loved the woman sitting beside him, shaking like a blade of grass in a hurricane, even more.

Second, finding his grandmother's killer and seeing the bastard put away for life would not bring the woman back.

Third, finding the treasure would probably not stop anything. This was only one of countless treasures in the area. There were hundreds of the ships sunken in the Great Lakes alone. And there would always be unscrupulous people looking for an opportunity to make some quick money, no matter what it took.

He was not Superman. He wasn't going to clean up the town and stop all crime in its tracks. He was a regular guy who needed to start living like a regular guy. And quit being so damned narrow-sighted. It was like he was a horse with blinders. Once he'd fixed his sights on a specific track, he could only see straight ahead.

That was the lesson his grandmother had wanted to teach him. That was why she'd mailed him her journal days before she'd died. She'd known somehow that she'd be dead by the time he'd received it.

No doubt, his grandmother'd given Reed the key to bring her back into his life. That wonderful, loving woman had known if he could learn this final lesson, he'd be able to love Reed like he should.

To be so wise.

And so, he decided, he'd embrace his new outlook on life. He'd give up the search for the treasure. He had the closure. And he had, indeed, found a greater treasure in Reed's love.

Turning, he said, "Just say the words and we'll quit. Right now. Done. Over."

Reed lifted red, watery eyes to his, blinked several times. Her bottom lip trembled. "No. We'll see this through. I can handle it."

Hello? Had she just said that? *Ohmygod, I've completely lost my mind.*

Bain had just handed her the opportunity she'd been waiting for. He'd offered to quit this insanity, to stop chasing clues in terrifying, dark places. To stop running from pistol-toting treasure hunters who lived by the law of Finders Keepers, Losers Die.

And what did she do? Turn it down?

Crazy as it sounded, she had to see this thing through now. She had to know she could. It was like climbing three-quarters of Mount Everest. In a blizzard. With no supplies. And quitting with the top in sight. This wasn't about the money. Or even about Bain's grandmother, although her heart was still heavy at the loss of the dear old woman. And it wasn't about proving something to Bain.

It was about proving something to herself. About growing. Pushing herself past every fear that had stood in her way. She was no adrenaline junkie and she doubted she'd ever be an investigative reporter. The demands of the job went against her very nature. But to quit now would mean turning her back on the woman she could be. Stronger. Braver. More willing to stick her neck out and take risks.

Bain sat beside her on the couch and gathered her small hands into his larger ones. He looked bewildered. "Why?"

"It's something I need to do." She met his gaze and lifted her chin, her resolve building. "For me."

"Okay. If you're doing this for you..." He bent forward and kissed her tenderly, murmuring against her mouth, "I love you, baby. I love you beyond words."

"I love you, too." She broke the kiss to give him a watery smile. "I have a plan."

"You do?"

"We're going to trap the bad guys, find the treasure and end this for once and for all."

He palmed her cheek, his eyes shining, his mouth pulling into a soft grin. "I'm all ears. What's your plan?"

"You are definitely not all ears, but we'll get to that later," she teased. And then she explained the details of her plan.

Chapter Nine

*The Old Plank ends
At His house.
Beneath the angels
Lies the secret
Eternal arms
To seize and protect.*

Reed wasn't afraid to admit she was scared poop-less. Over the course of the last two days, she'd laid the groundwork that would pretty much assure herself a face-to-face encounter with a man who had no qualms about killing innocent little old ladies. Practically given him a written invitation, in the form of a newspaper article in yesterday's paper detailing the myth of a lost treasure, the clues they'd uncovered, and the location of the gold and gems—assuming they were right about the message they'd decoded at the cemetery. The article's timing and a few subtle hints about security systems and work on phone lines would hopefully force the bad guys to show up this morning at 5:30 to remove the treasure before Reed and Bain were reportedly going in.

At present, they were sitting in a rented car, about a block south of Salem Lutheran Church, one of Plymouth's oldest churches, and one of the few buildings to have survived the many fires that had destroyed most of the town over a hundred years ago. It sat at the end of what had once been Plymouth's plank toll road, the route traveled by horse-drawn wagons bearing goods to be sold in the markets before the railroads had been brought into town.

She'd made a few phone calls before leaving Bain's house an hour ago, including one final call to the police. She knew there would soon be unmarked cars surrounding the church and policemen watching, but

she still had doubts about whose side the police were on—hers or the bad guys’.

A white Saturn rolled slowly past. The headlights cut off about fifty yards from the church. The car stopped in front of the building.

This wasn’t right. She checked their rental car’s illuminated clock. Four-forty-three in the morning. The bad guys were early.

“You have the metal thing?” she asked through chattering teeth.

Clearly catching the fear in her voice, Bain frowned as he lifted the item. It was obvious he didn’t exactly support her going this far, but he didn’t state his opinion. He tucked the metal piece in his jacket pocket and nodded. “The police aren’t here yet. We should wait.”

She watched three shadowed forms exit the white car and scurry around the east side of the church, out of view. “We’re going to miss our chance.”

Bain sighed and reached under the driver’s seat, pulling out a revolver.

Reed gasped. “Where’d you get that?”

“I’d rather not say.”

Bain had a gun. An illegal gun, no doubt. As if she didn’t have enough to be freaking out about. “You can’t take that in the church. I’m guessing you don’t have a permit for it. When the police come, you’ll be arrested.”

“I’m not walking in there unarmed.” He checked the weapon for bullets, then tucked it into the waist of his pants. As they climbed out of the car, a second car rolled by, this one black.

Reed pointed, heaving a sigh of relief. “Good. Looks like one of the unmarked police cars is here already.”

The car turned at the intersection, driving along the east side of the church.

“Should we go tell them that the treasure hunters are already in the church?” Reed whispered, falling into step beside Bain. She was both scared to death and exhilarated, like a kid about to climb into a carnival ride for the first time. Her heart was thumping so hard against her breastbone, she wondered if the pounding was visible, even through her

clothes. She zipped her jacket against the chilly predawn air. Hours before sunrise, the world was still and quiet.

"I wish you were wired," Bain grumbled.

"That would've required me to call the police days ago. And you didn't want to risk that. Remember?" She stole a glance at him. He was scowling as he plodded along beside her. His worries chilled the air between them, amplifying the tension coiling around her madly beating heart like a constrictor. She was so glad he was there with her, there to help her, support her and to protect her. Without Bain, she'd never have the guts to walk into a situation this potentially lethal.

Yet, at the same time, she didn't like what it was doing to him, to them. He was trying to be supportive and it was obvious he was impressed with her plan. But he also didn't like the risks involved and had stated so. Many times. Although not verbally.

How ironic. From the beginning, she'd been the one who'd fussed and fumed about the danger, and now she was throwing caution to the wind. And Bain was taking her former position, as the pessimistic conservative. She had to admit, however, that he wasn't as much of a whiner as she had been. His objections took the form of broody silence and the occasional grunt.

She couldn't wait for this whole thing to be over.

They headed around the east side of the building, following the path the bad guys had taken. Reed spotted the black car, parked down the street, lights off.

"I think we'd better go tell the policeman." She hurried her pace to a slow jog but halted midstride when she caught a glimpse of someone standing next to the car, bent at the waist. "Uh..." She turned a questioning glance at Bain. "Maybe it's not the police?"

"And maybe it is." He grabbed her by the elbow and sprinted toward a nearby hedge. He pointed at the spotlights next to the rearview mirrors, a surefire indicator that the car was indeed an unmarked police car. "I don't like this. It's a trap."

"Darn it! I guess I'm not clever enough to outsmart criminals and crooked cops."

He soothed her wounded pride with a gentle touch to her shoulder. "That's nothing to be ashamed of."

"They still can't open the Chamber of Secrets or whatever it is without our metal thingy. Should we just leave? Hide it? What do you think?"

"They won't stop until they have it."

"That was my thought, too."

Their gazes met and held for several seconds. Finally, Bain whispered, "We're staring at the peak."

"Peak?"

"Yeah, Mount Everest. Remember?" He palmed her cheek, kissed her nose. "Ready to make the final climb to the top?"

"You have a plan?"

"Not exactly." He pulled the gun from its hiding place and stood, motioning back toward the church.

She nodded and followed.

The door was unlocked. Bain entered first, gun held at arm's length in front of him. Once he'd made sure no one was waiting for them, he motioned Reed inside. They moved silently through the nearly pitch black room, a classroom with cribs lining one wall, toys stowed on shelves on the opposite. Through a door and down the hallway. It was only because they'd made a visit to the church yesterday during the day to map out their route that they were able to make their way to the sanctuary without either tripping down stairs or running into walls.

Bain crept around the last corner, leading with the gun.

The sanctuary was silent. With the exception of a dim light illuminating the cross hanging on the far wall, the cavernous room was also heavily cloaked in shadow. They took advantage of the darkness as they made their way up one of the side aisles, toward the altar. About ten feet from their target, Reed heard a single shuffling footstep. Bain must have heard it, too. He swiveled, his arm stretched in front of him and fired the gun. The echo of two shots, fired almost simultaneously, was followed by a dull thump.

Bain? A quake of fear ran up Reed's spine. She swallowed a screech and dropped to a squat. Listening, eyes wide, she searched the shadows. Silence.

For a few agonizing seconds, she was alone with her private demons, her worst fears. Bain was not there. Only darkness and terror.

So dark.

She felt along the floor with her fingertips. Smooth and cold stone. Had that thud been Bain or the enemy? And were there others with guns? Hiding in the shadows? She didn't dare speak, knowing even a whisper might lead to her death. She twisted around, searching the floor behind her. A fingertip brushed against something, a shoe? The sole seemed to be on the floor, indicating whoever wore the shoe was standing up.

A hand fell to her shoulder, landing heavily, like a sack of dry cement. She gasped, jerking away. The brush of Obsession-scented skin against her cheek instantly doused her panic.

She stilled, blindly running a hand up his calf until one of his hands closed around it. She climbed to her feet and once again they were inching toward the altar.

As she tripped up a series of shallow steps in the dark, she silently chanted the clue in her head, a bizarre mantra that still held little meaning. *His house* most definitely referred to the church. No mistake there. A glance up at the ornate stained-glass window above the cross, the colors now muddy because of the darkness outside, suggested they needed to search along the back wall. Angels.

But eternal arms? What the heck?

Instinct told her to prepare for an ambush. Logic told her they needed the key. The little voice in her head told her to make for the nearest exit as fast as possible.

Where were the bad guys? Had the police stopped them before they'd come in? There simply couldn't have been only one. She'd seen three outside. Had their first assumption—that the police were allied with the treasure hunters—been wrong?

Bain tapped her hand. The dim light washing down the back wall illuminated his face well enough to read his gestures. He was pointing at the floor. They both dropped to their knees and started feeling the wood platform for some kind of handle or opening. Seconds later, she found a groove. She traced it with her index finger, following it back toward the wall to a small indentation, a hole the diameter of her pinky.

Hmmm... She could think of one thing that would fit in that hole perfectly. A certain long, skinny metal thing. Too bad a pair of treasure hunters had stolen it from their hotel room.

Bain gently pushed Reed's hand aside and produced the item she'd assumed was in the possession of the armed thieves.

"Where'd you get that?" she whispered.

He slid the key into the hole. There was a metallic click as the key engaged in the lock. "The dead guy," he hissed. "Sshhhh."

She gulped. "Dead?"

"Oh...uh. Yeah. I shot him. You didn't figure that out by now?"

"Oh God."

"I had no choice." He twisted his wrist, but it appeared that the key wasn't turning.

"I...I know," she stuttered.

"Why isn't this working?" He wrenched his wrist, counterclockwise and then clockwise again.

"Rust?"

"Could be. Dammit." Rising upright, he dug in his pocket, producing the bigger metal piece. He lifted it overhead.

"What are you doing?"

"Gonna knock the rust loose."

"You'll make a racket!"

"Honey, if there was anyone else in here, they'd have shot us by now." His arm came down, delivering a sharp blow to the end of the key. A clang echoed through the church.

Out of sheer instinct, Reed spun around to face the shadows, prepared for a shower of bullets.

None came. But what did come was a low grinding sound. From the wall behind her. Similar to bricks dragging across each other.

“Hot damn!” Bain exclaimed. “That chunk of metal did more than I thought. Not sure how it worked, though. It’s magnetic.”

Turning, Reed discovered a hole the size of a shoebox in the wall. Bain had his arms up to his elbows thrust into the hole and was rooting around in the dark for whatever was hidden within.

“Found something.” He pulled out a small box, about three inches square. It was ornate. Jewels flashed colored stars on the wall as he turned it over and over in his hands. “Gorgeous.”

“But so small. Is this all of it, you think?”

“I don’t know. Could be.” Bain ran a hand over one side. “Can’t find a latch. But there’s something on the bottom. A series of circular wooden disks with letters carved into them.” A huge smile slowly lighting his features, he stood, helped her to her feet and then pulled her into the tightest hug of her life. “We did it, baby. Let’s get out of here. Go someplace where we can see.” Before she had a chance to get comfortable and really enjoy the hug, he pulled away, took her hand in his and passed her the box. Together, they walked down the hall, back toward the classroom, to the door through which they’d entered. Giddy with relief, Reed hurried along beside Bain, his hand warm in hers. She giggled halfway through the church before getting a handle on herself and sobering up.

She could hardly believe it was over. It had been so much easier than she’d anticipated. There’d been only one bad guy. Bain had taken care of him with no problem. Certainly not the level of hair-raising, gun-shooting, chasing-and-running business she’d expected. Obviously, she’d spent too many nights watching action adventure movies like *National Treasure* and *The Da Vinci Code*. Active imagination. Yeppers, she had that...in spades. She was definitely writing that novel, put that imagination to use.

Of course, she realized the instant they stepped outside— and a giant white spotlight blinded them—that her first instincts had been right all

along. A man's voice bellowed from a loudspeaker, "Drop your weapons and lie on the ground!"

She knew what was happening, but had no idea why. "What's going on?" she screeched.

"Just do what they say." Bain slowly set his gun on the ground in front of them then, hands raised, dropped to his knees. Reed did the same. "If anything happens to me. Go to Cindy. She'll know what to do."

Then so many things occurred, all at once, that she barely had the chance to sort it all out. Somehow, she ended up handcuffed, sitting in the back of a police car, answering a battery of questions hurled at her by one scary-looking policeman sporting a crew cut and an attitude that would make a grown man cry for his mother.

She answered his every question, over and over and over, interjecting every now and then an inquiry of her own. Naturally, hers were ignored.

Hours later, her handcuffs were removed. It could only be assumed they'd decided she wasn't a criminal. Unfortunately, it would seem they didn't come to the same conclusion about Bain. He was hauled away in another car and she was left at the church, thankful that they'd at least been nice enough to get the car keys for her.

Hands trembling, she drove to Cindy's house. After stalling the rental car at least a hundred times and grinding the clutch to the point of no return, she coasted the vehicle up Cindy's driveway. No sooner did she have the sorely abused car shut off, then she was up on the front porch ringing the doorbell.

Cindy, dressed in a robe and wearing a wicked scowl, answered the door after the twentieth ring. "Let me guess," she said by way of a greeting, "Bain's in jail. Again." Eyes rolling, she stepped aside to let Reed into the house.

Reed swallowed a sarcastic comment. After everything she'd been through today, she was so in the mood to give someone some shit. Miss Perfect here was just asking for it.

However. If Miss Smart Ass was Bain's only hope for getting out of jail, then she'd better kiss the woman's perfect little ass.

Should she throw up now? Or later?

Her tongue held firmly between her teeth, Reed ground out, “Yes, but I have no idea why. If it’s about the bad guy he shot—”

Miss Perfect gasped. “Hold up. He shot someone? Bain?”

“It was self-defense. The other guy shot at us first.”

“I’m going to kill him. Damn it. That was never part of the deal! Once again, he’ll expect me to fix things—”

“What ‘deal?’” Reed suddenly felt like the lone person left out of an inside joke.



“More lies, Bain?” Reed was fuming. She was beyond fuming. She was boiling over with rage. Her insides were churning like a Mount Vesuvius seconds before it had erupted. “Have you told me anything that was true?” she screamed into his face. Her eyes were burning like they’d been bathed in hydrochloric acid, but she refused to cry. She would not let him see her fall apart.

She had no heart left. He’d pulverized it into dust. All she had left was her pride. And even that was far from fully intact.

“I had no choice,” he reasoned. “There was too much at stake.”

Jerk. He wasn’t even sorry. He was giving her excuses. Pathetic excuses at that. What an idiot she’d been. To let him manipulate her, to fall for his lies. His charms.

Oh, how she regretted sleeping with him—regardless of the fact that they had been the most amazing nights of her life. She’d be forced now to forget it ever happened, dammit. If that was possible.

Never again. Hell could become a winter wonderland, pigs could sprout wings and take flight, and the Detroit Lions could win the Super Bowl, and she’d still never let that man lay so much as a pinky finger on her.

He was rattling off some pathetic story about crooked cops, blah, blah, blah, treasure, blah, blah, blah, self-defense and the Wayne County prosecutor, blah, blah, blah, blah. He then had the nerve to try pulling the old “I do love you, baby. I was telling you the truth when I said that.”

She had to close her eyes to trap the tears threatening to escape. “Don’t.” She shoved at his chest, a feeble attempt at knocking him aside so that she could be on her way home. He might have been the one facing trumped-up murder charges a few hours ago—like anyone was going to believe he’d shoot his own grandmother—but she’d be facing some very real murder charges if she didn’t leave. Now.

The two of them might share a once-in-a-lifetime kind of chemistry. The intense, overwhelming connection every young woman dreams of finding with a man. But it wasn’t enough. They were clearly not meant to be together long term. Too many important issues stood between them and their happily-ever-after. Like trust. Everyone knew a relationship lacking trust was doomed to fail.

God, she was depressed. Sad. And mad. And frustrated. And so damn angry.

Could she just go home and wallow in self-pity for a while? Maybe she’d gorge on some ice cream—Bear Tracks, chocolaty, caramel-creamy goodness. Cool and sweet and comforting.

And fattening.

Ugh. She shoved at his chest again, tipping her head to give him a slitty-eyed glare. “Move!”

“No. Not until you listen.”

“I’ve heard everything I care to.”

“No, you obviously haven’t heard a word I’ve said.”

“Yes, I have. Want me to prove it to you? I will. Let’s see. Shall we start with the part where you told me how Miss Perfect—”

“Miss Perfect?”

“Your ex-wife,” she snapped. “Miss Perfect works for the Wayne County prosecutor. Or shall we move onto how she was helping her father, who happens to work for some agency or something or other that deals with investigating crooked cops. And then, we can move onto how they thought they knew who’d shot your grandmother, but needed more proof, wanted to know what the murderer was up to, so you agreed to help them.”

He nodded.

“So, you see? I heard it all. It’s fine and dandy. My only problem was you forgot to mention all of this to me.”

“I was sworn to secrecy.”

“Ooooh! I guess I wasn’t cool enough to be in your secret club,” she scoffed.

“It’s not like that—”

“Doesn’t matter. You lied. You are a liar. You haven’t stopped lying to me, not since the day we met. There’s no way I’d ever consider a future with a man I can’t trust.”

“But you *can* trust me.”

“I can trust you’ll lie to me. That much I can believe. How’re you going to convince me that you’ve changed? Hmmm? That you’re trustworthy?” At his bewildered, gape-mouthed response, she laughed. “See? You can’t. It’s over. Goodbye. Have a nice life.”

She finally managed to force her way past the deceitful jerk and outside. It was then, as she stood on the perfectly manicured front yard, that she realized she had no car to drive, since hers was back at Bain’s place. It was a long frigging walk to his house. More miles than she’d ever walked.

A taxi. She stomped up to Miss Perfect’s front door and rang the bell.

As she expected, Bain answered. He quirked a smile at her.

“Call me a taxi, please,” she managed to speak without screaming. She wanted to slap him. Maybe she would.

“Really, there’s no need—”

“Taxi.”

Palm was itching. Oh, how satisfying it would be to smack that hint of a smile off his face.

“I can drive you back to my house.”

“I’d rather take a cab.”

“You’ll be waiting for at least an hour.”

“Not a problem. I’ll wait out here.” She turned and dropped onto the bottom step, facing the road.

Bain descended the stairs and circled around the front of her. “I can have you there in twenty minutes. Come on. You’re being silly.”

"Don't you dare call me silly! I was shot at. I was chased. I was terrified. And for what? Some silly box with...whatever is inside there. The point is, you didn't tell me a goddamn thing, you bastard! I could've died."

"I wouldn't let that happen."

"You can stop bullets? Are you fucking Superman now? Is that it?"

"That's not what's bothering you, is it?" he challenged, grabbing her by the upper arms and yanking her to her feet. "It isn't the scary stuff that bothers you the most. It's the other stuff."

"Get. Your. Hands. Off. Me."

"You love me and that's what's got you running scared now. But it's okay, baby. I'm scared, too. Loving another human being is scary. You're vulnerable. I'm vulnerable. It's human nature to get nervous about that."

She tried to deny what he said, but God help her, she couldn't. Unlike Bain, she was incapable of speaking an untruth.

"I've told you things no one else knows. I've shared things..." His watery gaze searched her face. "Yes, I've lied to you. I won't deny it. But when it came to the really important things...I've always told you the truth."

"Really important? Like why you broke up with me?"

He shook his head. "I regretted that lie for two years. But I couldn't risk telling you the truth yet and risk having you get involved in this mess. Look what happened to my grandmother. Gram. This has been going on for years." His gaze lowered, he combed his fingers through his hair. "You have no idea how many times I picked up the phone to call you. My fear of you getting hurt stopped me. If I could have protected my grandmother as well, I would have."

"I got involved anyway."

"Wasn't my choice."

"Yes, it was Edna's."

"She knew we both loved each other. Don't you see? She gave you the key, not expecting us to solve the mystery, but simply to get us together?"

"You married another woman. Why?"

“Yes, I did marry another woman. For all the wrong reasons. I admired Cindy. I respected her. But I never loved her. I went through this period of time when I was frustrated and lonely. I missed you, but my grandmother told me you were involved with someone else. You were happy, and I wasn’t going to get in your way. I realized I’d made a mistake soon after we said the vows. I’d married Cindy to please my grandmother. Even Gram could see I’d made a mistake. We all realized that, before the honeymoon was even over, Cindy included.”

“So, if you were so worried about other people being put in harm’s way, why risk getting someone else involved?”

“Cindy was different. She’d grown up in a houseful of cops. She got her first gun for her tenth birthday. She’d been in the army and knew how to handle dangerous situations—”

“Yeah, she’s not a wimp like me, then. That’s what you’re trying to say.”

When she dropped her gaze from his to give herself a little distance to think, he cupped her chin and gently lifted it, forcing her to look him in the eye.

“You’re no wimp. You’re brave. You’re strong. My God, look at what you did—”

“More lies.”

“No. I’m not lying. I love you. That’s the truth. I’ve missed you. That’s also the truth. The thought of spending another two years without you makes me want to die. That’s the truth.” He ran his flattened palm up the side of her face. “But what’s more important than my wants, my feelings, is yours. More than anything, you must be happy. So, I’ll ask you one last time. Can you love me? Will you give me another chance? To try to be everything you’ve ever wanted in a man? In a...husband? A partner? A friend? A lover? If the answer is no, then I’ll drive you back to your car and say goodbye forever. You’ll never hear from me again.”

No way. He’d just proposed marriage?

“I need time to think.”

“Fair enough.” He motioned to his vehicle. “Take all the time you need. Take an hour. Take a day. Take a decade.” They were both silent

the entire drive. As she sat in her chilly car, waiting for the motor to warm up, he tapped on her window. When she opened it, he handed her the metal box from the church.

She looked down at the beautiful artifact. "What are you doing?"

"Giving this to you. For safekeeping."

"Why me?"

"Because I trust you."

"But is it safe?"

"After tomorrow's write-up in the paper, which happens to include some carefully worded facts, I don't think any treasure hunters will bother with it."

"Carefully worded?" She laughed humorously. "In other words, lies?"

"Not exactly. More like half-truths." He gave her a crooked grin.

"You're never going to change, are you?"

"I'm hoping, after you take some time to think about it, you're going to decide you wouldn't want me to change."

"We'll see about that."

It didn't take her an hour to decide how she felt about Bain. It didn't take her a day. It took her a week. Seven torturous days and nights. Even though she avoided him at Edna's funeral, she couldn't stop thinking about him. When she was at work, she wondered what he was doing. At night, as she lay in bed, alone, she wondered if he was sleeping. After six sleepless nights, she sat down at her kitchen table to make a list of all the things she hated about Bain. She couldn't come up with a single item for that list. It was then that she knew she needed to go to him, to give him another chance.

Despite his propensity for stretching the truth, she knew Bain had a good heart. He always put others first. His grandmother. The county prosecutor, even.

Herself.

He had never meant to hurt her. He'd never lied to her to get out of trouble, at least not from her. He'd only thought to protect her and protect the secrets of his grandmother and his allies. She could hardly fault him for wanting to see his grandmother's murderer caught.

And he'd never lied about what was most important—how he'd felt about her.

And so, on the eighth night, she took the metal box to Bain's house. Hands trembling, heart racing, she knocked on the door. Bain greeted her with a genuine smile, the kind that made a girl go all warm and soft inside. He welcomed her into the house, made her coffee, and together, they solved the final clue to the treasure, the password that opened the box, taken from the clue that had led them to it.

The Old Plank ends

At His house.

Beneath the angels

Lies the secret

Eternal arms

To seize and protect.

The password, the first letter of each line—tablet. They lined up the six disks. The lock disengaged. They lifted the lid together.

Inside, nestled on black velvet, was a simple gold ring.

"That's it? One measly ring?" Reed asked as Bain plucked it from the box. "This is what we trudged through musty churches and creepy cemeteries to find? This is what inspired men to murder innocent women?"

"No, but that doesn't matter." He took her left hand in his and slipped the ring on her fourth finger. "I have my treasure. You." He leaned forward, claiming her mouth with his. With his kiss, he communicated how profound his love and longing for her was. At first, he teased and tormented. And then he devoured her.

Sometime later, her head spinning, she glanced down at the ring on her finger. There were lines etched at regular intervals, all the way around the circumference. While she waited for Bain to get her some coffee, she slipped it from her finger, toying with it. It was then that she noticed the etchings weren't superficial. The entire piece was hollow. Nested inside were thinner sections of gold, one inside another, allowing the ring to expand into a larger circle when she pulled gently.

“Look!” Reed said, holding it up when Bain brought her coffee. “Wonder why the ring does this?”

Bain laughed. “I don’t care. Like I said, I have my treasure.”

“But what about your vow to return the treasure to its rightful owner?”

“If I’d found the treasure, that’s exactly what I would’ve done. But I didn’t. And I’m not interested in taking any more risks to find it. You see, despite what you think, I did learn something through all of this. I learned I tend to get blind to what’s going on around me when I set my mind on something. As far as I’m concerned, that mystery is better left for someone else to solve. My grandmother’s killer, ironically the grandson of her first love, has been caught. He’d learned about the treasure from his grandfather, I suppose. Not that it matters, really. I have the closure I was looking for. And as long as that remains a secret”—he motioned to the item she still held in her hand—“my grandmother’s secret, the treasure she died to protect, is still safe.” He pulled her closer, until her soft curves were smooshed up against his hard bulk. “Baby, your love is everything I could ever want or need in life. And I intend to spend the rest of my life proving that to you.”

Reed sank into his embrace, a secret smile spreading across her face. The plot of a novel, inspired by one sexy hunk with dark, wavy hair and a propensity for lying, and a mysterious key to a lost treasure, whirled through her mind like a sandstorm.

She tipped her head to meet his gaze, one of her hands taking a little adventure down a thick, muscular torso to find a bulge at the front of his trousers. “Just do me a favor. Don’t ever change.”

“That, you can count on, baby. I promise. And you know I always keep my word.”

He set about proving exactly how committed to keeping that promise he was. Over and over and over again.

About the Author

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When deceit and desire collide, the results can be deadly...

Truth and Consequences

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For undercover FBI agent Jason Harding, coming face to face with the grown-up version of his adolescent dreams is a nightmare. Kathleen Palmer sees him as a despicably corrupt small-town law officer and a murder suspect. Trapped in a web of his own making, he must see his mission through to the end and bring down the crooked cops who've run Haynes County for decades. To do so, he must betray the only family he's ever known and fight his growing love for Kathleen, a relationship that could get one, or both of them, killed.

Determined to uncover the truth, Georgia Bureau of Investigation agent Kathleen struggles with her attraction to the one person who's awakened her since she buried her heart and emotions in her son's tiny grave. Listening to her heart could destroy all she has left in life—her career and reputation. When the truth about Jason's identity surfaces, they both face unimaginable consequences: Jason may lose his life and Kathleen the man she loves.

Book One of the *Hearts of the South* series.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Truth and Consequences*:

Anger set up camp in Jason's gut, reaching out tentacles that smothered the thrill he'd gotten from blowing two hundred bucks of his oh-so-convenient tax refund on food.

What did he care what she thought of him? It wasn't like he stood a chance, anyway. Her mind was made up, and any opportunity he'd ever had of her seeing him as something other than just another corrupt cop was long gone. He resisted the urge to shove the cart toward the truck and create another dent in the pockmarked side panel.

Insects flirted and danced against the halogen security lights, casting weird shadows on the parking lot. The spot next to his truck sat empty now, devoid of the massive blue Cadillac parked there earlier. A familiar

white and wood-paneled Wagoneer was two spaces away, and Kathleen moved bags from cart to the cargo area with economic speed.

He began unloading his own purchases, aware of her glances in his direction. She slammed the cargo area door closed. After a moment's pause, she approached him, her shoes clicking on the pavement like angry castanets. Jason settled the bag holding his milk and ice cream in the corner of the truck bed and watched her approach.

The bright security light glinted off the elegant silver studs in her ears. Anger glittered in her eyes and he stiffened. She marched up to him, her hands resting at her hips. "It's probably not my place to say this, but I'm going to anyway. This job in Haynes County and your loyalty to your cousin are going to ruin your life. You need to get out, Jason, before you get sucked in."

"Didn't we have this same conversation last night?" He nestled a bag of canned goods in front of his milk. "I need this job. I need the money."

Her gaze flickered toward the bags of groceries and he could sense the thoughts tumbling through her mind. She thought he was already selling out, taking payoffs.

Sadness settled over her features, tugging the corners of her mouth down, wrinkling her brow. "There are other jobs out there. You don't have to do this."

If she only knew. He rubbed the tightness at his nape. "Yeah, I do."

"Why?" She threw her hands skyward. "Just tell me why. Make me understand. And don't give me that crap about family loyalty. The only person Jim Ed has any true loyalty for is himself."

He shrugged. "He's faithful about visiting Billy up at Reidsville."

"Do you really think he's going to look out for you?" She shook her head, dragging her fingers through her hair, the short wisps standing out, begging him to smooth them. "How do you know he's not setting you up to take the fall for some of his shenanigans?"

A bark of laughter escaped him. "Shenanigans? Did anyone ever tell you, Miss Palmer, that you have an old-fashioned vocabulary?"

She muttered a word sure to have offended the old-fashioned English teacher they'd shared in high school.

He lifted his eyebrows and muffled his laugh this time. With a quick shove, he sent the cart into the buggy corral and turned to face her again. “Why do you care? Does it matter whether you’re slapping cuffs on me or Jim Ed?”

The question brought her up short. He could tell by her rapid blinking. Finally, she nodded. “Yes, it does. I don’t want to see him bring you down, too. You deserve more than that.”

The quiet words ricocheted through his brain. She thought he deserved better. No one—*no one*—had ever said that. While he tried to digest the idea that the girl who’d always been out of his reach thought him worthy of more than he had, she stepped forward, a hand gentle on his arm. “You have to get out now. Before it goes any further.”

I can’t. The words refused to leave his lips, his brain short-circuiting since all he could focus on was the warmth of her hand against his bare skin. He stared at her, her eyes dark and luminous. The muggy air pressed in on them, enveloping them in the silence of the deserted parking lot. Heat radiated from her skin on his, desire invading his blood stream, traveling through his body.

Don’t do this, man. Step away. Get in the truck and leave her alone before one of you gets hurt. Or dead.

I can’t.

“Jason?” Her lips parted on his name and the desire hit him hard, even weakening his knees for a split second. God, he wanted to taste his name lingering on her full bottom lip.

With a hand on the truck to steady himself, he bent his head and covered those parted lips with his own. Her soft mouth moved against his and her hold tightened on his arm. Making a small noise in the back of her throat, she swayed closer and he drank in her unique taste—mint mingled with something sweet and wild.

Revenge is a dish best served bold...

The Living Legend

© 2007 Emma Wayne Porter

Patrick “Trick” Mancini wants revenge. Not only has he learned that his boss, William Ormond, might be implicated in his mother’s death, he’s just found out Ormond has sent assassins after him. After sixteen years stealing for the good guys, Trick is prepared to turn bad if that means he can keep ahead of the assassins long enough to uncover some long-buried secrets.

Kate Crawford, Ormond’s niece, wants a normal life. Not that she knows what “normal” would feel like. When Trick drags her into his pursuit of the truth he threatens the last few things she still cares about. Forced to help him, she’s determined there are some secrets he won’t discover. Including the real reason she was compelled to break up with him ten years ago.

Now Trick and Kate are racing against time to find out what’s hidden in Ormond’s black files, fighting a passion that never went away...and trying to stay alive.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *The Living Legend*:

“What are you doing here?” David demanded.

Kate watched Patrick ignore the boy completely, closing in on her instead to drop a kiss on her astonished cheek.

“Hi, Kitten.”

She tried to return his greeting, but the sound that came out was more like a squeak.

Typical. Patrick had always made her unspeakably nervous. Widely acknowledged as the rock star of law enforcement, he always seemed to be up to something, and always gave the impression he knew something no one else did.

Usually, both were true, and Kate believed half the work Patrick was contracted to do was completely unnecessary. To certain people, his exorbitant fees were worth it for a chance to bend his ear or ask a favor.

She must be the only one in their circle who actively avoided him. But then, she was the only one who needed to. For the last ten years, *she'd* been up to something. She knew something he didn't, and could never tell him.

A hot glow of fear and shame burned beneath her skin as she inspected him in short, nervous glances that never quite dared venture above the collar of his black cashmere turtleneck.

Why was he here? Had he finally found out the truth?

"Oh, that figures," David grumbled. "First he busts me, then he paws my girl."

"You," Patrick said, pointing at David, "Shut it. She's not your girl."

"She's not yours, either. She dumped you a long time ago." At two indignant reactions from the adults, the boy added smugly, "Word gets around."

Kate rubbed her neck and inspected her shoes, certain her face must be crimson by now. It was bad enough Patrick was here. She didn't need their history dredged up, too. And when she found out who'd been telling tales, they'd regret it.

Patrick took her elbow and told David, "You wanna take shots at me for putting you in here, be my guest. But never disrespect your keeper, kid. Especially when I'm within striking distance."

As she ventured a peek at Patrick's face, her spine straightened, and even David had to rethink whatever jab he'd been about to make.

Patrick Mancini was no one to be messed with in the best of moods, and right now there was fire in those liquid-black eyes. Had he looked at her that way, she would have crawled under the nearest solid heavy object.

When he began to haul her back the way he'd come, she didn't fight him. A useless endeavor, as she well knew. He had a way of getting what he wanted, rules, boundaries and manners be damned.

And he must want something. He wouldn't have come here otherwise. They hadn't been able to avoid each other entirely since the breakup, and left alone long enough, they always descended into the same old argument about why she'd broken up with him.

It was never pleasant for either of them. She hated lying to him almost as much as he hated being lied to, so she doubted he would have come here by choice.

What if he really *had* found something out about his mother?

That eternal wrench of remorse grabbed onto her and twisted hard while she hurried to keep up with him, unsure she'd be able to withstand another argument. She was tired and caught off guard, and Patrick wasn't dense. All it would take was one wrong word, and he'd jump on it. Then she'd have to hope and pray the bad blood between her and Uncle William wouldn't do her in.

Once inside the walkway leading to her house, she decided this was as good a place to start as any. Better, in fact. Walking beside him was much easier than facing him. She asked, "Why are you here?"

"I need a favor."

That wasn't what she'd expected him to say. Was he holding off until they were somewhere private before the yelling began?

They were halfway down the passage before she realized she might have over-reacted. The only other person who knew the truth had even more reason than she did to keep quiet.

It was likely Patrick still didn't know anything. She'd just had such a horrible few months, and was so paranoid about him learning the truth that she always expected the worst.

"What kind of favor?" she asked.

"I need David. And I need access to the tactical center."

"David? I—but—"

"It's an emergency, Kit. There's a hard drive I need tapped in a secure environment, and he's the man for the job."

Dragging them both to a halt in the doorway, she kept her eyes on the top button of his black wool peacoat. "No he's not. You've got computer experts on your own team, you know. One on every continent."

"If this were information I wanted spread far and wide, that might be an option. But it's not. So I came here where I can contain the situation."

"Contain? My brother's in charge of all thirty tac centers. You think he won't notice you messing around in there?"

"If he does, you can cover for me. It's the best option, Kitten. And David's an expert."

"Forget it. He's not allowed anywhere near a computer."

"You can make an exception."

"No, I can't," she said. "There has to be another—"

Patrick stopped her by dipping his head and raising her chin, forcing her to make eye contact, just as her brother had done earlier.

Having no other choice but to look at him, she shied back a bit. The man was completely overwhelming in every way. Painfully handsome with that too-long, wild black hair, the honey-gold skin and bone structure sharp enough to cut diamond.

And then there was the intense black stare that had always been her undoing. But most overpowering of all was the staggering rush of memories. Some so good she could hardly believe they'd ever happened to her, and some so horrifying she'd give anything to undo them.

"I'm not going away, Kit. You can give in now, or delay the inevitable a few more minutes. It doesn't matter to me. You know how much I enjoy our little talks."

He'd moved in very close, staring with those smoldering eyes, and if she wasn't mistaken, he'd threatened her with her least favorite topic if he didn't get what he wanted.

On any other day, she might have buckled. But she was through being pushed around, and she knew what this was about. He'd done something rash again. Either that, or he was *about* to do something rash, and wanted her to help him do it.

Fat chance, and she needed to get her point across, pronto. Let him know she was suspicious, and show some backbone about it. He'd always claimed his work was the art of managing risks. If she made this one too costly for him, he'd be gone in no time. She asked, "Is it business or personal?"

"Business."

"Really. How much trouble are you in?"

"I'm not in trouble. But I will be if I can't tap this drive."

Sighing, she shoved his hand away and walked through the door, letting it slam in his face.

He, of course, came in after her. "I'm doing this, Kit. It has to be done."

"Has it escaped your attention that if you get yourself in trouble, you'll—"

"I know," he interrupted. "If I break the rules, they'll ship me back to jail where they found me. But those same people pay me obnoxious sums to break rules each and every day."

"Mixed messages aren't an excuse," she argued, turning on him.

This time it was Patrick who shied back. "Are you all right?"

"Of course I'm not all right. You come barging in here asking me to lie to my brother and get David in—"

"Asking? Whatever gave you the idea I was *asking*? I'm giving you an order."

"You can order me all you want, but you can't touch David. He can't go near a computer without violating a court order."

"Um, Kit? Remember that whole thing where the Sanction isn't bound by law?"

Giving him a withering look, she said, "Our privileges don't extend to these kids."

"That won't matter if no one finds out. I won't tell anyone, and you know David won't. He'd probably sell his soul for some key time right about now."

"What about me?" she asked. "Why would I cover for you?"

"Because you broke my heart and scarred me for life."

"Well. I see you still think the entire world revolves around your big fat head."

"How annoyed you must be that it *does*."

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