



I'll Do Anything
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Prologue

Present

The media waited at the top of the courthouse steps when Julia arrived. She pressed a hand beneath her cashmere overcoat to ease the knot forming in her stomach. Reporters were the hardest part of her job. Drawing a deep breath, she walked around the corner and climbed the wide, cement stairs with a swift, don't-mess-with-me stride she had perfected over the years.

Suddenly, they turned as one and surged toward Julia. She averted her head to avoid being photographed but needn't have bothered as they brushed past and surrounded a man behind her.

Confused, Julia turned and studied what she could see of him. His dark glasses hid his eyes and an expensive looking, creamy tan overcoat kept her from seeing much of his body. Brilliant flashes of light from the cameras obscured her vision and she turned away before she was recognized. It was not until she was almost to the door that she realized there was something familiar about his dark blond curls that ruffled in the wind. She turned slowly, almost in disbelief. The crowd shifted and she got a good, long look at Cade Taylor; the first in five long years.

Julia's head swam. She had the horrifying feeling that she might pass out. At the same moment, Cade lifted his head with that devastating, familiar grin still on his lips and spotted her at the top of the steps. His smile slowly faded, replaced by an intense set of his jaw that she recognized so well. Julia stood and stared as he ignored the questions being thrown at him rapid-fire. Their gazes held and Julia dragged in a ragged breath.

The media, sensitive to the sudden change in their target, turned. The mob lurched toward her and Julia felt a twinge of panic. It was too late to run now. She had been recognized. Julia stood her ground and fought hard to regain her composure.

"Miss Campbell! Miss Campbell!" They vied for her attention, shouting questions at her. Julia continued to stare past them to the foot of the steps. Cade started toward her. The wall of human bodies and photo-flashes suddenly lunged closer. She blinked behind her sunglasses and looked at the closest microphone that was shoved under her nose.

"No comment at this time," she said firmly. The wall pressed closer and Julia backed away. When he reached them, a few reporters turned and made room for Cade. They faced off and the questions mercifully ceased as the press waited for something to be said.

"It's been a long time," Cade said quietly. Julia ignored the flashes as more pictures were taken.

"Not long enough," she replied, grateful her eyes were hidden behind her sunglasses. It made it easier to hide the fact that she wasn't quite in control of her emotions. Where was the cool, calm and collected persona she'd spent the last four years cultivating? Damn it! Why did he have to look so damn delicious?

"It seems fate had other ideas," Cade replied.

"Fate has always been a cruel bitch," Julia muttered and the microphones shot beneath her nose.

The avid eyes of the press bounced back and forth as though watching the last seconds of a sudden death tennis match. The undercurrent of electricity between them was enough to send their equipment into spasms.

Cade drank in her upswept hair and prim little suit and wondered if she still wore her bad girl underwear. Suddenly, unbidden memories assaulted him. Julia flush with passion, her sinful sexy black hair tumbled in an erotic mass over law books and legal pads and her silk clad legs wrapped around his naked waist. Damn, now he was hard.

"I think we're losing sight of who the real bitch is here, aren't we," Cade asked icily, striking out at her. He was angry with himself and with her. After all that happened, how could she possibly still have power over him?

Cade sensed more than saw her flinch away from his attack. A sadistic sort of pleasure engulfed him at having cracked her cool composure.

"I'll see you inside, counselor," she said, her voice cool. Julia turned on her heel and pushed through the media barricade.

Cade watched her leave from behind the tinted lenses of his glasses, disgust at their behavior fueling his anger. He brushed past the gaping reporters who battered him with new questions.

"Mr. Taylor, how do you and Ms. Campbell know each other? Mr. Taylor, is there bad blood between you and the District Attorney's office?"

Chapter One

Five Years Earlier

"Good God!"

That was the last thing Julia heard before she landed on her butt. The large stack of loose papers she carried fluttered to the floor after her.

"Are you okay," a man's voice asked. No. Not a man. *The man.*

Julia looked up and stared into a pair of familiar, sexy blue eyes.

"I-I," she stammered. Embarrassment burned her cheeks.

"Where were you going, barreling around the corner like that?" Cade helped her to her feet and stopped her attempts to collect her papers. "Here, I'll get that."

Julia grabbed a sheet of paper off the floor behind her and knocked her head against Cade's elbow as she stood. She rubbed it, grimacing more from mortification than pain.

"Slow down Julia," he admonished, his voice tinged with laughter. He stood and handed her the disheveled papers.

"I was making copies," she mumbled then blinked stupidly. Did the knock to the floor dislodge her brain?

"Well," he said, and flashed a wide, gorgeous grin that turned her insides to jelly. "Be a little more careful coming down these halls or you'll be laid up before the week is out."

"Thanks again," she said weakly as he started to walk away.

He turned back and gave her a mock salute before he rounded the corner. Julia sighed, his retreating image still burned on her mind. If there were a law against sex appeal, Cade would be a convicted felon. She snorted in disgust and gripped the mess of papers to her chest. If office gossip was to be believed, what he did with that sex appeal could constitute a crime. With a heavy sigh, she headed to her office.

This childish infatuation with Cade Taylor was almost too pathetic to bear. Had he not been her high school crush, it would not be quite so wretched. However, she had daydreamed about that smile, those eyes and that body for almost nine years; nine long, invisible, tormenting years where she was subjected to talk of his hedonistic exploits with other women who out-classed Julia in the sexual experience arena any day. She heard his latest girlfriend was an exotic dancer named Babs. A stripper. Lord help her, Julia still got undressed in the dark.

"What happened to you?" Paige's pretty blond head popped through the open door right behind Julia as she entered her office. Paige Holland, who worked on the real estate support staff upstairs, was one of the few friends Julia had.

"I just humiliated myself with Cade." Julia sighed and dropped her stack of hopelessly jumbled papers onto her desk. "Again."

Paige giggled and leaned against the doorframe. "What did you do this time?"

"This time?" Julia sat down in her chair. "This time I nearly knocked him over trying to hurry back here from the copy room. Instead he knocked me over."

"As in flat on your butt?"

When Julia nodded forlornly, Paige laughed and rolled her eyes. "He must think you

are the biggest klutz!"

"Every girl I've known since high school had a crush on Cade," Julia pointed out, omitting the fact that she was one of them. She toyed with a bent paperclip on her desk, avoiding Paige's gaze. "They didn't call him 'All the Way Cade' for nothing. He probably gets a big kick out of making me nervous. After all the hard work I put into getting over my introversion, Cade reduces me into that blushing, stuttering fifteen year old I used to be."

"Hell, even I would blush and stutter over a man built like that," Paige muttered then sighed at Julia's gloomy look.

"You and most other, normal women on Earth," Julia said, tossing the paperclip into the trash with ill-disguised disdain. "Then there are the Babs and Elisabeth Westlys in the world who can slap on some lip gloss, show a little cleavage and get the Grand Prize."

"Elisabeth Westly," Paige repeated the attorney's name cattily, "is a narcissistic bitch. It also happens that she's very married, and very much older than Cade." Paige tapped her fingernail against the wooden doorframe and raised her brow to punctuate her point. "I'm sure even Cade gets the creeps thinking about her naked."

"I wouldn't know," Julia muttered as she sifted through the mess on her desk. "Cade thinks anything with big breasts is do-able."

"Big boobs aren't everything," Paige laughed. "There are also blue eyes, blonde hair and an ass you can bounce a quarter on."

"Fabulous." Julia wadded up one of the wrinkled sheets of paper. "A look every woman can aspire to with a few thousand dollars, some colored contacts and a ten-dollar bottle of hair dye. The ass thing is negotiable."

"Only if you're a natural blonde, honey!" Paige dodged out of the office laughing as Julia tossed the balled up paper at her.

The early evening sun slanted across the parking lot, casting long shadows from Kelly, Bright & Hale's old Victorian style building. Julia took in a deep breath scented with the blooms of the magnolia trees lining the street. She shifted the balance of her attaché case and purse and dug her hand deep inside to search for her keys.

Kelly, Bright & Hale, often referred to as KBH, consisted of approximately one dozen attorneys and their secretaries, copy clerks, law clerks, paralegals and administration. Unobtrusive by "big city" standards, KBH was the largest firm in Hardin, Georgia, population 17,000. Big enough to get lost in, yet still steeped in a small town, southern mindset, Hardin was homemade peach ice cream and ticker tape parades on every bank holiday, four lane intersections and an ATM on every corner.

There were memories of her parents here, of grade school friendships and girlhood crushes. It was home, the only one Julia had ever known, and she wouldn't trade it for any metropolitan area in the world.

Julia squinted at the sun through amber tinted lenses as she continued the blind search for her car keys in the bottomless pit that was her purse. She shoved her sunglasses on top of her head and brought the purse close, balancing it on her upraised knee and leaning forward to get a better look. Just as she grasped the ring of keys, her glasses fell to the ground and the briefcase slid from under her arm. With an exasperated sigh, she bent to pick them up and a shadow fell across her shoes. Julia squinted and lifted her hand to block the sun and saw Cade

standing five feet away with an amused smile.

"Hey there," he said. It was just a simple greeting. Just simple enough to make her knees weak.

Julia groaned inwardly and tried to stand. Her knees refused to cooperate and she stumbled. Again with the tripping, she thought ruefully. If it weren't so disgraceful, it would almost be funny. Cade leaned forward and grabbed her hand, pulling her up. After she got to her full, upright position she kept her gaze over his shoulder and crammed her wayward sunglasses onto her face. *I must look like an idiot.*

Cade swallowed hard. It should be a sin to look that damn good.

He already fought to keep his slow, easy smile when her hand fluttered near her temple and tucked a curl behind her ear. Her shiny black hair was pulled into one of those sexy, loose I-Just-Fell-Out-Of-Bed twisty styles that drove Cade wild. Soft looking, curly tendrils kept falling forward to brush her brow and high cheekbones. He remembered the look in her large green eyes, which tipped up the tiniest little bit in the corners, just before she blushed. She wet her lips and shifted uncomfortably and his gaze dropped to her mouth. God, what he could do to that mouth.

"I really am sorry about running into you earlier," Julia said. He drew his gaze from her lips and concentrated on her voice. It was soft and sweet, a little on the breathy side as she continued to apologize.

"No big deal." He offered a nonchalant shrug, playing it cool. "It happens."

"Well," she said as she awkwardly motioned to her car with her keys. "I need to get going."

"See you around," Cade said. He watched her climb into an older model Mercedes. She avoided looking at him when she drove past and pulled out of the lot onto the street.

"Forget about it, man," he muttered under his breath.

Cade was a ladies man by reputation only but that never stopped most women from making excuses to touch him, to talk to him, to give him the once over with inviting smiles. Elisabeth, his supervising attorney, was the worst of all, which only encouraged him to hold fast to his one dating rule. No co-workers—ever.

Then, of course, there were the rumors. Cade had handled them in stride through high school and most of college. He could handle them here. Especially since he got wind that he was dating a stripper named Babs. He had to smile at that because, frankly, he'd never dated a stripper before.

Despite his resolution to keep his life uncomplicated and clear of women, he still had eyes in his head and they were completely focused on Julia Campbell.

Cade wracked his brain trying to remember Julia in high school. The only thing he could definitely remember was a painfully shy girl who once knocked him down the stairs when she tripped and broke her ankle. After that, Cade really had not given her much thought except as competition for next year's associate spot on KBH's litigation team.

Until last week.

It had been an accident, really. Cade had seen her in the small copy room cursing over the fax machine. Before he could offer to help, Julia leaned over the machine and gave herself an extra toe up. Beneath that dark, very plain skirt lay every man's fantasy: black lace and satin garters. Cade would have bet the farm that her stockings were silk. Since then, he felt

like he'd been in the throes of a constant wet dream and he feared far more than the loss of the coveted associate's position. He was terrified he was losing his mind.

For days Cade fantasized about coming up behind her and taking her hips in his hands, hiking up that conservative skirt and stroking the creamy flesh between all that black sin. He woke up sweating just thinking about those satin garters. The ice-cold morning shower had become so frequent that he was starting to like it.

Frowning, Cade shook off the depressing thought and climbed into his truck. Tonight he had to make an appearance at his parents' house for a family dinner and he figured showing up with a hard-on the size of Texas would be a bad idea. With a quick glance in the rear view mirror, he shoved his sunglasses onto the bridge of his nose and gunned the engine.

Three blocks down, Julia sat in her car with her eyes closed and forehead against the steering wheel. With a long, deep sigh she tried to start the car again.

"Come on! Come on you stupid car!" It sputtered, jerked and died once again. She slammed a fist against the steering wheel and cursed a blue streak. Frustrated beyond reason, she wrenched open the door and climbed out, slamming it shut with a grunted expletive.

"Piece of—" She kicked the door with her two inch heeled pump and cursed again when her toe started throbbing. Coming around the rear of her father's old beloved Mercedes, she leaned against the trunk and crossed her arms over her chest.

Cars whizzed by full of working folks on their way home, all surely eager to reach their destination. Most likely a majority of them had a wife or husband and children waiting on them. They would have dinner to make or, if they were really lucky, already prepared. Julia self-consciously tugged the hem of her skirt down and indulged in a full-fledged pity-party.

"Need a hand?"

Julia glanced up and bit back another curse. What had she done to deserve *this*? Cade grinned widely from inside a pick-up truck so old it could be classified as an antique. She pushed away from the trunk of her car and put on the fiercest glare she could manage around the gigantic wad of misery she was trying to swallow.

"Not from you."

Surprise flickered in his eyes before Cade's laughter rose over the din of traffic. A horn blared behind him and he pulled his truck over to the curb in front of the Mercedes. When he climbed out, Julia took the time to notice he'd shucked his suspenders from his shoulders and let them hang loose around his waist. When he pulled off his tie and turned to toss it into the truck, Julia nearly groaned aloud at the sight of those dark suspenders cupping that luscious rear end. This was going to be a lot worse than she thought.

"Pop it," he told her when he reached the hood of her car.

With a great show of reluctance she really didn't feel, Julia reached through the open window of the driver's side and pulled the lever under the dash. While Cade poked under the hood in silence, the mid-summer Georgia humidity took its toll on his starched shirt. His gaze lingered on the greasy engine of her car as he slowly tugged his shirttail from his slacks and unbuttoned it. Julia's eyes widened. Cade peeled the shirt from his back and handed it to her.

"Here. Hold this."

As swiftly as that, Julia's bad mood evaporated to be replaced with glimpses of Cade Taylor's fabulously sexy body *en dishabille*. Julia weakly took the dress shirt and clutched it to

her chest. His scent lingered on the starchy fabric, undeniably male and sexy as all get out. Her heart thudded, her mouth watered and she swore that if she disgraced herself and actually drooled, she'd go home and drown herself in the tub.

He leaned farther under the hood, bracing his hand against the edge of the car. Muscular shoulders stretched the white, v-neck undershirt and Julia felt her knees begin to quiver. She stood mesmerized by the sight of Cade's backside straining against his slacks when he pressed even farther into the engine's depths.

"Ahhhh," he finally said, pulling out from under the hood. Julia's eyes snapped to his face.

"Hmm?" She asked, distracted. She shook her head and tried again. "What's wrong with it?"

"I think you threw a rod, sweetheart," he said.

"What's that?" She stared at her car, her mind drawing a blank.

"When is the last time you had your oil checked?" Cade moved to the bed of his truck and opened the tailgate. Pulling an old towel from the back he proceeded to check the oil, just as her father had a thousand and one times for her in the past. For one wistful minute, Julia indulged in a bit of nostalgia; her father leaning under the hood of this very same car, babying it as he had everything else in his life, including his wife and only child.

"You probably had a leak," Cade was saying from under the hood, "and if you ran out of oil, you caused serious damage to your engine."

Julia shook off the bittersweet memory and nodded, her gaze wandering back to his slacks, which were molded to his rear end.

"Yep." Cade pulled out from under the hood and showed the dipstick to her. Julia looked at it unseeing, too unsettled from being this close to him. She nodded and he made a small sound of disgust and shoved the stick back into its proper place.

"Bone dry." He tossed the oily rag into the truck bed and turned back to her.

"You probably put a hole the size of a softball into that fancy, German engine," he muttered while he began wiping his hands clean on another towel. Nodding toward the shirt she held for him, his expression still critical, Cade took his time making sure all the grease was gone. Julia reluctantly handed the shirt to him and stepped out of the way when he made a move to close the hood.

"The oil light came on about a week ago." Julia glanced guiltily at the Mercedes. She could almost see her father cringing over her admission.

"You've got to be kidding." He shook his head in disbelief. "Why didn't you take it in then?" He rested his hands on his hips, pushing aside his open dress shirt. A smudge of grease on the belly of his t-shirt drew her wandering eyes.

"No time." She dragged her gaze away. "Look, I don't know anything about cars," she said. "What is it going to take to fix it?"

Cade tucked his arms over his chest and leaned against the tailgate of his truck, his legs crossed at the ankles looking like he had every right to stand there criticizing her.

"A week," he said and shrugged. "Maybe two if they don't have the engine they need on hand."

"A week?" Julia pressed her fingertips against her forehead and groaned. What the hell was she going to do now?

"Maybe more," Cade reminded her.

"I don't even know where to take it to get it fixed," Julia dropped her hand and met his mocking gaze. "You can stop looking at me like that. I feel bad enough as it is. This was my father's car."

Julia felt the tears welling up and swallowed them back. She would not cry in front of this man. He already thought she was an idiot and a klutz. She did not want him to think she was a weepy, over-emotional drama queen too.

"I'm sorry," he said over the traffic. "My dad told me about the accident when I came home for Easter break."

She nodded and looked at the ground, crossing her arms over her chest in a protective gesture.

"Don't you have a brother or an uncle or something? Someone that could help you out?" His tone was gentle this time.

"No, just me." Julia tried for a bright smile but fell painfully short. "And now my knight in shining armor."

Cade gave her a weak half smile and rolled the cuffs of his shirt up his forearms.

"Listen, I've got someplace I need to be in about ten minutes, can I at least drop you somewhere?"

"Do you have any suggestions about where to get the car towed?" Rubbing her arms and feeling as though she'd caught a chill, Julia moved around to the passenger side of her car and opened the door.

"My dad has an auto service, I'll call and have them take it to someone I know. I think it will be okay to leave it here until it's picked up. Can I give you a ride?" he asked again as he followed behind her.

"It's too far out of your way. I'll just call a cab from the office." Julia gathered her things from the car then locked the doors. She turned and blew a curl out of her face then bumped the door closed with her butt.

"The office might be locked up by now. You'd have to wait at least twenty minutes or more for a cab this time of night." Cade gave her a doubtful look.

"Fine, the nearest coffee shop." Julia was at the end of her rope. Her night was rapidly declining from dismal to dreadfully depressing.

"How about a home-cooked meal and a rowdy family dinner instead?"

Surprise and pleasure warred inside her. Dinner? With Cade? No way. Julia started to shake her head. Then he did something she couldn't resist.

He smiled.

Chapter Two

This was a bad idea.

Julia sat in silence beside Cade in front of his parents' house. The very scent of him filled the rickety old truck's cab and nearly drowned her senses. This was a bad, bad, very bad idea. Of course, it was too late to back out now. When he offered her dinner with his family, she knew she should have passed it up but the invitation was too irresistible. It was just dinner. One night with Cade, the object of her girlhood fantasies. What could it hurt?

She followed Cade out of the truck, pulling and tugging at her skirt self-consciously. Nerves were beginning to set in when Cade came around the front of the truck and held out his hand.

"C'mon." He motioned for her to take it. Julia stared at him for an interminably long second, trying to decide if her body could handle touching him voluntarily. The last thing she wanted to do was pass out from an overload of hormones in his mother's front yard. Finally she reached for him and swore that she would never again wash that hand. Okay, maybe not *never* but she would certainly memorize the way his fingers wrapped around hers, his palm warm and calloused from years of being a jock. She had a brief, blazing thought of feeling those palms somewhere other than her hand.

Foregoing the front door, Cade took Julia around the side of the house to the gate where loud laughter and the sound of girlish squeals reached Julia. Just before opening the gate, Cade turned to her and stared thoughtfully before speaking.

"I should warn you." His gorgeous, slightly stubbled cheeks dimpled before her very eyes and Julia nearly fell under the beam of that killer smile. "My sisters have big mouths and not enough manners to know better than to ask a nosy question, so just let me do the talking."

All Julia could do was nod. Her brain was mush. Cade opened the gate and led her into the back yard. Julia already knew about the size of the Taylor family but she couldn't help but wonder how a guy with five nosy sisters could get away with dating a stripper.

"Cade, where have you been?" A young woman, petite and blond, called down from a large deck attached to the back of the house. She bounded down the steps and hurled herself into Cade's arms, wrapping her own around his waist and hugging him tightly. Julia recognized his sister Janessa immediately.

"Playing hero." Cade gave her a wide grin and squeezed her back so tight she emitted a groan and a laugh.

Pulling away from him, Janessa turned warm blue eyes the exact shade as Cade's on Julia.

"I take it you're the damsel in distress?" she asked as she eyed Julia with barely disguised interest.

"Julia," he said without preamble. "Meet my older sister Janessa."

"We know each other already, silly," Janessa told him and treated him to a playful swat on the back. "If you came over more often, little brother, you would know these things." She grinned at Julia then winked.

"Whoa, there Josie," Cade shouted and laughed as he easily caught a blur of pink cotton and blonde curls hurtling at his legs. He lifted her high above his head while she squealed

with ear piercing shrieks.

"Cade, put that baby down right now and come give me a hug," his mother scolded good-naturedly as she stepped down from the deck.

Julia was acquainted with some of the women in the vast Taylor family, specifically his beautiful mother and two of his five sisters. She had been touched when Olivia had come to her parents' funeral to offer her support. She had hugged Julia tightly and whispered her private condolences. Later, Julia realized that Olivia had been the only person who had touched her familiarly during that long, horrible day.

"Yes ma'am," he said. Cade set Josie on her feet and accepted a hug from his mother.

"You're running a little behind tonight." Olivia pulled away and gave her son a concerned look. "Are you working too hard?"

"Don't worry, Mom. I can handle whatever they dish out." Turning to Julia, he diverted his mother's attention. "Mom, this is Julia. She works at the firm. Julia, this is my mother, Olivia."

"How wonderful!" Julia saw the recognition in her eyes yet, for whatever reason, Olivia chose not mention their acquaintance like Janessa had. "I didn't know Cade was bringing a guest."

"It wasn't planned, Mrs. Taylor. He was nice enough to stop when I had some car trouble."

Cade playfully picked Josie up again, letting the girl flip upside-down in his arms. She squealed again and giggled that small childish giggle that tickled up Julia's spine and infected her with a smile of her own.

"This rug rat is my baby sister Josie," Cade said, producing another giggle from Josie when he tickled her exposed tummy. Julia was completely charmed when a pink-faced Josie stuck out her hand.

"How do you do," came the formal greeting. Another bubbly laugh came from Josie when Julia shook her tiny hand.

"How do you do, Miss Josie," Julia replied, completely enchanted.

In a fit of giggles Josie cried out, "Very nice to meet you!" Cade flipped her back upright and Josie stumbled a bit, regaining her feet. She stared at Julia quizzically.

"Are you going to marry Cade like Janessa is marrying Kyle," the child wanted to know.

"God no!" The vehemence with which Julia answered made Cade's mother give her an odd look. Julia laughed nervously and began to backpedal.

"Not that I don't think your big brother would make a great husband, I just don't think I would make a great wife."

Josie blinked at her thoughtfully and then slowly nodded.

"I think you're right."

"Josie!" Olivia gasped, shooting Julia an apologetic look over the girl's head.

Covering a laugh behind a cough, Cade turned away and grabbed up Josie by the waist, settling her atop his shoulders again with her feet dangling on his chest.

"Let's go see what Dad's making, huh Kiddo?"

Josie whooped with laughter and Cade made a grab for Julia's hand. The shock of his skin on hers a second time did nothing to alleviate the panic she felt. Olivia was watching

Cade manhandle her and she did not want his mother to get the wrong idea about her. Whether she was a stripper or not, Cade was still Babs' man and Julia was not a boyfriend poacher. Not to mention she was already harboring second thoughts about tonight's events. What was she thinking, going to dinner with All the Way Cade?

She pulled her hand from his and clutched her fingers tightly together as he held her gaze for a long, unreadable moment. Her tummy fluttered and she broke the contact.

"Daddy!" Josie squealed from her lofty position. "Cade's here, Daddy!"

"So I heard."

Julia walked beside Cade toward the deck, absorbing the familial scene like a sponge. Doug Taylor winked at his youngest daughter before returning his attention to his steaks.

"Working late again?"

"Not this time, Dad." Cade took a serving plate from one of his sisters and held it out while Doug put baked potatoes onto it.

"It's my fault, Mr. Taylor. He stopped to help me out when my car broke down."

Glancing up from the grill, Doug studied Julia for a moment. "You're Rob and Laura's girl, aren't you?"

"Yes sir." Julia nodded and side-stepped out of the way when Olivia hurried by.

"Your steaks are burning, sweetheart." Olivia bussed his cheek before moving on.

With a grunt, Doug quickly snatched another, larger plate from an outstretched hand and loaded the steaks onto it. The helping hand, Julia noticed, was attached to one of Cade's teenaged twin sisters. The pretty, young girl exchanged whispered comments with her mirror image while casting speculative glances at her. It must be a rare thing for Cade to bring a girl home. Then again, she guessed Cade couldn't really bring Ba-Ba-Boom Babs home to Mom and Dad and five impressionable sisters.

The sun began its descent and Janessa lit the citronella candles on the table. At dinner Julia was reacquainted with most of the Taylor girls, including fifteen-year-old Carly who sat in sullen silence, her hair teased and died an outrageous burgundy and black. Small, thin lips were painted dark purple and there was silver mascara caked onto her lashes. Beneath it all were the Taylor blue eyes.

Not until they served the orange sherbet did anyone broach the topic Julia had avoided all through dinner.

"How are you dear?" Olivia smiled at her with sympathy.

"I'm fine," Julia responded quietly. She lowered her spoon to her half-eaten dessert and met Olivia's gaze. When she saw the understanding there, she smiled sadly. "I'm better."

"We were sorry to hear about your parents' death," Doug said gruffly.

"I appreciate that." Julia replied. Her gaze swept the suddenly silent table.

"Whatever happened to that woman? The one who hit them?" Doug spooned another bite of sherbet into his mouth, oblivious to the tension surrounding the table.

"Sandy Levi," Julia murmured, staring down at her bowl. She picked up her spoon and forced herself to take another bite. "Her license was suspended when she had the accident and it was her fifth DUI. She was convicted of two counts of vehicular manslaughter and gets to spend the rest of her life in prison."

"I'm sorry, Julia," Cade said, staring into her eyes again. Her heart skipped a tiny beat. He really knew how to speak volumes with those eyes of his. Julia released her pent-up breath

and tried to ignore the pitying looks that were focused on her from the rest of the table.

"I heard today that you were assigned to help with the Jefferson case." Desperate to change the subject, Julia flipped her spoon around in her dessert and kept her gaze trained on the bowl.

"Oh!" Janessa exclaimed. Her spoon clanked loudly against the ceramic bowl. "I read about that one in the paper! That's the one about the old grandfather whose daughter died of cancer. He's trying to take her kids away from their dad. You are working on that one, Cade?"

To Julia's consternation, Cade's cheek flushed. He avoided everyone's gaze as he said, "I'm just a clerk. A glorified researcher. No big deal."

"No big deal!" Julia snorted a laugh, confused by his reaction. "All the associates were vying for that spot on Elisabeth Westly's team. Glorified researcher or not, you're one lucky guy."

"I'm glad to see you're actually sticking with it," Doug muttered.

"Doug," Olivia said, warning in her voice.

"What?" He shrugged and shot his wife an innocent look. "I didn't say anything. I'm just glad our son has finally figured out what he wants to do with his life."

"I'm not a quitter," Cade mumbled, his gaze on his bowl of ice cream.

"Well nobody spends years working they way you did at baseball then just walks away from it without an explanation." His father lowered his spoon and stared at Cade expectantly.

"I guess it's about time we got going." Cade rose, ignoring the eruption of dismay from his sisters. He tossed his napkin on top of his unfinished dessert. Olivia reached for his arm before he could pull away from the table.

"Stay," she pleaded, her voice low. "He didn't mean any harm. Please darling? Just for a little longer?"

Cade shook his head. "I'm sorry, Mom. I've got to go."

He walked away and Julia jumped up, almost toppling the table over onto the other occupants. "Dinner was wonderful. Thank you for everything," she said breathlessly and ran to catch up with him.

Julia climbed in the truck and flinched when he slammed his own door shut. Cade gunned the engine and took off down the driveway, kicking up gravel behind him.

After a full minute, Julia was unable to keep her questions at bay. "What the hell was that back there?"

"Don't ask." His mouth was set in a tight-lipped, unwelcoming grimace.

"No problem." Annoyed, Julia turned away and stared out the window as he drove. She reminded herself that she didn't want to get involved with him or his family. She needed to preserve the distance, to save herself from the magnetic draw he had over her before she did something stupid like fall in love or worse, actually sleep with him.

Obviously his father's comments bugged him and she was dying to ask why. Cade was Hardin's golden boy. The star pitcher of their high school baseball team, he had been recruited by colleges in his sophomore year. When he left for Georgia Tech, the girls of Hardin High were still tripping over their tongues to get a piece of him. And here he was, sitting across the truck from her, smelling absolutely divine— and brooding. If this was to be the only time she ever allowed herself to be alone with him, she certainly didn't want it end like this.

And her night had started out *so* well. Julia rolled her eyes.

"Do you know where you're going?" Julia asked, irritation making her tone sharper than she intended. She turned in the seat to face him and saw he was so caught up in his own thoughts that she had startled him with her voice.

"Sorry," she mumbled.

"For what?" Cade asked insolently. He swung his head to stare at her and pinned her with those sexy blue eyes. Obviously they were not discussing the same thing.

"For whatever bug crawled up your ass," Julia snapped. She refused to be turned to jelly over that smoldering look he used so well. "I'm not going for this rebel without a cause thing you've got going here so either speak up or stop acting like such a baby."

"You don't know what you're talking about," Cade muttered. They were at a red light and he stared out through windshield and refused to meet her gaze. When she would not relent, his jaw tightened visibly. "Look, you don't want to get into this thing with me and my dad. It's stupid."

"I didn't ask to get in the middle," Julia said with a shrug. "But if you want to talk about it, I can at least listen."

The red light changed to green and he eased the truck across the intersection. Julia shrugged once more and shifted in her seat.

"My dad always wanted me to play baseball. Even when I was a kid, he used to tell me that the Majors were just waiting for an arm like mine." Cade's self-deprecating half smile shown in the streetlight when they passed underneath. "I went right along with it, following his instructions like they were the Bible. 'Hold your head up son'," Cade imitated his father's gruff voice. "'That's the way boy, do it just like I told you'."

Julia watched anger and regret cross Cade's face. When he stopped at another light, he turned his head to look at her. She melted a little under the penetrating gaze.

"When I quit ball in college and went pre-law he was frustrated. We spent a lot of time together perfecting my fastball. It was what we both wanted and I knew he was disappointed but things happened— "Cade shook his head and turned his attention back to the street. "Hell, I was disappointed myself. But I was too ashamed to tell him what really happened." Cade trailed off and Julia reached out to touch him. He looked down at her hand on his arm and she pulled away. *Stupid*, she reminded herself. *Keep your distance. Down girl.*

"All anyone ever talked about was earned run averages and that damn fastball." He sighed wearily and lowered his voice. "I just wanted to be something more than a high school has-been."

"You don't think you would have made it in professional baseball?" Julia asked, keeping the conversation moving. His hair was windblown and mussed and her fingers itched to drive through it.

"I was scouted pretty heavily my first year at college."

"Were you really?" Julia turned in her seat to face him more fully. "What happened?"

"This guy from the Braves approached me after a really tough stretch on the road and handed me his card. He said he wanted to talk to me when I got back to school. I was so stoked, you know?" Cade glanced at her and grinned, showing her just how excited he'd been. "I was really full of myself when I finally went to see him. I was sure I'd be calling my dad and telling him I'd be playing with the Braves by summertime."

"What happened?" Julia asked again and the boyish grin fell away. He was lost in the memory for a moment before he spoke again.

"The guy didn't lay on the BS, that's for sure. He told me straight out that I'd never make it past the farm leagues. I had a man's arm but a boy's head for the game. He said I was immature." Cade seemed to think this was funny because he sort of half laughed, half snorted over this admission. Julia frowned.

"He said some other stuff about the way I played and how I would burn out before I made it to the Big Show." Cade spared her a glance. "The Big Show is what they call it when you get called up to the Major League."

"I know," Julia said quietly. The charming, self-confident grin was gone and she could almost envision the look on his face when the scout delivered his bad news. Defeated. Wounded. Humbled.

"What did this guy know anyway? He was just one of how many scouts?"

"That's what I thought at first, too," Cade said. He turned the steering wheel and his eyes flickered over the rear view mirror before he continued. "But then the other scouts stopped coming around. One by one they either left the games early or talked to other players. I was pulled out of the game earlier and earlier. Everything that guy said came true. I was completely burned out before the end of the second season."

"Did you really think your dad would be upset?" As soon as it was out, Julia wished she could take the question back. It was obviously a sore spot that was already raw after tonight's events. Although most of his frustration and anger had drained away, leaving him relaxed and easy going. Julia liked this lighthearted state. He was so preoccupied with his own thoughts he wasn't cranking up the charm.

Cade shrugged but did not look her way.

"Not upset, really. Just disappointed, I guess. A lot more than I was, I'm sure. Every once in a while I catch him looking at me and I can see the question in his eyes: Why?"

"What made you go after the law degree?" Julia switched gears. She had delved deep enough into Cade's inner sanctuary of crushed dreams and bitter regret for one night. He was starting to look a little less than larger than life and that freaked her out a little.

He laughed ruefully and shook his head. "I was always good at arguing. Dad and I were always going at it about one thing or another and I would be able to run circles around him until he wasn't sure which side he was on."

Julia joined him in his laughter, noting that his was more bittersweet than humorous.

"What about you?" Cade's eyes slid in her direction. "Why law?"

The question was an easy one, though Julia did not like explaining it to people who did not know her history. Thankfully she didn't have to go into details about her parents' sudden death. Only a little over a year old, the grief was still as strong as the day the officer showed up at her dorm room on campus to break the news.

"I'd have to say it was definitely the accident that clinched it for me. When it first came out how often Sandy Levi got off with her DUIs and how many times her license was suspended, I was pretty pissed. Now I want to do something about it."

"So, what? It's like a crusade or something?" Cade asked, surprised.

"I suppose you could call it that," Julia said thoughtfully. "There have to be better, more effective laws to deal with repeat offenders."

"Is that what you want to do, Julia," Cade asked, wonder evident in his voice. "Charge into congress, a lone woman, and change the justice system?"

"That's the beauty of democracy, isn't it? It only takes one person to start the ball rolling. Sure," she said and shrugged casually, "there is a lot of work, a lot of time and bureaucracy but look at the new laws governing guns and child molestation. Do you think that thousands of people went before congress to propose the concept of those bills?"

Cade started to speak but Julia cut him off.

"No. It was one mother. One father. One person." She pointed an impassioned finger at her chest. "One single person, Cade, who went before Congress with the determination that their bill and their vote would count. That they would make a difference.

"There is no real justice for DUI victims right now," Julia continued, "but there will be one day and I will live to see it."

A bemused smile crossed his lips and Julia blushed. "Sorry. I get a little caught up in all that."

"It's okay," he replied. "It's important to you. I'd be worried if you didn't get that excited about it."

Julia broke eye contact, embarrassed. "Why have we stopped?"

The truck was sitting in the middle of the road, the streetlights illuminating the sidewalks of a residential neighborhood.

"This is your street." Cade told her, a hint of humor in his voice.

"Oh." Julia had been so wrapped up in the mutual soul baring that she hadn't noticed when Cade pulled onto the street she had lived on her entire life. How stupid was that? Recalling her heated speech a moment ago, she nearly groaned. How arrogant. How self-serving. How *Cade*.

Suddenly Julia was super aware of the close quarters she had shared with him for the fifteen-minute ride. His features were softened by the intimate darkness, the sexy, male smell of him filled her lungs when she drew a shaky breath. All the fight went out of her at one simple thought. *If this were a date, would he kiss me goodnight?*

"Was this a date?" She heard the words before she realized they came from her and could have bitten her tongue off. For a brief, agonizing moment she prayed that it was the only part of that insane thought that had made it out of her mouth.

"I don't know," Cade answered in what suspiciously sounded like a laughing tone. "I can't remember what happens on a real date."

Julia snorted at this but wisely held her tongue before she said anything about strippers and one-night stands. Of all the amoral, egotistical—

"Which one is yours?" Cade's quiet voice interrupted her indignant mental tirade.

"It's the last house on the right," she murmured. Julia didn't want to think about the way he deftly evaded her question or that it really, really mattered to her how he answered.

The truck pulled into her driveway and Julia gathered her things, juggling them while she opened the door. Cade's voice stopped her before she climbed out.

"I hope you get what you want, Julia," he said. The earnest manner with which he stared into her eyes gave her a warm thrill. "You deserve it."

"Thanks," she replied. Their eyes held across the cab, blue with green while they measured each other silently. Something flickered in Cade's powerful gaze but it was gone

before Julia could wonder at it. Julia felt her heart beat thickly and she drew a deep, shuddering breath. He looked at her lips.

“Goodnight Cade.”

Julia broke the spell first and turned away. *Coward!* Her body shrieked. *He wanted to kiss you!* Julia tamped down her disappointment. *Fool!* Her brain lectured her traitorous body. *If he kissed you, you would be no better than all of the women who already pant after him.* It’s better that he leave now before she sincerely regretted the day she ever said yes to him. Julia could not have agreed with herself more.

Chapter Three

The next morning, Cade watched Julia undetected from her office doorway. She bent over her desk, engrossed in paperwork. His hungry, lust-glazed eyes took in the little black-framed glasses perched on the end of her nose and one slim, tapered finger absently tugged at a stray, glossy black curl. He was plagued by the image of her sitting just so wearing little more than her naughty underwear. The Playboy Playmate image was ruined when she noticed him standing there and jumped so hard the coffee cup on her desk rattled then spilled onto her work.

"Cade." She breathed out his name then visibly swallowed. "What are you doing here?"

In a deceptively casual move Cade leaned against the doorjamb, buried his hands in the pockets of his chinos and studied his loafers. The night before he almost pulled her across the cab of his truck and kissed her. Now, seeing her again, he still felt the same way only he wouldn't stop at just one kiss. When he trusted himself to look up, she mopped the mess on her desk with a napkin.

"I work here, remember?" Cade grinned. He really ought to do something about her habit of spilling things in his presence but it was just so damn cute. He liked her jumpy because he was jumpy too, but for a different reason.

Julia's hands paused over her papers. The wet napkin dripped while she leveled him an exasperated look over the top of her glasses. "I know you work here. I meant what are you doing in my office." She dropped the napkin in the trash and used another to clean her hands.

"You've got a book I need." Cade gestured at the stack of law books on the floor beside her desk. "The log in the library downstairs said you had it. Are you finished with it?"

"Oh," Julia said, a crease appeared between her smooth, dark brows. She tossed the other napkin and pushed her reading glasses to the top of her head. "Yeah. Sure. Take them all if you need them."

The minute she stood and came around her desk, Cade forgot why he'd come. There was definitely something to be said for Casual Fridays, he thought. Julia bent over in her form fitting blue jeans and tilted her head sideways to read the spines of the books. Cade swallowed hard. My God. No panty lines.

"Cade." Julia looked over her shoulder at him and frowned. He did not want to get busted looking at her sexy rear end.

"Yeah?"

"I just asked you which one do you want."

"Let me look," he said. Cade crouched down beside her and read the spines himself. He could smell her fragrant skin and breathed it in greedily. "Here it is."

They rose together and Cade stepped around her, pretending to be engrossed in the cover of the law book. Down boy, he told his raging libido. She smelled so good, like warm summer sunshine and sweet raspberries. As close as he was, he could feel her heat and indulged in a deliciously torturous question. Would she taste as good?

"Oh!" Cade turned back to her as though it were an afterthought. "By the way, I got a

call about your car. I was right. It's going to be at least a week and a half before they can get the model engine they'll need for your dad's Mercedes."

"Oh that's just great," Julia muttered. She fell back into her chair and crossed her arms over her chest. The chair swayed back and forth as she dropped her head against the back. "What am I supposed to do for a car until then?"

"Does your insurance company offer a free rental when your car is in the shop?"

"I have no clue," Julia sighed and closed her eyes.

"Call and find out. Some places even deliver to your house. If they do, I can take you wherever you need to go tonight. Home? Shopping? Dinner?" He threw the last in there hopefully and waited for her to catch up.

There was a stretch of silence. "I don't want to trouble you," she finally said.

"It's no trouble," Cade reassured her. "Really, it's not."

"Okay then," Julia replied slowly. "Dinner?"

"Dinner," he repeated. Cade worked to remain relaxed and suave looking. "I'll come by here again around five o'clock, okay?"

"Sure." Julia nodded and sat behind her desk. She pulled her glasses back to her nose and began to read again. Cade realized he had been dismissed.

Sitting beside Cade on the top of a picnic table, Julia looked out over Hardin Lake and smiled. The evening twilight edged the sun farther toward the horizon and set the lake on fire. Cade unwrapped his deli sandwich and took a huge, manly bite before he reached behind him for a bottle of soda.

"When you asked me to dinner I had no idea this is what you had in mind," Julia said as she unwrapped her sandwich. "I have to admit. It's a lot better than what I'd imagined."

"I find the privacy out here far superior to any fine dining establishment in town." Cade polished off the rest of his sandwich in a matter of minutes while Julia took smaller, slower bites, enjoying the quiet solitude of the lake.

"I haven't come here in a long time," Cade murmured. He gazed at the sunset while he fingered the bottle of soda between his hands. Julia watched his thumb absently trace the lip of the bottle before she looked away. She stared at the rippling water as a shiver rippled over her skin.

"My parents and I used to come here for picnics on the Fourth of July," she said. "My dad would barbeque and my mom would set out bowls of baked beans and potato salad. We didn't have any other family nearby and so it was always just the three of us."

"Where were your parents from?"

"We never talked much about their time before they moved to Hardin. Though I think that my mother's mother lives in Pennsylvania but I haven't ever seen or heard from her."

Cade drew a knee up and leaned his elbow against it. The bottle dangled from two fingers in front of his chest. He turned to study Julia's profile and she sensed his gaze roam over her hair. "She didn't come to the funerals?"

Julia shook her head and took another bite. Cade tilted his head back and swallowed long and slow from the bottle. Julia watched his Adam's apple slide up and down his throat and licked a bit of mayo from her lip. She was losing her appetite for food.

"Nobody came except the few friends my parents had, including your mom and dad. I

think there was bad blood between my maternal grandmother and my father. He was twelve years older than my mother." Julia stared down at her sandwich, which she was never going to be able to eat with him sitting so near. She wrapped up the remainder of it and set it aside then reached for her own soda.

"I suppose," Cade said with a casual shrug, "when you're in love it doesn't matter."

"Love-shmove." Julia snorted with disgust and leaned back on her forearms. She propped both feet near her rear-end on the tabletop. Cade sent her a glance under half closed lids, his eyes roaming over her body so hotly she felt like he'd burned her. She drew in a deep breath. "More like lust."

"That grew into love," he said gently.

"Either way, they are both so overwhelming. Love is just a feeling yet it rules your entire body, takes over your mind and makes you believe—"

She trailed off, unable to resist looking at him anymore. His eyes were hooded as he raised the bottle to his lips. He finished it off in three quick swallows. Julia turned away.

"Lust, I can understand." She bit her lip. "What's scary is that they are so alike. A body can't tell which is which while in the throes of one or the other."

"Have you ever been in lust?" Cade set his empty bottle on the table and leaned back on one elbow. He was eye to eye with her and they were both reclining on a flat surface. Julia tried to think of the question.

"Not really." She was terrified he could hear her heart thudding inside her chest. He was so close she saw the golden tips of his long lashes. Did she always know that he had a small cowlick over his right brow?

"Then it's safe to assume that you've never been in love either?"

She couldn't tear her eyes from his now. His lazy scrutiny of her face made her breathless.

"You've never wanted to touch a man so badly that your soft skin burned hot?" Cade's voice had dropped to just above a whisper. He was not touching her but Julia could feel him all over her body. She shook her head weakly.

"You've never wanted to kiss a man so much that you watched his lips move when he talked, wondering how he would taste?"

Julia exhaled slowly, unaware she had been holding her breath. "No," she whispered, her eyes dropped to his lips. They were curved into a seductive smile.

"Lust isn't so bad," he whispered. He leaned toward her. "It's damn fun to be in lust."

He was going to kiss her. Julia watched his eyes fall closed as he neared and she started to close her own. When she did, she envisioned a busty blonde named Babs with blue, sequined tassels swinging from her breasts and a tiny scrap of cloth serving as a g-string.

"How often have you been in lust, Cade?"

Her breathless question halted his momentum. He opened his eyes and stared down at her.

"Now Miss Campbell," he said in a slow, exaggerated drawl, "a gentleman never kisses and tells."

Julia used one hand to push him away and grunted in irritation. "I'm sure there's lots to tell, too."

Sliding from the wooden picnic table, Julia moved away from his warm body and sexy,

bedroom eyes.

"Now that depends on who you listen to, honey." Cade drawled. "You'd be surprised how little you really know about me, Julia."

"Your reputation precedes you, Cade." Her tone was biting. Julia crossed her arms over her chest and turned her back on him. She was beyond annoyed that her hands still shook from his near kiss.

"You shouldn't believe everything you hear." His voice was so low, Julia looked over her shoulder at him. He reclined against the table and his eyes followed her as she moved closer.

"And you shouldn't give everyone so much to talk about," she snapped. Julia tossed her hair over her shoulder and looked away, studying the water in the darkening sky. Soon, the overhead safety lights would come on and ruin the magic of the lake at dusk.

"I can't figure you out, Julia. One minute you look like you're about to go up in flames, the next it's like someone dumped you in the lake in December."

"Ice Queen," she muttered, moving farther away from him.

"Excuse me?" He sat up and propped his elbows on his knees.

"It's just a thing," she said, shaking her head. "Something people used to call me."

Cade was quiet but she could feel his gaze on her. Finally, he said, "We should go."

She heard him gather the wrappers from their dinner and sighed heavily when she heard his empty bottle clink against her almost full one.

She gasped when he came from behind and put his hands on her, pulling her toward him until her back brushed against his front. Cade's rough, calloused fingertips stroked against the sensitive skin of her upper arm. Julia tilted her head back until her eyes met his and he stared. His thumb scraped a lazy circle against her singing flesh and reminded Julia of the bottle he'd toyed with only a short while ago.

"Let me go," she whispered. Her lashes fluttered traitorously as his fingers flexed against her. His skin was so warm and he smelled so divine. She swayed ever so slightly and felt his erection against her backside.

"I wish I could," he replied. Julia's eyes closed and she swallowed hard. Be strong, she told herself. With great reluctance, her body straightened. The movement put just enough space between them that Julia mourned the loss of his intoxicating heat.

"Take me home," she said shakily. "Please."

Chapter Four

The thick, humid air seeped into the church through the open doors. Friends and family of the bride and groom trickled inside, taking their time to smile and comment on the lovely decor of the church and the stifling heat.

The second to last row of pews was empty except for Julia, who discreetly fanned herself with an old church bulletin she found stuffed in the worn velvet seat cushion. She searched the crowd for any sign of Cade. *Snap out of it*, she told herself. He's just a guy like any other guy. But he wasn't. He was Cade Taylor, Playboy Extraordinaire. *And you still like him*. She snorted and fanned a little harder. *You dolt*.

If only she'd been able to decline Olivia's invitation to Janessa's wedding. If only she'd been able to get Cade's near kiss out of her head for an entire week. If only— Well, there was nothing she could do now but get up and leave before anybody, namely Cade, realized she was there. Even as she moved to slide from the pew, the church filled with the low tones of an organ and the rear doors behind Julia opened to reveal Olivia Taylor and her only son.

Well hell.

Cade, dressed to the nines in a white jacket tuxedo a la Hugh Heffner, escorted his mother to the first pew and took his place at the front as a groomsman. Bridesmaids followed but Julia was completely captivated by the sight of Cade in a tux. Good grief, the man was an addiction and she was jonesing for the sight of him. She tore her gaze away and tried to pay attention to the procession.

The music changed and Julia rose with the other guests as Janessa appeared with her father. His pride was evident in the beaming smile he turned upon his oldest daughter. The bride gazed serenely at the sea of guests but as they passed Julia, she noticed that Janessa's smile wobbled and her eyes shone with tears.

The service began with a prayer and Cade bent his head, his dark blond curls shining in the sunlight that streamed in through the open windows. There were few opportunities to stare at him without causing comment or embarrassment and Julia took advantage. Once, when they were both in high school, she had stared at the back of his soft, golden head so intently she had tripped down a flight of stairs and twisted her ankle. Now, she drank him in like a cool glass of sweet iced-tea on a hot summer day. The scent of his warm, sun-tanned skin still lingered in her memory as she drew a long shaky breath.

"Amen," she whispered, echoing the other guests.

The minister began his sermon on marriage and love and commitment while Julia continued to ogle Cade. He appeared to listen and Julia wondered what was going through that gorgeous head of his. She found herself wishing she could see his eyes just once and nearly choked when he turned suddenly and scanned the back of the crowd. She slumped down in the pew and averted her gaze. After a few heartbeats she started to feel ridiculous and straightened in her seat. He had returned his attention to the bride and groom.

"Janessa and Kyle have written their own vows," the minister said with a smile. Julia straightened and watched as Kyle clasped his bride's hands in his and stared into her eyes.

"Janessa, I look at you today and you're so beautiful. I first met you as an annoying kid

sister who used to follow me and your brother around and ask too many questions." Laughter rippled through the crowd and Kyle waited until it grew quiet again. "Out of the whole universe, it amazes me that I found you in my own backyard wearing pigtails and skinned knees. You're the woman I never believed existed and I take you as my wife today to be the only woman I will love forever."

Janessa brushed tears from Kyle's cheeks as he pressed a kiss to the palm of her hand. Julia wiped the tears from her own cheeks with the tips of her fingers, forgetting about her mother's delicate hanky sitting in her lap. It was the most beautiful thing she had ever heard. She drew a deep, shuddering sigh and glanced at Cade. He was watching her with such intensity that she couldn't tear her eyes away from him.

"Kyle, I have been in love with you since I was just a girl." Janessa's tearful voice permeated Julia's awareness as she locked gazes with Cade, her heart hammering wildly beneath her breast. "You were the boy of my dreams. You became the man of my fantasies then the love of my heart. I take you as my husband today to be the only man I will love forever."

Breathless, Julia pressed shaking fingers against her thudding heart. She could have recited those very words to Cade herself and known the truth of them. Her girlish crush had lasted nearly a decade and turned into something very womanly. His blue eyes flickered with awareness and she knew his desire was displayed nakedly in her own eyes.

Suddenly overwhelmed, Julia tore her gaze away and stared at her hands. As she regained her equilibrium, she tried to think. What she was experiencing was too powerful, too passionate, too... too... damn. She needed to get the hell out of there before she ripped his clothes off and did bad, dirty things to him.

The entire church erupted with applause and Julia jolted with surprise. Janessa and Kyle shared a tearful, exuberant kiss. It was over and soon, too soon, she would have to face Cade. After several agonizing minutes where Julia prayed he would be too preoccupied to come to her, she was able to follow the rest of the guests outside.

A burst of sunlight and staggering humidity greeted Julia as she reached the open doors. She fumbled with her sunglasses, so nervous that her hands trembled. She shook them with frustration and silently cursed when two of Cade's sisters rushed to her side.

"Oh Julia," the twins exclaimed in unison. They were flushed prettily with excitement and their blue eyes twinkled with unshed feminine tears. "Was that not the most beautiful thing you've ever seen?"

Julia smiled at them and nodded, afraid to say anything. Please, she thought, let me get out of here before he finds me.

"We are going to have a double wedding," one of the twins informed her.

"That's wonderful," Julia said and put on her sunglasses. She pulled out her keys. "I'm sorry girls, but I really need to get going."

"You're not going to the reception?" The girls exchanged a glance.

"No, I don't think so."

"Well," one of the twins said with a sigh and clutched her sister's hand. "I guess that's okay."

"Thanks." Julia forced a nervous laugh as she turned away and paused, the trembling smile dying on her lips. Cade stood at the foot of the stairs looking up at her. His jacket was

unbuttoned and spread wide by his hands which were deep into the pockets of his tuxedo pants, a stance Julia was beginning to recognize as a challenge.

She braced herself and slid one hand down the slim, iron rail as she descended the stairs. She kept her eyes on Cade, refusing to break the contact and reveal too much. The ankle length skirt of her sundress caressed her bare legs. The thin, spaghetti straps did little to protect her shoulders from the heat of the sun. Her heart thundered inside her chest. Please God, don't let me fall—

"Hello Cade."

"Julia." He nodded his greeting and kept his hands in his pockets. "What are you doing here?"

"I was invited."

Cade rocked back on his heels and looked at the ground. When she stopped two steps above him, he glanced up again.

"I didn't realize you were on the guest list," he replied.

"Your mother called me earlier this week." Julia felt suddenly stupid that she had not been invited until just days before the wedding.

"Oh," Cade said quietly.

Julia shrugged, avoiding his gaze. Up close, the effects of Cade Taylor in formal wear were nearly staggering.

Cade threw a glance at his mother across the stairs. Olivia flashed an encouraging smile in his direction and turned away. Shaking his head, he chuckled low. "I'm sorry about that."

"No, it's all right. It was a beautiful ceremony."

"Are you going to the reception?"

"No," Julia said, thankful she wore sunglasses when she met his gaze. She all but licked her lips as she stared. Gah. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"Why not?"

"Cade." Julia looked away again and frowned with frustration. "You know very well why not."

Taking a step up, he came close enough she felt his breath feather across the bare, heated skin of her neck and shoulders. He whispered close to her ear, "I won't lay a hand on you." Julia pulled away and glanced at him. "Unless you ask me to." His heart-breaker grin was unmistakable.

"Not likely that will happen in this lifetime." Julia tried to step around him. Same old Cade. Irritation vibrated through her entire body, washing away the after-shocks of their shared moment inside the church.

Cade took her arm, forcing her to hesitate. Julia reached up and tilted her glasses down her nose and said with more disdain than she truly felt, "Something more you needed?"

His eyes darkened and his lashes lowered as he looked down at her. "You."

Biting her lip, Julia discreetly tugged her arm from his hand. It's just an act, she reminded herself even though she was sucking in the masculine scented air between them in breathy little pants. Still, she could not bring herself to move away. Cade reached up and snaked her glasses from her face. "I want to see your eyes," he murmured.

For all the noisy chatter of the other guests, they could have been alone on the stone

steps. Their gazes clashed, a power of wills and undeniable need. With deliberate slowness, Julia took her glasses from him but didn't put them back on.

"You can't have me, Cade."

He merely smiled, the hint of dimple in his left cheek distracting her. She turned away and went around him to the bottom of the steps. She got five paces away before Cade's deep, smooth voice reached her.

"Come to the reception Jules," he said.

It was not a plea but it was not quite an order either. Julia hesitated and glanced over her shoulder. He looked so wonderful, so appetizing with the sunlight in his hair and his charming grin taking over his entire face. She slid her sunglasses back on and smiled.

"Why don't you hold your breath and wait and see?"

Cade's rich laughter followed her down the sidewalk.

The party was in full swing. Janessa and Kyle had cut the cake, tossed the bouquet and garter, and danced their first dance as a married couple. Delicious food was served and now empty plates and champagne glasses littered the tables. Cade sat alone with his back to the wall.

His parents danced cheek to cheek on the outskirts of a packed dance floor. His sisters sat with cousins giggling and laughing, Josie sat with his grandmother eating an enormous piece of cake. Cade smiled to himself as he watched her. She was his baby sister. She loved him unconditionally. Josie had no expectations, no rules to follow to gain her trust and respect. Her love was so simple and so huge, the sheer beauty of the grin she bestowed upon him when she caught him watching her made his heart swell. A guy could never lose with that kid.

The band changed songs and his parents broke apart, his father whispering in his mother's ear before he patted her behind. Olivia left the dance floor giggling. Doug turned and looked at his son, drawing out a cigar as he ambled towards the table. Cade felt a surge of dread and braced himself.

"Son," Doug said by way of greeting as he took a seat across from him. The table was wide and round, large enough to fit ten people. In Cade's opinion, it was not near big enough for both his father and himself.

"Dad," Cade replied. He watched as Doug puffed on the cigar with appreciation. "Having a good time?"

"You bet." Doug grinned at his son. "You don't seem to be, though. Where's your girl at?"

"My girl?"

"That beautiful dish your mother invited, Rob and Laura's girl?"

"Ah," Cade said, a small smile curving his lips as he glanced at the table. He toyed with a place card, kind of wondering the same thing. "You must mean Julia."

"That's her. She's a good girl." Doug jabbed his cigar in the air for emphasis. "Where'd she go?"

"She couldn't make it." Cade shrugged. Doug examined him for a heartbeat then nodded.

"So I see." Doug glanced across the hall, smiling at Josie as Olivia wiped cake icing

from the tip of her nose. Turning to Cade, he leaned back in his chair. "How's the law doing?"

Cade's lips thinned into an annoyed line. "Fine."

"Things working out at that big, fancy firm you're at?"

"Yes, sir."

Doug nodded and squinted at the tip of his cigar. "Glad to see I'm still getting my money's worth."

Cade remained tight lipped and refused to be baited.

Doug sighed. "What's important is that you're happy with it, I guess."

"Yes, sir."

Silence descended again as Doug took another puff from his cigar. Nothing was the same anymore between them. Since Cade dropped baseball Doug was distant at best, outright belligerent at worst. He knew he owed his father an explanation but Cade couldn't bring himself to admit that he'd failed. Not to his father, the one man whose opinion meant everything to him.

"Why did you do it?" Doug asked. Many more difficult questions lingered in his eyes.

"Why can't you just accept it?" Cade returned, frustrated that he sounded like he was pleading.

"You knew how hard we worked. How difficult it was to get up every morning year round and perfect that pitch. You've got distance and accuracy." Doug leaned forward in his chair. "You've got strength and a head for the game."

Cade snorted but kept his gaze averted.

"I just want to know why?"

"Why not?"

"Because you're my son. Because I put as much time and energy into it as you did and you just threw it all away."

"But I didn't," Cade said, shaking his head. "I found something better."

"How is giving up everything you worked so hard for *better*?"

"I'm happy, Dad. Why can't you just let it go?"

"Because I had as much at stake as you did and you made the decision without me." Doug smacked his hand down on the table. "A bad decision, I might add."

Cade stared in disbelief at his father.

"I just don't know you anymore, Cade. I didn't think you had it in you to be the kind of lawyer you want to be." He shook his head, his cigar forgotten in his hand. "I feel like you're not my son anymore."

His chest squeezed tightly and Cade swallowed convulsively.

"I just can't be proud of the man you want to be, if this is truly what you want. I can't stop you from the path you've chosen, Cade. But I can be disappointed in you."

Doug stood up, gave Cade one last lingering look then walked away.

Angry, Cade rose from the table so fast the dinnerware clattered. How could his own father say such horrible things to him? It was just baseball. Just a game. But it was obviously more important to his father than he was.

Without a backward glance, Cade left the reception, striding through the lobby of the hotel and out into the night. Dragging in slow, deep breaths, he leaned against the rough

stucco of the hotel and ground the heels of his palms into his eyes. The old pain of disappointment racked his body so hard he shuddered.

Swearing, Cade shoved away from the building and took off down the sidewalk. He would just leave. It would be over soon and nobody would miss him. And Julia had made it very clear how little she thought of him. Shit. He had to get out of there. He headed toward the end of the hotel where his truck was parked in the huge lot.

He rounded the corner and came to an abrupt halt when a soft, feminine body collided with his. He caught her this time, saving Julia from another disgraceful tumble on his account. She looked at him in surprise, her arms still clasped in his hands as he steadied her.

She still wore the sun dress she'd had on at the wedding and Cade let her scent, the feel of her body against his, sink into him and surround the bitterness of disillusionment with a blanket of desire.

"You're late," he whispered close to her ear.

"I changed my mind about not coming," she whispered. Her voice sounded shaky and he felt her arms break out in chill-bumps.

"I'm glad you did," he murmured and captured her earlobe between his teeth. She felt so good and he needed to touch and be touched so badly he paid no heed to her soft whimper and held her as she tried to pull away.

"Cade." Her voice broke on his name but he ignored it. His lips and teeth worked down to her nearly bare shoulder. She was all warmth and silk as he traced the sensitive skin at her nape with his tongue.

"Mmmmm," he half-moaned, half-sighed against her sweetly scented flesh. His hands slid from her arms to her back, pulling her closer. Her arms lifted and clutched the front of his tux. He tried to kiss her lips but she evaded him, her eyes searching his.

"Cade," she whispered shakily. "What is it? What's wrong?"

He avoided her probing gaze and returned to trailing frenzied nips and bites over her neck and up along her jaw. "I need you Julia," he groaned against her skin. "Now. Please. Don't say no."

He stole possession of her mouth, pouring all of his need, all of the desire and a little desperation into her. Julia's fingers slid to his shoulders then dove into his hair, holding him as tightly as he held her.

He felt it, the moment she gave in. With a groan, Cade cupped his hands around her rear and lifted her against him, their bodies brushing intimately. He tore his mouth from hers and pressed his open lips against the swell of her breast, displayed to perfection by the neckline of her dress, and sucked gently, tasting her.

"Cade!" Julia gasped and tugged his hair. "Cade! No!"

He broke away from her and looked up into her frightened eyes. Slowly, she slid down the front of his body and Cade returned to Earth. His senses cleared and he really looked at her. Julia's hair was disheveled, her lips red and swollen, and he'd left a mark on her breast. My God, he'd marred that beautiful skin. Gently, he took her face in his hands and became frustrated when his fingers shook as he stroked her smooth, flushed skin.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, his voice ragged. "I'm so sorry."

Julia's eyes were large and uncertain and he pressed his forehead against hers, his chest was tight because he couldn't seem to breathe normally and his eyes closed because he

couldn't stand to see her disappointment or her fear. He'd lost control and scared the hell out of her. He'd scared the hell out of himself.

"I'm sorry." He brushed one last kiss against her forehead and turned away.

"Cade," Julia called after him. "Don't leave! Cade!"

He picked up his pace, running from her. Running from himself.

Chapter Five

The tap, tap, tapping of Julia's red pen filled the quiet office. She stared with disinterest at the rough draft of a motion she was supposed to file this afternoon. She propped her chin in her hand as she let the pen hit the desk in a rapid-fire beat. She was restless and achy and nervous and she didn't have to think hard to know why.

Cade.

Julia drew a quick, deep breath and exhaled slowly as she dropped the pen on the desk and stretched in her chair. It took very little imagination to remember the feel of his hands on her skin and his mouth on her body. She still had a mark over her left breast and she got turned on just looking at it in the mirror this morning.

It was time to stop kidding herself. She wanted him. Bad. A year ago—hell, a week ago—Julia was convinced that any kind of involvement with Cade Taylor would lead to heartbreak and ruin. After last night, standing in the dark while Cade clung to her and put a voice to the need she'd felt practically all of her life, Julia wasn't so sure anymore. What harm could come if he wanted her as badly as she wanted him?

"Hey." Paige's voice interrupted her thoughts and Julia flushed guiltily. "It's about that time. Hungry?"

Julia looked around her office and sighed. "Yeah," she said, "but I've got to be back here in thirty minutes. I've got to finish this Motion for Discovery for Robert. We need to file today."

"No problem-o," Paige said. She leaned against the doorjamb to wait while Julia gathered her purse and forwarded her phone to her voicemail. When Julia stood, Paige whistled low.

"Whoa. That's some skirt, Jules."

Julia laughed self-consciously and pulled at the hem a little. "It's been in my closet for a while. I finally had the guts to wear it today."

"Any particular reason? I mean, you might as well have worn a band-aid across your butt."

"It's not that short!" Julia felt her cheeks flush warm and she tugged a little more on the jade skirt. "It's fine for work."

"Don't mind me," Paige said, laughing. "I'm just jealous because my legs wouldn't look half as good as yours do."

"Your legs are fine." Even as she said it, Julia looked down at Paige's petite, five-foot-two frame and smiled. "Okay, so I'm an Amazon."

"Just don't try to kick anybody's ass, Xena." Paige rolled her eyes. "I do like that color though. It really brings out the gorgeous green in your eyes."

"Thanks," Julia said. Some of the nerves that had wracked her all morning long slid away. She stepped out into the hallway and paused, giving Paige a wry, conspiratorial look. "I've got the underwear to match it," she told her. The look in Paige's blue eyes killed Julia's laughter and she turned to see Cade frozen in place only a few feet behind her.

The papers he held were slack in his grasp, a dull flush spread across his cheeks. If Julia

had not known better, she would swear he was blushing.

"Excuse me," he muttered, brushing past them and turning the corner. Julia watched him leave, wondering.

"Ohmigod," Paige whispered. "I cannot believe that just happened."

"Neither can I," Julia said. She almost felt the spot above her breast where his mouth had been, the mark burning her like a hot coal pressed against her skin. She shivered and nudged Paige along.

"Let's get out of here before I say anything else to embarrass us both."

Cade leaned against the closed door of his office, his eyes shut and his chest heaving with suppressed anxiety. When he saw Julia come out of the office he was about to turn and go back the other way. He did not want to see her, look at her or risk talking to her after what had happened over the weekend. He was man enough to realize he had practically forced himself on her.

What the hell was the matter with him? He was losing his mind, that's what. He wanted her so badly that he would take her, willing or not, outside in a dark hotel parking lot, against the rough stucco walls. Shit, he was hard. He had to think about something else.

Cade crossed the small office and tossed the handful of forgotten papers on his desk. He ran his fingers through his hair and pressed his palms against his forehead to erase the image of Julia in sheer, jade colored lingerie. It didn't work.

A light tap on his door preceded the entrance of his boss, Elisabeth Westly. The feral, possessive way her slate gray eyes raked over him was more effective than a bucket of ice-cold water. Cade straightened in his chair and grabbed a pen from his desk.

"Is there something you needed?" he asked.

She came into his office and closed the door behind her. Cade catalogued the skirt—just a hair too short—and tailored jacket paired with the blond hair artfully swept away from her face. In spite of the way she watched him with feral intent from the door, she managed to look professional and worth every penny the firm charged for her services.

"You know what I want," she purred. Elisabeth was almost fifteen years his senior and though she was a beautiful woman, her avaricious eyes and greedy, lip-licking ways were enough to put Cade's self-preservation on red alert.

"I'm sorry, Elisabeth." He frowned and made himself write a few things down on his notepad to look busy. "I don't have time for any of your games today."

"All work and no play makes Cade a dull boy," she cooed, slinking across the small office to prop her rear end on the inside corner of his desk. "Come play with me, Cade," she whispered, her fingers snaking out to wrap around his tie.

"Elisabeth." His voice held cold warning and her fingers stilled for the briefest moment, her eyes meeting his. She smiled and stroked his tie in a shameless motion that could not be mistaken. "I told you, I'm busy."

"Not too busy for a little taste of paradise, I bet." She leaned in, her breasts pressing against the strategic cut of her blouse to give him an unfettered view of all she offered. Elisabeth released his tie to rake her nails over his chest through his shirt.

"I'll take that bet." He grabbed her wrist and stared at her coldly, assessing. She met his eyes and he saw challenge in her hard gaze.

"Never bet more than you can afford to lose, Cade," she said, her warning clear. She glanced at his hand around her wrist and he looked down. His knuckles were white, he held her so tightly. He released her and she lunged away from him, holding her wrist.

"I do love a man who isn't afraid to be a little rough," she drawled. Elisabeth's eyes sparkled with lust as she flexed her fingers and examined her wrist. He saw the beginnings of a bruise around the pale skin and sensed her excitement. "I could do so many things for you honey," she murmured.

"I don't need your kind of help," he replied. He wanted to go on but held onto his temper.

"Suit yourself." She shrugged and pulled her sleeve down to cover the marks. That was twice he had left a mark on two different women. He was out of control and it scared the hell out of him. "You know where to find me when you change your mind."

Elisabeth left and closed the door behind her. She stalked him like a live animal, a feeling he didn't appreciate anymore than he was sure Julia did. It was an eye-opening experience, to say the least. Cade made a promise to himself that he would stay as far away from her as possible. Julie didn't want him to pursue her. Why did he want to keep pushing?

For the sake of his sanity, he would let her go. As for covering his own ass, he was going to have to do something about Elisabeth. He wished he could talk to his father to ask his advice. But Cade was pretty sure he didn't want to know what Doug Taylor would think about forty-year-old female lawyers who hunted down college boys in their own offices.

Cade ran his fingers through his hair and dropped his head on the desk. What the hell was happening to him?

The sick feeling that swirled in the pit of his stomach before Elisabeth came in now swamped his head. Something brewed inside him and though he could not put his finger on it Cade knew when it finally surfaced, it would be ugly.

Several days later, Julia fanned herself with a file folder as the copier churned out sheet after sheet, heating up a room so small, only one person could move around comfortably. Lost in thought, she attempted to reword the letter to go along with the boxes of files she prepared for the opposing counsel. No matter how often she redirected her thoughts, they inevitably routed back to Cade. Julia found it peculiar that she'd seen very little of him the last few days. Before Janessa's wedding, she'd managed to run into him, both literally and figuratively, at least once a day.

Now, almost a week later, Julia realized he was avoiding her. She did not know what to think of that. Despite all of the warnings her brain sent her body, her traitorous memory would not let the matter rest. Julia recalled every detail of those few impassioned moments when he held her, clasped close to Cade's body while he ravaged her lips, throat and heart.

After nine long years Julia had, she thought, crushed all girlish fantasies about Cade Taylor. The reality of the man proved far more persuasive than her willpower. She wasn't so foolish to believe that she loved him. He was Cade, after all. What she felt was womanly lust. Plain and simple. Except there was absolutely nothing simple about the way she wanted to tear open his shirt, touch his hot skin and lick and—

"Excuse me."

Julia jumped so hard she wracked her knee against the copier and sent a jolting pain all

the way to her hip.

"Jayzuz," she muttered and cast a glare at whoever startled her. One look over her shoulder halted the rest of her scathing set down. "Cade."

"Julia," he replied tersely. She rubbed her knee again then straightened.

"Do you need to get in here?" She gestured at the copier and tried to keep her eyes off his tanned forearms. His shirtsleeves were rolled to just below his elbow and his tie was loosened, the top button undone. His disheveled hair hung across his forehead in careless waves.

"I can wait," he said. He started to turn away but Julia reached out and grabbed his arm. The heat of his skin seared her fingers and she snatched them back.

"Cade," she murmured. "Wait."

He hesitated before turning around. Julia searched his face. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Cade replied. His jaw was tense, a small crease formed between his brows. Blue eyes regarded her with such intensity that she struggled to draw an even breath. She glimpsed unchecked passion in the way his gaze roamed her face and body. The way his chest jumped when she licked her lips.

"If you need anything," she said, her voice unsteady and unsure. "Just ask."

Cade's mouth opened and closed as though he wanted to say something and his jaw flexed before he took a sudden step toward her. In the small room with no door, they could be seen by anyone that happened to walk by but Julia did not care. She held her ground, her body almost brushing against his in the tiny space. His fingers lifted as though he would touch her face but he hesitated only inches from her burning skin.

Julia felt her cheeks flush and her eyes grew heavy. She held his gaze and waited breathlessly. Cade stared at her mouth. His fingers trembled as they hovered over her lips. Reflexively, she wet them. He groaned.

It happened so fast. Cade's fingers wrapped around her jaw, his thumb pressed against her chin and forced her lips to part as he dove in. Over and over he stole her breath as his tongue delved deeper and stroked her from the inside out. She felt every brush all the way to her toes. His hand gentled on her face, caressing her cheek and neck, playing with the fine hair at her nape. The kiss changed direction, slowing to an agonizing pace where his tongue traced the inside of her parted lips. Julia panted. Her hands hung limply at her side. She would not touch him, only let him take what he wanted from her.

Cade pulled away first, his nose brushing against hers as he kissed her so feather-light she almost whimpered.

"I swore to myself—" he began, his whisper fanning her cheeks. Cade's lips brushed hers again.

Her eyes were still closed and her heart felt like it would trip over itself and fall out of her chest onto the floor at his feet. Julia's breath caught as his thumb traced along her lower lip before his hand left her face.

Julia was on fire. Her blood raced through her veins like molten lava streaming from a volcano long dormant. She knew she would erupt if he touched her again.

But he didn't. As a matter of fact when she opened her eyes, he was gone.

"Damn." Julia sucked in an unsteady breath. "He did it again."

Chapter Six

Cade blinked hard and stared at the yellowed pages of the law book. The small letters blurred again and he stifled a yawn. After reading the same page several times and still not absorbing the legalese, Cade pushed the book away.

He glanced around the law library in the basement of KBH. The ancient bookshelves stood along the walls and down the center of the room like soldiers and housed a copy of every law book published in the state of Georgia for the last century. Several tomes lay scattered across the scarred, oak tabletop in front of him, mixed with his textbooks.

Cast in long shadows, his corner of the library was relieved only by the old, dusty green reading light at the end of the table. The bulb glowed for so long, the musty light shade emitted an odd burning smell. Cade blew out a frustrated breath and linked his fingers behind his head. He tilted his head back, trying to garner his concentration.

"Cade."

Julia stood just inside the circle of light surrounding his work area, her face still in the shadows. His gaze traveled up her legs to the infamous short, jade green skirt and a white, silky looking tank top. He nearly groaned. Please God, let her have left her matching underwear in the drawer. Of course, the thought only evoked a more dangerous one.

"Julia," he said, glancing at his watch. "It's got to be almost eleven-thirty at night. What are you still doing here?"

She leaned against the nearest bookcase and smiled.

"My guess is the same as you. Working."

"You'd be wrong." Cade dropped his hands from behind his neck and let them rest on the top of his thighs under the table. He wanted to touch her so badly his palms itched. Instead he kept his eyes on her and tried not to scare her off.

"I'm studying for the bar exam."

"Oh." She pushed away from the bookcase and neared the table. To his disappointment, she remained out of arm's reach.

"What are you doing here so late, Jules?"

"Rawley versus Jefferson," she said by way of explanation. Julia shrugged and reached for a book on the table. She turned it and glanced at the page. "The bar is this weekend, isn't it?"

"Yeah," Cade said with a sheepish grin. "I'm cramming."

"Not the kind of test you cram for," she said, half laughing. "You either know it or you don't at this point."

"True." He sighed.

"Why do you push yourself so hard, Cade?"

The question surprised him. Honestly, Cade occasionally wondered too but the answer always made perfect sense to him.

"It's my father," he admitted. "I want to prove to him that I'm just as good at this as I was at baseball."

"I don't understand your dad." Julia leaned her backside against the table-edge to his

right. Cade pushed his chair back, putting a wide space between him and the table. His control was already slipping and if she got any closer he didn't think it would hold much longer.

"You were an awesome baseball player and the most popular guy in school. All the girls adored you. What more could any father want?"

Cade strangled out a laugh. "What do you mean 'all the girls?' If I remember right, you wouldn't give me the time of day."

Julia seemed nonplussed. She leveled him with a censorious look. "As if you even asked."

"What? I never asked you out?"

"No," she said with a laugh. "You literally never asked the time of day."

"Oh c'mon! I had to have asked at least once." Cade relaxed in his chair. He felt more at ease with this teasing, joking side of Julia.

"Nope." She shook her head, her dark hair shining in the dull lamplight. A curl fell against her bare shoulder from the loose twist at her crown. He stared at it, watching the way it stroked over her beautiful skin. Skin he remembered as soft and fragrant. In the space of a heartbeat, Cade felt his throat tighten, his breath shorten and all the blood drain to his lap.

"Not once," she finished.

Julia watched him and the expression on his face told her exactly where his thoughts wandered. He stared at the shoulder she'd deliberately bared by taking off her jacket just minutes before she gathered her courage to come over to his table.

All night she'd sat in the darkest corner of the library listening to him work. After a week full of sleepless nights and hot, set-the-bed-on-fire dreams that left her aching and unfulfilled, Julia decided to take matters into her own hands. For whatever reason, Cade changed his mind about seducing her. When she came to that startling conclusion, Julia made a decision of her own.

It was time for a ruthless, take-no-prisoners kind of seduction that she read about only in romance novels. It took another week before she got the nerve to act on it. Now she practically sat on a table—a very large, wide, sturdy table—with Cade less than three feet away. They were the only people in the entire building and he looked relaxed and comfortable with himself. Julia decided it was time to shake him up a bit.

Watching his face, she pushed a few of his books out of the way. With deliberate slowness, Julia went around the corner of the table until she stood in front of him with his knees on each side of her legs. His body heat reminded her of their last kiss in the copy room. Her skin prickled with anticipation and her nipples tightened—a fact Cade had to know about since his eyes were exactly level with her breasts. Julia squelched the self-conscious urge to cover them.

Cade's eyes met hers. His body did not move so much as an inch.

"What are you doing?" he croaked. *He actually croaked!* Julia reveled in the small victory. She was getting to him.

"I'm seducing you," she said, her breath catching in her chest.

"Why?"

"Because I want to." Julia inched closer until she felt his inner thighs press against her stocking-covered legs. His hands flexed against his thighs but his gaze remained steadfast on

hers.

"Because I can." Ever so slowly, Julia lifted her leg until she could slide his muscular thigh between her knees. She reached out and placed a hand on each of his shoulders. Cade was wound so tight she felt it beneath her fingers.

Julia leaned forward until her lips were a breath away from his. His eyes were heavy-lidded and watchful but they never left hers.

"Just because."

Mustering the last ounce of her courage, Julia pressed her lips against his. She threw everything she had into the kiss, giving with her lips what she wanted to give with her body. After several long seconds, Julia realized Cade's hands stayed flat on his legs and his lips were closed. The humiliating rejection caused a knot to form in her throat and tears burned her eyes.

"I-I'm so sorry," she whispered brokenly as she backed away. "I didn't—"

"Christ." The blasphemy was covered by her gasp. Cade moved so fast Julia barely had time to close her eyes as his warm, hard fingers wrapped around her neck and dragged her forward.

The kiss was savage, desperate, consuming, drugging, and a million more things Julia could not remember as his mouth took hers. His lips were firm, his tongue aggressive and sure as she opened for him and he stole inside. His hands roamed everywhere. Her face, her hair, her neck, her waist. Finally they settled on her knees and urged her to spread her legs wider and straddle both his thighs. Cade's hot fingers stroked over the silk stockings and upward to bare skin. He gasped against her mouth.

"Oh my God," he groaned. He repeated it again with reverence as he went farther and discovered Julia's daring secret.

"You're not wearing any panties."

Julia could only shake her head. Cade's irises were nearly black and ringed in brilliant blue. His lids were at half-mast and a dull flush spread across his cheekbones. He fingered the satin straps of her garter belt before his hands slid along her damp center in teasing, too brief strokes. The exploration left her trembling.

"Not yet," he said hoarsely. "I want to see you."

Cool air breezed against her bare backside as he bunched her skirt at her waist.

"My God. You're beautiful."

He stared at the shining black curls framed in jade green satin and lace. Her stockings were so sheer they were barely there. Her soft, silky skin burned under his hands and he dragged in a deep breath filled with her scent. Julia's lips were parted and shimmering. She panted.

Cade lightly stroked his fingers across her tight buttocks and down her bare thighs. She whimpered.

"Do you like that?" he whispered. Julia nodded. He did it again and watched her nipples harden under her shirt. He had to get her naked.

Now.

He urged her forward until she sank onto his lap. He closed his eyes as her warmth cupped his straining erection through his slacks. Grabbing fistfuls of her shirt, Cade dragged it over her head and tossed it on the floor at his feet. Julia tugged on his tie while he spent a

full minute admiring her luscious, creamy breasts spilling out of the – as promised – matching bra.

"We have a problem," Julia said breathlessly.

"What's that?" He brushed the palm of his hand against a distended peak through the sheer cups.

"You're wearing too many clothes." She grabbed the front of his dress shirt and jerked it open. Buttons skewed across the floor and table and he half-laughed in surprise. One look at Julia's expression and his laughter died. She gazed at his bare chest, hunger written clearly in her green eyes. He was definitely glad it was too hot for an undershirt that morning.

"Kiss me," she whispered. "Right now. Please."

The uncertainty in her voice struck a tender chord in Cade and when he kissed her, he was slow and gentle. When he felt her soft hands against the bare skin of his chest and exploring his sensitive nipples, his control slipped another notch.

He shuddered. *Hard. God he was so hard.* Next, her bra joined her shirt and his tie on the floor. She wiggled as close as she could and moved her hips against him. Cade pressed his hand against the small of her back to keep her still.

"Shhh," he murmured just before he put his mouth, hot and hard, against her breast. He drew her straining nipple deep and rasped his tongue roughly against it. Julia stifled a ragged cry.

"I'll never forget the way you taste." He sighed against her flushed skin.

Cade trailed suckling bites across her skin, dragging his tongue over the other peak before nibbling on it gently. Julia's fingers dove into his hair and her hips rocked so hard against him he nearly came in his pants.

"Jesus," he whispered hoarsely. He wrapped a hand around her jaw and pulled her close for a deep, provocative kiss while his other hand fumbled with his belt and zipper. When he freed himself, he kept his mouth on Julia's, stroking the warm haven inside with his tongue as he lifted her until she was poised over his straining cock. A violent shiver shook his body as she took him inside her with one, easy stroke.

"Oh my God," she whispered against his lips. "Oh God." Without any persuasion, Julia continued rocking and the chair beneath Cade groaned with their efforts. She was slick and hot, burning him from the outside in. She took him deeper with every stroke and Cade was completely enraptured by the sway of her breasts against his chest and the pleading moans close to his ear.

If he didn't slow her down, it would be over in seconds.

Her nails sank into his skin as he grasped her hips and guided her movements until she slid against his rigid flesh in an agonizing, slow rhythm. Her eyes were closed, her forehead pressed against his. Their rapid breathing rasped between them.

"Faster," she whispered against his lips. "Fuck me faster."

He upped the pace, pulling her closer and closer with every driving thrust of her hips. She grabbed a handful of his hair and pulled his head back, her tongue plunged deep into his mouth.

He wanted her on her back. He wanted to watch her as she came for him.

Cade wrapped both arms around her waist and stood. Julia's surprised cry turned to a low, sultry moan as he settled her on the table and pushed her back.

"Oh yes." She wrapped her legs tightly around his waist. Her back arched and Cade slid his cock deep inside, holding still, barely breathing as he gathered his wits and stared down at Julia.

A silky tumble of dark hair fell across the books and yellow legal pads. He drank in the sight of her closed eyes and parted lips.

"Now!" She gasped, wriggling closer.

Unable to deny himself a moment longer, Cade pressed his hands against her inner thighs and spread her legs apart. He watched, enthralled, as he boldly drove into her harder and deeper. Julia cried his name over and over in ragged moans increasing in volume. He dipped one finger into her glossy curls and stroked the hard little bud hidden inside and she arched off of the table. She was the most beautiful, arousing sight he had ever seen. One he would likely never forget as she came apart around him.

"Yes," he groaned, feeling his own orgasm clawing to the surface. "God. Julia."

He came, hard and long, deep inside her. She shivered with every pulse then sighed when he leaned forward and placed a loving kiss on her breast.

"You are so beautiful," Cade said again, breathless. A blush spread across her exposed stomach and chest. His brain was befuddled and he could hardly see straight but Cade laughed when he saw his shirt. "And dangerous. Look at this." He pulled away from her as she leaned up on her elbows and they both froze at the exact same moment.

"I forgot, I'm sorry," he said, straightening at the same time Julia sat up. "I should have remembered the condom."

She stared at him, the combination of concern and complete satisfaction warring on her face.

Cade swore, angry with himself. "I'm sorry, Jules. I don't usually carry one around with me and I totally didn't expect this tonight. But I should have thought. It's just when I'm with you, I forget everything."

"I know," she whispered. "Me, too." A wrinkle appeared between her smooth brows. "I'm sorry."

"No." He shook his head and reached for her. He wrapped his fingers around her neck and brought her head against his chest. Her hair tangled in the stubble across his chin as he rubbed his lips over the top of her head. "Don't. Don't be sorry."

"I'm not worried. It's okay," she whispered.

"You're sure?" he asked, running a hand over her hair.

"Positive."

"Okay then." He wrapped his arms around her and she laughed against his chest.

"I owe you a shirt." She ran a finger down the placket. Only one button remained but it hung from a single thread.

"I have more," he said against her lips. He felt Julia smile.

"Good."

Chapter Seven

Julia paced the cramped length of the firm's second floor restroom.

"You're making me dizzy," Paige muttered and glanced at her watch.

Without a word Julia stopped and leaned against the narrow counter top.

"How much longer?"

"One more minute," Paige whispered. Their quiet voices echoed in the small, tiled room, which sounded louder and suspiciously magnified to Julia.

The girls faced each other in silence. Paige fidgeted against the side of an open stall door while a thin, white plastic cartridge balanced on the toilet seat, waiting like a ticking bomb.

"Okay."

Julia glanced up, her eyes widening. "Okay?"

"It's time." Paige nodded. Julia did not move. "Well? Aren't you going to look?"

"I can't," Julia whispered. Her hands shook and her stomach pitched and rolled with anxiety.

"Fine." Paige sighed and glared at her. "But I am not touching it. That's just gross." She reached behind Julia and snatched a paper towel out of the dispenser before she disappeared inside the stall. Paige leaned over the pregnancy test, tilting her head to the side. Julia held her breath and concentrated so hard she felt her eyes cross. Please be negative.

"It's positive," Paige announced in a loud whisper. She carefully wrapped the paper towel around the test and stood up, examining it. "Yup. Definitely positive."

"I knew it." Julia released her pent up breath and all the blood rushed to her head as she sagged against the counter. It was positive. Positive meant a baby.

"This can't be happening," she whispered brokenly. Julia felt the tears on her cheeks before she even realized she was crying. "There wasn't enough time."

"One time is all you need honey." Paige snorted. Julia's head snapped up and she saw hurt and confusion in her friend's eyes before she turned away.

"I'm sorry, Paige," she whispered. "I don't know what to say."

"What's to say?" Paige kept her back to Julia. "Look, I'm not your mother or anything. You don't have to tell me about every man you sleep with. It's just that—" Paige hesitated and sighed.

"It's just that you haven't been on a real date for so long that I'm a little mad you didn't at least tell me you were seeing someone."

"I guess I didn't want to hear what you had to say about this particular someone." Julia looked down at her trembling hands. It was very hard to admit even to her best friend that she was as human as the next girl. She'd fallen for the Bad Boy that every mother warned her daughter against. Though after the last couple of months, she was beginning to believe that there was a lot more to Cade than the rumor mill implied.

"Puh-lease." Paige snorted. "Spare me. You and I have known each other way too long. I've seen you go home alone too many times to begrudge you a little action between the sheets, regardless of who it is."

"Fine," Julia gritted out. She dragged in a huge, bolstering breath before blurting out the truth. "Cade is the father."

Paige's eyes grew huge and round. Her mouth dropped open and she slumped against the stall door.

"No," she said, disbelief evident in her voice. "Please tell me you're joking."

Julia shook her head and felt the tears come on again. She sniffled. "Nope. About two months ago or so."

"Just once?"

Again, Julia shook her head. "It's been an ongoing thing."

"Oh Julia." Paige pressed her fingertips against her forehead and closed her eyes tightly. "What were you thinking?"

"I wasn't thinking," Julia whispered. "I think that's pretty obvious. The worst part is I'm not exactly sure who seduced who."

Paige's head snapped up. "What?"

"I don't know," Julia groaned. "I just don't know anymore. I'm not sure how I feel about anything. Cade. Cade and me. Cade and the baby. Cade, me and the baby. Oh God." Tears clogged the back of her throat. "I don't think I can do this, Paige. I'm so scared."

"Does he know yet?"

"He has no idea." Julia wiped her cheeks. "It's been so great between us, you know?" She half laughed, half sobbed. "I hope this doesn't ruin it."

"When are you going to tell him?" Paige slid across the floor to sit next to her.

"I'm going to have to do it soon," Julia murmured. "I don't have a choice. I wish I had told him I loved him before. Now he'll just think I'm saying it because of the baby."

"Do you love really love him, Julia?" Paige wrapped an arm around her shoulders.

"I've loved him since I was a kid. If I'm totally honest with myself, I don't think I remember a time when I didn't love him." Julia hiccupped and sniffled noisily as she laid her head on Paige's shoulder. "I'm just glad he finally loves me back."

"How do you know that?" she asked. Julia ignored the thoughtful tone in her oldest friend's voice, instead concentrating on Paige's fingers brushing against her hair. She felt comforted. God, she missed her mother.

"I just do. I know it in my heart."

"Has he ever said it?"

"Not in words," Julia said, fighting uncertainty. "Not yet."

Paige pulled away from her.

"Look," Paige began. "I know you want this really bad but we have to face the facts here. Cade Taylor is a well-known womanizer. Even though he's gorgeous enough to make your hair curl, sleeping with the office stud suggests poor judgment. We won't even get into the safe sex issue."

"He's not really like everyone thinks." Julia interrupted, feeling a little betrayed by Paige's sudden accusations.

"I know what I've heard and he has yet to prove himself different in my eyes," Paige snapped. "Until he does, I'll continue to hold my opinion of him. This child you're carrying is his child, too. I know you think he loves you, honey, and I wish I knew what he'd said to make you believe that, but I wouldn't count on him. He's not exactly shotgun wedding

material. I'll tell you one thing for certain." Paige stood and brushed off her skirt. "If just one person in this building finds out that you've been screwing around with Cade, your life will become a living hell."

"I know," Julia whispered. She grabbed Paige's proffered hand and heaved herself off of the floor. Hating the doubt that crept into her heart, Julia tried to block the new direction her thoughts took. Paige was just trying to help, she reminded herself. She was just playing devil's advocate. Yeah, the little she-devil on her shoulder taunted, but what if she's right?

"Look Julia, I love you like a sister and I'll do anything I can to make this easier for you but you have to help me. You're going to have to protect yourself. I want you to make me a promise that you won't put too much hope on Cade doing the right thing."

"You're jumping to conclusions. You don't know him like I do." Julia wished Paige would just shut up. This was so not the time to start doubting Cade's feelings for her.

"I don't care," Paige insisted. "Promise me."

"Okay, Okay." Julia rolled her eyes. "I promise, okay? Happy now?"

"Not really but it'll do."

Julia followed Paige out of the restroom. They exchanged a glance at Paige's office door then Julia took the stairs down to the first level. As she wandered down the hall, she tried to stem the misgivings Paige's warnings had created. Julia knew Cade loved her. It was written in his eyes every time he stared into hers while they made love. His love and devotion was plain to see in every intimate moment they shared. Remembering their last kiss in the wee hours of the morning as they made love and watched the sunrise gave Julia something to smile about.

Cade had to share her feelings. She paused outside his closed office door. There was one way to prove it. She would tell him she loved him right now. This minute, when he would least expect it.

Elisabeth leaned over Cade's shoulder and looked at the file he worked on. Cade endured the close proximity and gag on her perfume. *Jesus, did she bathe in that crap?* He turned his head away from her when she moved closer, rubbing her cheek against his.

"Move this paragraph up to here," she said, pointing at the rough draft with an immaculate, manicured fingernail. "Reword these last two sentences here."

Cade picked up a red pen and made notes in the margin.

"I don't know why you can't just take this with you, make the notes and leave it in my box when you're done," he complained. He hated to sound like a whiner but this cat and mouse game she played with him was getting old. He wished she would either fire him or get bored. That would be far easier than filing a sexual harassment complaint against her. She was one of the best litigators in the state. He didn't have a chance in hell against her in court.

He was this side of desperate to ask Julia what she thought he should do. So far, he hadn't told anyone about Elisabeth's advances, though lately Elisabeth had stepped up the pace. She laid her hand against his nape and stroked her fingers through his hair while she finished reading the document.

"Because darlin'," she purred against his ear, interrupting his thoughts. "I find it's so much nicer to work side by side than all by myself."

He did not mistake her meaning. He ducked away from her hand and leaned back in

his chair, gazing at her.

"What do you want from me?" he asked, finally unable to hold back the single most troubling question.

Surprise flashed across her face before Elisabeth smiled. "Isn't it obvious, honey? Or do I have to club you over the head with it a little more?"

"I already told you I wasn't interested in being chased around your desk, or mine."

"Nobody's chasin' anybody here." Elisabeth straightened and cocked her hip to the side as she studied him. "I think I know what your problem is."

"I don't have a problem," Cade gritted out. He shoved himself out of his chair and tried to pass her. Elisabeth reached out and snaked her hand around his tie, pulling him up short. It was a favorite trick of hers, one he despised. Cade stared down at her in stony silence.

"You're afraid of me, aren't you sweetie?" Her throaty chuckle floated in the air between them, fragrant with coffee. He glanced at her mouth, decorated in a deceptive neutral shade which made her seem like a harmless kitten, not a stalking lioness.

"I don't think that's quite what it is."

"C'mon, Cade." Elisabeth slid her fingers down his tie and began toying with the waistband of his trousers. "What else could it be?"

"I'm not interested." He reached for her hand and yanked it away.

"Not interested," Elisabeth said with a disbelieving laugh. "I can't imagine why." Her bottom lip caught between her teeth as she dug her fingers into the front of his shirt and dragged him close. "Most men like an experienced woman, honey."

"And maybe that's why I don't want you." He tilted his head and raised a brow in derision. "You're too experienced for me."

Anger and hatred flashed in Elisabeth's eyes an instant before she brutally crushed his lips with hers. Cade grabbed her chin and shoved her hard. She hit the desk, her hold on him so tight that she took him with her. He leaned over her, panting and tasting blood in his mouth where she had bitten him. Elisabeth smiled dangerously and he struggled to pull away.

"You slimy son of a bitch!" Julia cried from the doorway.

He fell back from Elisabeth in shock.

"Julia!" His ragged exclamation seemed to echo in the deadly silence that descended on the room. He started around the desk toward her but she held up her hand. She was so deathly pale that he was afraid she would faint.

"Julia, wait a minute. Please let me explain."

"Stay the hell away from me," she choked and tried to slam out of the office. Cade caught the door just in time and threw it open. He snagged her wrist and pulled her back.

She yelled and jerked backwards, pulling her hand from his. She stumbled into the hallway where people stood stock-still and gaped at them. Her chest heaved with suppressed emotion and the tears shining in her eyes. She stood frozen in horror, staring at her co-workers. Elisabeth came up behind him and pressed her body against his side. He saw the look on Julia's face and knew her pride refused to let her fall completely apart in front of everyone.

"Come back inside my office, honey," he said.

"Don't call me honey! You're not allowed to call me that anymore!" She shook her head and backed away.

"Looks like you've lost her, lover," Elisabeth whispered in his ear before brushing past. All eyes were on her as she slinked down the hallway, her hips sashaying confidently.

Cade was in shock, still trying to digest the last two minutes and make sense of it all. He tried to comprehend that he stood in the hallway with everyone looking at him curiously. Their gazes swiveled from Elisabeth to Julia then turned as one on Cade.

"Which one are you going to go after?" a voice from the back asked and Cade started in surprise. Of course he was going to go after Julia. He turned away from them and took off in her direction, feeling their eyes on his back until he disappeared around the corner.

He found Julia standing on the sidewalk just outside the side door. She dug through her purse and muttered to herself.

"What the hell is the matter with you?"

She spun around and glared at him.

"I'll tell you what's the matter. You're just like I remember, Cade. A selfish, rutting pig who can't keep his dick interested in one woman for longer than a couple of months. I knew better than to fall for your lines." Julia tossed her hands in the hair and raised her eyes to the sky. "I still let you talk your way in. I should have seen this coming. I am so fucking stupid!"

"Stop that," Cade shouted. "Just shut up for a minute so I can explain. First of all, I tried to stay away from you like you asked. You're the one who showed up in the library half naked. I didn't ask for that."

"I can't believe you would bring that up." Julia looked so hurt that Cade regretted letting his anger rule his words. She then snorted in disgust and threw her hands up again. "Of course I can believe it. This is All the Way Cade I'm talking about here. Ten years ago that shit may have been charming, honey, but now it's just pathetic."

"Jesus, Julia." Cade stared at her in disbelief. "How long have you hated me like this?"

Julia turned away from him and tossed her head back. Cade heard her snuffle before she finally spoke.

"That's the problem, I guess," she whispered. "I haven't ever hated you. Until now."

Cade felt as though he had been sucker-punched. His chest ached and his head pounded as he watched her walk away from him. What was she trying to tell him? He ran after her, grabbing her from behind and wrapping his arms around her tightly.

"Don't leave me like this. Please Julia. Let me explain."

"Let me go!" Julia kicked and thrashed against him.

"Don't do this to us, damn it." Cade grunted when her heel caught him in the shin and he squeezed her a little harder. "Julia stop it right now! You're acting like a child."

"Let me go or I'll scream!"

Cade was willing to take the risk though when she landed another hard kick square on the top of his foot. He dropped her.

"God damn it Julia! Listen to me!"

She stumbled then pivoted on her heel to face him. Her face screwed up into an angry snarl as she jabbed her finger at him.

"No," she growled low, "you listen to me. I've had it. I quit. I quit you. I quit this place." She shivered violently before she whispered, "I just quit."

Cade could only stare at her retreating back as she hobbled away.

"I'm warning you, Julia. You're going to ruin us. We need each other too much."

"I don't need you, Cade," she said without turning around. "I don't need anybody."

Chapter Eight

Soft twilight set in around the park and the sounds of a hot, steamy summer evening hung in the air. Several sailboats bobbed in the center of the lake and the giggles of small children carried over the water to the small, worn picnic table. The wild flashes from Fourth of July sparklers reflected on the calm surface of the water and Cade watched them from his perch on top of the table. A half empty beer hung between his raised knees by the tips of his fingers. His dress shirt was a wrinkled mess and his tie askew; the product of anxious fingers.

Cade now dragged those fingers through his hair and held his forehead in the palm of his hand as he looked down. An unopened envelope lay between his feet on the bench. His bar exam results.

Nearly a week had gone by since Julia left him. She hadn't gotten over her jealous snit enough to let him explain, and she had yet to return to work. It was obvious she wanted nothing to do with him and he wasn't sure how he felt about it. He missed her, Cade knew that much. Several times he stopped himself from going to her house. Mostly because he wasn't sure what he wanted to do when he got there, shake her or kiss her.

Cade dragged his palm over his eyes and stared hard at the envelope. He was tired of second guessing himself. Whether he passed or failed, he would have done it on his own. The decision was made, the tests taken. Now all he had to do was open the envelope.

Beer swished as Cade took one last fortifying slug from the bottle then reached for the envelope. He wiped his hand on the leg of his trousers and slid his finger beneath the glued flap. He paused and took a deep breath before he broke it open and pulled out the folded, single sheet of paper.

"Congratulations," he whispered and closed his eyes. His hands shook as he opened them again and read the rest of the letter. He passed. His very first try and he passed.

Cade stood on the bench seat. With his hands cupped around his mouth he let out a whoop of excitement that echoed across the lake. He laughed and hollered again before he jumped from the table and headed for his truck. The relic creaked and groaned as he climbed inside and started the engine. Gravel whipped up as he tore out of the parking lot and drove through Hardin to his parents' house at breakneck speed, maneuvering through the narrow streets with expert ease. The truck rattled and shook when he turned up the driveway and the tires squealed when he skidded to a halt. Cade barely remembered to pull the parking break before he jumped out, leaving the truck running as he bounded up the front steps.

"Mom! Dad!"

"In here, Cade." Olivia came from the back of the house at a run, her eyes wide with concern. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." Cade grinned at her and grabbed her around the waist. He lifted her from the floor and treated her to a smacking kiss on the cheek. "Nothing is wrong at all! Everything is awesome!"

His sisters clattered down the stairs, "What's going on! Why are you so happy?" Their girlish voices mixed and rose with excitement.

"Where's Dad?" Cade looked around and released his mother to snatch Josie off her

feet.

"I'm right here. What's this about Cade?" Doug stepped from the den.

Cade's smile widened. He hugged Josie tight before setting her down.

"I got my exam results today," he said, watching Doug's face. His mother gasped and clapped her hands over her mouth, her eyes flooding with tears. "I passed on the first try, Dad."

Doug stared at the letter. He waited several long seconds before he lifted his gaze to Cade's face and cleared his throat.

"That's real good," Doug finally said. Cade watched him closely but his father kept his eyes down. "I'm happy for you."

Cade's steps halted, his hand still outstretched with the letter. What had he expected? *Good job, son? I'm proud of you?* Either would have been a good start. Resignation settled heavy and deep inside him. It made his vision blur and his throat constrict. Cade swallowed hard.

"Douglas," Olivia whispered tightly. "Don't you have anything else to say?"

"We'll just see how long it lasts, won't we?" Doug ignored his wife and pinned his gaze on his son. "You'll probably get bored with it just like you did baseball."

"You don't know what you're talking about." Cade's jaw clenched with the effort not to yell, ashamed that tears stung the back of his eyes.

"Who's fault is that? I have asked, thousands of times, for you to tell me why! Just tell me, Cade. Why?"

"I failed, Dad. I couldn't do it." The admission came from deep inside, clawing his throat and making his head ache as he exorcised his conscience.

"You gave up," Doug shouted back. "You *thought* you couldn't do it and you just gave up. You're a quitter, Cade."

"Doug!" Olivia gasped in horror. She moved to Cade's side and wrapped her arm around his waist.

Cade shook his head hard. "No. Mom, he's right."

Doug cheeks were flushed with anger and his broad shoulders rose and fell in a heavy sigh. "I just wish you would have talked to me before you gave up your dream."

"It's a boy's dream, Dad."

"But it was yours, Cade. Whether or not you believe that now, you wanted it and I did everything in my power to give it to you. Why couldn't you just come to me?"

"And what?" Cade demanded. "What do you want to hear about first? The one scout who told me my best playing days were behind me? Or the many who stopped coming once it got around that I let myself start believing it."

"So you quit?" Doug asked, his tone sharp and angry. "For the first time in life someone comes to you and tells you you're no good and you buckle under the rejection. What the hell does that say about you?"

Clenching his jaw, Cade stared hard at the floor.

"I raised you better than that. Look at you, pouting like a little kid because somebody didn't drop to your feet and worship you."

"How could you say such a hateful thing to your own son, Douglas?" Olivia shooed the girls out of the foyer and turned on her husband. "What has gotten into you?"

"Forget it, Mom." Cade pulled away from her. "Forget I ever came here."

"Don't walk away. Stand up like a man and take some responsibility for your life." Doug scowled and his broad shoulders stiffened, filling the doorway leading into the den.

"I thought that was what I was doing, Dad." Cade tossed the letter on the floor at his father's feet. His voice cracked. "All I ever wanted was for you to be proud of me. I guess I was wrong to think you could do that even when I wasn't playing ball anymore."

Doug snatched the letter off the floor and shoved it toward Cade. "How could —"

Olivia stepped between her husband and only son but it was too late. Cade turned his back on them and stormed out of the house. The truck ran in the drive, spitting and spewing in idle where he'd left it. The porch lit up and his mother stepped outside as he did a full U-turn in the grass and sped down the driveway.

Cade forced aside most of the dark anger and hurt. It turned him inside out and exposed him to the raw reality of his own disappointment.

"Son of a bitch!" he yelled and pounded his fist against the roof of his truck.

The hell with it, he told himself. His cheeks burned and his hands clenched tighter around the wheel with the utter unfairness of it all.

It started to storm as Cade drove onto Julia's street. He needed to see her and didn't stop to think about why. The rain came down in torrential sheets, sloshing across his windshield harder and faster than his wipers could sweep it away. He squinted, trying to see through the glass as he pulled to the curb in front of her house. His headlights illuminated the trailer hitched to the back of her car.

"What the hell," Cade muttered to himself. He was surprised to see a figure dart across the yard. Cade threw open his door and stepped out into the rain.

"Julia," he shouted. The rain came down so hard he could hardly hear over the din it made on the aluminum trailer. He yelled for her again.

Julia swung around.

"What the hell are you doing here?" She shoved the hood of her jacket from her forehead. She came to him and scowled. "Have you lost your mind?"

"Not yet," he said. He let his gaze roam over her. It had been too long since he'd seen her last and he just now realized how much he missed her. She was soaked to the bone, her plain white shorts practically see-through and her navy blue blouse hanging across her breasts. His gaze lingered at her throat where water sluiced across her delicate skin and had an overwhelming urge to push her hair aside and kiss her there.

"Not yet, my ass. You're an idiot." Julia snorted, killing any ideas he had of kissing her. "What's wrong with you? Why are you here?"

"Where are you going?" Cade ignored her questions, suddenly wanting to talk about anything but his father and the bar results. He glanced at her car and then her.

"I'm leaving."

"Don't be silly. You can't leave right now. You're in the middle of your internship." Cade attempted a smile but it felt forced and wooden, as though his lips did not belong to him. He tried a different tact, grabbing her arm and forcing her to look him in the eye.

"Where would you go," he demanded. Cade hated the panic he heard in his own voice. He was losing her.

"None of your damn business." Julia raised her voice another level, already yelling over rain. "I told you not to come here. Let me go. I need to leave."

"Why?"

"Because I can't stay here."

"Why," he asked again, forcing aside the fear.

"God damn it, Cade." Julia screamed her frustration and her composure shattered. "Because I can't stand the sight of you! Because every day that I have to look at you makes me want to crawl up inside myself and die." Her whole body bowed with tension, hatred gleaming in her eyes.

"Is that what you wanted to hear, you son of a bitch? Do you want to know what you've done to me?"

Shock vibrated through Cade's whole body. "I never meant to hurt you, Julia."

"The hell you didn't! You knew what you were doing from the very beginning."

"Do you honestly believe that?" Was he truly so evil, so reviled that everyone believed the worst of him? Cade desperately wanted Julia to give him the right answer, the answer he needed to hear as much as he needed to draw his next breath.

"Hell yes I do." Julia held her fist tightly against her breast as though it could protect her heart from him. Though with every accusation, she hurt him as well.

"Then there's nothing left to say," he said, yet he still held onto her arms. Cade's hands refused to cooperate. *No*, they seemed to tell him. *We won't let her go. Not like this.*

"Leave," she cried, shoving his chest. "Go!" Tears streamed down her face to mix with the rain. Cade's hands loosened and he stumbled back.

"I didn't want it to be like this," he said. "You remember that when you're lying awake late at night, dreaming of the way we were together. You made this happen. Not me."

Julia stepped back as though he'd struck her.

"Wow. Famous last words." She sniffled, using the end of her sleeve to wipe away her tears. Subdued, Julia watched him warily as she stepped out of his reach.

"Well, that's okay. Believe what you want." Julia sighed. "I'll know that I loved you with all my heart and you threw it away. I may have been the dupe but in the long run, you're missing out on more than you'll ever know." She leaned closer to shove a finger into his chest. "You remember that."

She wrapped her arms around her middle and walked away, her shoulders hunched. Cade cursed, raking his fingers through his dripping hair and down his face. His hands dropped to his hips and he looked at the ground, unable to watch her leave him again.

Julia's admission of love came too late. He would never forgive her. She didn't trust him. She was no better than his father—the worst kind of hypocrite. How many times had she told him that his father was too hard on him? That Doug should accept Cade and believe in his judgment and good character? Julia betrayed him. Maligned him. *Forget that.* He was through trying to prove himself to everyone.

Cade shielded his eyes from the glare of her headlights. The wipers flipped on and he saw her face through the glass between each pass of the blades. He swore to himself it would be the last time he ever saw Julia—and wanted her.

Chapter Nine

Present

The boy slouched low in his chair. His chin stubbornly set and his arms crossed over his chest as he sat in sullen silence. An Atlanta Braves ball cap slung low on his forehead, the bill curved so tightly it completely obscured his eyes. Julia watched as his little body swayed in his chair, his feet swinging below the table. She bet even money his shoes did not even touch the floor.

"Who sold you the gun, Dominic?"

Tired of asking the question, Julia rubbed her eyes. Her thinning patience only added the reminder that time had run out. Normally, she sent one of her associates on these cases but Dominic was an old favorite of hers. At the tender age of eleven, he had an extensive dossier. It wasn't the first time Julia had interviewed the kid on a similar charge and it wouldn't be the last. Today, she came for bigger fish and Dominic held the key.

"I told you," Dominic muttered, "I ain't tellin' you shit."

"Julia." Marcus Adams, Dominic's high-priced defense attorney, sighed. "This line of questioning is getting tiresome. Either you officially charge my client or you ask a different question."

Marcus and Julia had faced off across a courtroom too often to indulge in formality. There was little love lost between them. Clashing tempers usually led to shouting matches like the one they had earlier that day over another of Marcus' clients.

"The extent of the charges are questionable, Marcus. If he gives us a name, they could be reduced considerably." Julia glanced at the open file in front of her.

"We're willing to offer him six months in juvy and twelve months probation for repeat offense of breaking and entering. We'll drop the weapons charge in exchange for information. It's the best we can do."

"Not good enough."

"He shot the owner's dog, Marcus," Julia said coolly. "He's lucky it wasn't the owner or, God forbid, a child. It's the best we can do. Take it or leave it."

"Twenty-four months probation, no time," Marcus countered.

"For no time, we'll have to add restitution for the dog. He was a prize winning champion."

"Wait a minute." Dominic's mother lurched forward, slapping her hand against the table. The large diamond on her finger glittered under the harsh fluorescent lights of the police interview room. "I am not paying for that damn dog. It was self-defense. The dog attacked him!"

"Mrs. Jackson," Julia said. "Dominic burglarized the home and the dog defended it, as any guard dog would."

"May I have a word alone with my client," Marcus asked.

"Of course." Julia closed the file and tucked it under her arm as she stood. She left them alone to wait with the uniformed officer standing guard outside the door. He eyed her with interest and his body visibly relaxed as he leaned against the wall. She felt his gaze roam over

her body and he gave her his best c'mere-baby-let's-get-to-know-each-other grin. She returned an icy glare and his demeanor immediately changed gears. His stance went rigid and all familiarity faded from his expression. Julia rolled her eyes and decided to wait across the hall.

The break room was pitifully spartan save for the water cooler and a pot of burned, stale coffee. Julia filled a small paper cup with water, the chug of the ancient cooler mixed with the loud ticking of the wall clock. She cringed. It was after four. She would be late picking Laura up from daycare. Her overage charges were going to be astronomical this month. Julia sighed and sipped her water.

The door across the hall opened and Marcus stepped out. He motioned her back into the room. Julia saw the grim expression on his face and hid her relief. The bastard who peddled illegal firearms to gang-bangers and kids like Dominic for the last four months was finally going down.

When she re-entered the interview room, the scene was dramatically different. Mrs. Jackson was subdued and Dominic was crying. Julia frowned but remained silent.

"My client has agreed to the terms of your offer."

Julia lowered herself into her chair.

Marcus deferred to Mrs. Jackson who gestured for him to continue. He sighed and clasped his hands on the tabletop.

"I'm afraid Dominic can't give as much information as you'd like."

"All we want is a name. We'll do the rest."

Outwardly, Julia remained detached, an unemotional instrument of the law as she ignored the pitiful whimpers coming from Dominic. Inside, the kid was breaking her heart. Suddenly she needed to get out of the room before her composure broke and she showed him a little compassion. *No, her mind screamed, don't be cruel. Can't you see it's too hard for him? He's just a kid. Don't make him do it.*

"I got it from a guy named Deevo." Dominic sobbed.

"I see," Julia said, disappointed. "Is that a nickname?"

Marcus shrugged. "That's all I can get out of him."

"Deevo's gonna kill me for sure," Dominic wailed. "He tol' me if I ever snitched him out, I'd be dead."

"We'll detain Dominic until tomorrow," Julia told Mrs. Jackson, calmly ignoring the boy's tears. "That will give the police twenty-four hours to track down Deevo. If Dominic is under any threat, he'll be safest right here."

"Fine." Though Mrs. Jackson seemed appeased, she looked as though it was anything but fine. Julia couldn't help thinking the mother's concern came too little, too late.

"Are we finished?" Marcus rose and buttoned his suit jacket.

"We're done for today," Julia said, also standing.

"I'd like to spend a few minutes alone with Dominic before we go," Mrs. Jackson said, looking between Julia and Marcus.

"That'll be fine," Marcus assured her. They left the room together. The uniform in the hall ignored Julia this time. She left Marcus behind to wait for Dominic's mother.

"Ms. Campbell's sure got herself a nice pair of legs," the uniform drawled to Marcus. Julia could practically hear the winking and elbow nudging in their voices. She forced herself to keep walking and ignore the suggestive laughter Marcus exchanged with the cop.

"Maybe so," he replied, "but the Ice Queen's got enough ice inside her to freeze your dick off. I'd stay away from that one, if I were you."

Humiliation settled like a knot in her throat and her cheeks burned as Julia hurried down the corridor.

A soft huff, fragrant with cocoa puffs, wafted across Julia's face. She peeked through her lashes to see Laura watching her intently. Julia considered feigning sleep but she doubted the four-year-old would fall for it. Laura wiggled closer, shaking the bed with her efforts. Slowly, yawning loudly, Julia opened her eyes to see bright blue ones so close she could count the eyelashes on her daughter's lower lids. She drew away and blinked at the alarm clock. 6:45 a.m. With a groan, she dropped her head onto the pillow.

"Momma," Laura whispered loudly. Julia opened one eye, gritty from a sleepless night, and peered at her.

"When's breakfast?"

Julia's arm snaked out and grabbed Laura, dragging her giggling and squirming under the warm comforter.

"You already had breakfast, doodle-bug." Julia kissed the top of her head. "Nice try though."

"How did you know?" Laura whined.

"I smelled the evidence." Julia snorted and snuffled noisily against Laura's neck, inciting more girlish laughter.

"Pancakes," Laura squealed through her laughter. "I want pancakes too, Momma. Time to get up."

"No up. Bed." Julia fell back and gave a dramatic groan "Sleep."

Laura giggled. "UP!"

Julia sighed and kissed the top of her head again. "Sleep."

"Up!"

Arguing with a preschooler was a lesson in futility. Julia rolled from the bed, dragged a hand through her hair then staggered into the kitchen. Her pajama top drooped haphazard off of one shoulder as she flipped on the television. The morning news filled the room as she yawned and dug in the pantry for pancake mix.

The dreams had returned. Weird, unpredictable nightmares brought to life by the 'what if' scenarios that plagued her subconscious. And they were getting worse. Usually, they only left her feeling mildly paranoid for a couple of days. Now they woke her in the middle of the night, sweating and tangled in the sheets, her pajamas half off her body and her heart racing so fast she thought she might pass out.

Ice Queen, my ass.

"Pancakes, Momma?" Laura's head popped over the edge of the counter, interrupting her thoughts.

"Yes, baby." Julia brought down her mother's large mixing bowl from the cupboard over the sink. The phone rang and she looked at the clock on the microwave.

"That's Aunt Paige," Julia announced, reaching for the cordless on the counter.

"It's your seven a.m. wake up call, Jules." Paige's singsong voice came over the line before Julia had a chance to say a word.

"Your cheerfulness is disgusting at this hour. I was never that happy when I was pregnant," Julia muttered, cupping the phone between her shoulder and chin.

"Well, I'm still technically a newlywed. I'm allowed to be blissful for at least another three months." Paige laughed.

"Yeah, yeah. How is Mike anyway?"

"He's just great. He wanted me to thank you again for selling your parents' house to us, Julia. I know how hard that was for you. We both do."

Julia's hand on the whisk hesitated as she closed her eyes. Paige did not know the half of it. Giving up her childhood home was the hardest thing she'd ever done but when Paige first approached her about buying it, Julia made the tough decision to sell. She refused to return to Hardin but she could not bring herself rent it out either. It just made sense.

"Don't worry about it," Julia said. "I'm just glad it's you and not some stranger living there."

"So," Paige asked, changing the subject. "How did you sleep last night?"

Julia sighed. "Not so great, thanks for asking."

"Again?" Paige sounded perplexed. "Julia, maybe you ought to see a therapist or something. You've been having these freaky dreams for too long."

"No one knows that better than me," Julia said.

"Was it the one where Cade asks you to be surrogate mother for his old crone wife, Elisabeth?"

Julia laughed. "Uh, not quite." She looked around to see if Laura was nearby before whispering, "The ones I've been having lately are slightly x-rated, if you know what I mean."

"Oh lord." Paige sighed in exasperation. "You've got to be kidding me."

"Nope. Dirtier than anything you've ever seen on late night cable. Girl, this stuff would set your hair on fire."

"One man in your bed in six years just isn't natural, honey. You need to wash that man out of your hair, once and for all. Gawd, even if it means dragging some young college stud home from a bar for a little anonymous nookie. Be like that ad on TV., 'Just do it.' "

"I don't think that's what they meant," Julia said, laughing again. "Regardless, I just can't do things like that anymore, Paige. I'm almost thirty. I'm too old to be trolling bars for men. Besides," she added, "I've got Laura to think about. I'm just not ready to play the 'new daddy' game with her yet."

Julia considered telling Paige about the conversation she'd overheard between Marcus and the cop but she was still too embarrassed. She had never been particularly fond of her nickname in high school and college and she liked it even less as an adult. It was her best defense against making the same mistakes with another man. However, after yesterday she might see some merit in Paige's idea about dating again.

Julia stopped stirring the pancake batter and watched Laura as she sat on the kitchen floor, trying to pull glittery tights on her Barbie doll. "I have a twenty-four hour a day reminder of him, you know," she told Paige. "It's just not easy to get over a heartbreak like that."

Paige sighed long and low over the phone.

"Look, you're not doing anybody any favors by beating yourself up with guilt. You made a decision for the well being of your child. Chances are he would have told you to get

rid of her anyway. You made the right choice. You need to get over this. Get over him."

"If it were that easy, I'd have done it years ago, Paige." Julia picked up the whisk again shook off the excess batter. She tossed it in the sink and turned on the stove to heat up the pan.

"Don't make me send Mike up there to put some whoop-ass behind my threats. He's very afraid of me and my hormones right now. He just might do it."

Julia laughed again as she poured small circles of batter in the hot pan and watched it bubble. "Why don't you come up by yourself instead? I could use the company and Laura would love to see you."

"Sorry," Paige said. The lightheartedness dropped from her voice and Julia zeroed in on it. "No can do. Too busy this weekend."

"What's wrong?" Her hand froze, poised over the pan with a spatula. "What did the doctor say yesterday?"

"Oh, I'm fine," Paige said too cheerfully. "I just had a big jump in my blood pressure to go with my fat feet, so the doctor put me on bed rest for a while. No biggie."

"Preeclampsia?" Julia frowned. "That can be dangerous."

"Yeah, but Mike's taking care of me. We're fine. Unless," Paige drawled, "you and Laura want to come down here for a couple of days. We'd love to have you."

"You know we can't," Julia said, flipping over a pancake and frowning.

"You won't, you mean."

"Look Paige, I'm just not ready to take the risk yet."

Paige was quiet for a long, uncomfortable moment. When she finally broke the silence, Julia could tell she was crying.

"After all the times I've been there to hold your hand you're not willing to sacrifice your stupid pride and come home when I need you. I'm scared, Julia."

Paige sniffled noisily over the phone and as quickly as the tears came, they vanished. Suddenly, Paige was steaming mad.

"This baby is coming in less than eight weeks whether you like it or not. Your ass better be in the delivery room, right here in Hardin, holding my damn hand or I'll never speak to you again!"

The phone clattered in Julia's ear. She pulled back and stared at it in amazement.

"Hormones make pregnant women so loony," Julia muttered, looking at Laura.

"What are hormones, Momma?" Laura glanced up from her half naked Barbie.

"I'll tell you when you're older." Julia frowned to herself and hung up the phone.

Chapter Ten

"You want to pass me that towel, honey?" The syrupy southern drawl floated through the room with the fragrant steam of her fresh shower. Cade turned around and raked his gaze over the half-naked blond in his bathroom.

"Sure thing, sugar." He picked up the towel and walked to the glass double doors of the shower stall, his eyes on creamy, bare skin. She smiled at him knowingly, raising a brow in challenge.

"I don't have time for that now, darlin'," she warned. "I need to pick my husband up from the airport in an hour."

Cade stilled. "Your husband?"

"Yes," she said, grabbing the towel from his hands. "My husband. You've met him. Reggie Lowery?" She laughed. "Surely, you remembered I was married?" She dried her arms and chest in sensuous motions that would have turned Cade on five seconds ago.

"Actually, no," he said, his ardor cooled instantly. "I had no idea."

She wrapped the black bath sheet around her naked body and stepped from the shower, her cool, blue eyes sympathetic.

"Aw, I'm sorry sweetie-pie. I thought you understood the situation."

Cade shrugged and turned back to the mirror. His stomach churned as he thought about the things he had done to another man's wife. He lathered his face in shaving cream before answering.

"What's to understand, honey," Cade said, smiling cruelly at her reflection in the mirror. "A woman dressed like a high-priced hooker comes on to me in a hotel bar and I'm supposed to be surprised she's married?"

"How dare you," she demanded. Cade ignored her horrified gasp.

He dragged an insolent gaze over her in the mirror, rank with sexual innuendo.

"Frankly, sweetheart," Cade drawled, dismissing her to drag the razor over his cheek. "I'm just glad I won't have to pay you before you go."

"You're the crudest son of a bitch I've ever known, Cade Taylor." She left the bathroom in a huff. He heard her moving around his bedroom, no doubt digging around for the clothes he'd taken off of her the night before. When she reappeared in the mirror, she wore the little black dress and sequined jacket that first caught his notice last night.

"Everything they say about you is true, you know," she spat. "You're a cruel, heartless bastard. You have no soul left. Whatever woman did that to you, I feel sorry for her. You probably deserved it."

"You know the way out, don't you?"

She scowled and grabbed the bathroom door, slamming it shut hard enough to make the wall-to-wall mirrors over the black marble double sinks shimmer in their brackets.

The water ran, untouched, for a several minutes while Cade stared at his own reflection. *A married woman.* He shook his head. What the hell was he doing?

Cade finished shaving and ducked his head to splash his face with cool water. Bracing his hands on the counter, he studied his face in the mirror. Water dripped down his chin, his

blue eyes were bloodshot from too much scotch. Probably why he hadn't recognized Kathleen Lowery. He remembered her name now, though he'd neglected to ask before her took her to bed the night before. In his defense, there hadn't been much persuasion involved. Kathy fell into his bed as easily as the dozens of other women he slept with.

Save one. Cade shook off the reminder and left the bathroom.

The walk-in closet off the master suite was paneled with cedar, mirrors lined the far wall and soft, halogen lights inset in the ceiling illuminated the dozens of designer, tailor-made suits hanging in uniform precision along the racks. He turned in a circle, his eyes skimming over navy, black and gray, ten times over.

As he pulled a plain black t-shirt and jeans from the drawer block in the center of the closet, he ran over the cases he brought home with him, including the Breckenright file. Peter was due in his office on Monday and Cade wanted to make sure he was completely brushed up on the progress made on the man's case. Winning this one would be a huge coup for Cade and he was working overtime to make sure it got all the extra attention it would require.

The phone on his bedside table rang, interrupting his reflective musing.

"Taylor," he said gruffly into the receiver.

"Mr. Taylor." The gate guard's low voice came over the line. "Your mother is down here. Would you like to let her up? She has a few packages."

"Let her up," Cade replied then hung up. No doubt his mother was here to nag him into dinner again this weekend. He went downstairs barefoot to let her in.

"Cade darling," she said breathlessly when the door opened. Olivia balanced two bags, as promised, on her hip. "Help your mother."

"What is all this stuff?" Cade grabbed both bags from her in his fists, stepping back to allow her to breeze by him in a cloud of gardenia perfume.

"Groceries," she replied airily. Olivia looked around his condo. "Why you have to live in a gated community is beyond me, Cade. Who are you trying to keep out, anyway?"

"You'd be surprised. With my kind of clients, you just never know who might walk up to your front door and try something funny."

He regretted the words as soon as they were out of his mouth. Olivia's stricken expression had him backpedaling fast.

"It's just a precaution. Nothing like that has ever happened or is likely to happen. I just like to be safe, that's all."

"Okay," she muttered. "If you're sure."

Cade unloaded the first bag, laying yogurt, fruit and assorted fresh vegetables on the counter. "Mom," he groaned, exasperated. "You don't have to keep buying my groceries. I can afford to pay for my own food."

"I know that, honey. I just like to make sure you're eating right. Since you don't come by the house anymore, I thought I'd bring some of the good stuff to you."

A large head of cabbage rolled out of the bag when Cade turned it over. "I won't eat half of this stuff."

"You should," she replied. Olivia wandered the living room, running her finger furtively along the onyx marble mantelpiece while he finished putting things away. Cade rolled his eyes.

"Before you ask, I don't dust. A maid service comes in twice a week to clean up after

me."

"A maid service?" Olivia raised a brow. "Your practice must be doing pretty well to afford weekly maid service."

"Yeah," he said, avoiding her probing gaze. "I get a discount from the company I hired to clean my offices every night."

"Don't be a smart aleck," she muttered. "Defending criminals pays well, we accept that. We just don't have to like it."

"Dad's made it pretty clear how he feels so don't speak for him. And if you're here to talk about his job offer again, you can take your gentle suggestions and hit the road."

"I'm only trying to help, Cade. You boys will eventually stop acting like children and start communicating again or I will stop talking to both of you." Olivia collapsed on his leather couch and pressed the back of her hand to her cheek.

"Was that supposed to be a promise or a threat?" he asked in an attempt to tease her back into a good mood.

"Ooh!" Olivia groaned loudly. "I don't have to listen to this. I'm your mother. You're not too old for me to take a switch to your behind."

Cade needed coffee. Desperately. "I'm pretty sure that's still a crime in some states."

Olivia sighed and dropped her hand. "I'll take your word for it. You're the expert, after all."

"Thanks for that, at least," he said. Cade dropped beside her on the couch.

"How are the girls?"

"You'd know if you would come to the house."

"Mom," Cade warned.

"They're fine. We're all fine. Janessa and Kyle are still trying to have a baby. Your sister is just heartbroken that she hasn't conceived yet."

"It'll come," Cade said. He squirmed. The last thing he wanted his mother to get started on was Janessa's fertility shots and Kyle's low sperm count.

"Which reminds me," Olivia said, her hand reaching out to grab his arm before he could get up and run away. "Was that Kathy Lowery I saw leaving in the same cocktail dress she wore to the charity auction last night? Leaving your apartment?"

"Oh good God," Cade lurched off of the couch but Olivia held tight. "Mom. Please don't start."

"How many times have I told you that if you're going to be morally bankrupt at least be discreet?"

"I am not morally bankrupt," he repeated through clenched teeth. Cade wasn't sure if he should be more embarrassed or angry.

"Having sex with married women —"

"Mom." Cade narrowed his eyes and scowled. "Drop it."

Olivia rose from the couch and tucked a non-existent strand of hair back behind her ear.

"Fine. But as your mother, I should —"

"Mom."

"All right. Fine. Let me at least make you a little lunch before I go."

"That's not necessary." Cade followed her into the kitchen.

"Something for that nasty hangover you have then," she said without looking at him.

Cade closed his eyes and leaned his forehead against the doorframe.

"Okay," he muttered, turning around. Olivia frowned at his back in the mirror over the hall table. "After that you've got to go. I'm real glad you stopped by but I've got a lot of work to do today."

The hurt expression on his mother's face made Cade feel like a complete ass.

"That's all right," she said. Olivia moved around the kitchen, opening drawers and the refrigerator. "I've got to get home and start preparing Sunday dinner anyway."

"I'm sorry, Mom. I'm not going to make it out there tonight. I've got a big case I'm working on that will bring a lot of money in if we win."

"Life isn't just about money and winning, Cade." His mother handed him a tall glass of tomato juice with God-only-knew-what floating in the middle of it. "If nothing else," she murmured. "I'd like to think we taught you that."

"Maybe you tried, Mom," Cade said with a sigh. "But Dad's lesson got lost in the translation. Win. Succeed. Be the best, but only at what I tell you."

Olivia pressed a warm hand to his cheek.

"He loves you so much," she whispered. "Please give him a chance to make it right."

"It's too late, Mom." Cade pulled away from her soft, motherly touch. "The damage is done. It will never be the same between us again."

Olivia smiled sadly. He sensed she wanted to hug him but knew he would pull away again.

His mother left and the condo was quiet again. Cade made his coffee and settled himself in the office off of the master suite.

Peter Breckinright was under investigation by the Department of Children and Family Services. Six months ago, Peter's ex-wife accused him of carrying on a sexual relationship with her teenaged foster-daughter. Cade was pretty sure the ex-wife was right but it was not his job to worry about that. He was hired to make sure nobody else found out the truth. Breckinright was a high dollar client that would eventually mean big money with repeat business and referrals if Cade could get him out of his current mess.

The one and only time Cade met Beth Breckinright, he could not believe the kid was only fourteen. She was built like a Playboy centerfold and dressed the part. Then Peter left them alone to take a phone call and Cade got a better understanding of his client's true character. Beth fluttered her lashes, licked her shiny, glossed lips and asked Cade if he ever had his dick sucked in the back of a limousine.

After that, Cade asked Peter to leave Beth at home.

He turned on his laptop and sorted through the stack of files on his desk. It would take a miracle to get Peter Breckinright off the hook. It just so happened Cade knew how to work one.

The phone rang shrill in the darkness. Cade stirred then glanced at the clock. Three a.m. Nothing good ever came from a phone call at three in the morning. His first thought was for his sisters or his mother.

"What is it," he barked into the phone, suddenly alert. "What's wrong?"

"Mr. Taylor," a man's voice asked.

"Yes, this is Cade Taylor. Who is this and why are you calling my private line at this

hour?"

"This is Micah Sampson, Congressman Denton Turner's aide. We've met before."

Cade frowned into darkness of his bedroom. He ran a hand over his face and tried to think. "I remember you Mr. Sampson. Is there a problem? Could this not wait until regular business hours in the morning?"

"I'm afraid not Mr. Taylor. Congressman Turner needs you to come down to the police station here in Hardin right away."

"What's this about? Is the Congressman in trouble?"

"In a matter of speaking. Look, Mr. Taylor," Micah said impatiently, "we'll explain the situation once you arrive. Right now, it's imperative that you get here as soon as possible."

"I'm on my way." Cade hung up the phone and got out of bed. Thousands of questions poured through his head as he dressed quickly and left the condo.

Cade arrived in the lobby of the police station less than twenty minutes later. Micah Sampson met him with an outstretched hand.

Younger than Cade by a few years, the congressman's aide looked like he'd stepped off the cover of GQ with his pin-striped Hugo Boss suit and slicked back hair. He looked Cade directly in the eye when he shook his hand.

"Thank you for coming, Mr. Taylor." Micah gestured toward the hall. Cade followed him to a small conference room thick with stale cigarette smoke. Congressman Denton Turner stood as they entered.

"Sir." In two strides, Cade reached over the table and shook the Congressman's hand.

"Please sit down, Mr. Taylor. Would you like some coffee?"

"No sir." Cade waited a beat before asking, "What is this all about?"

Congressman Turner glanced at Micah and the other man left the room.

"I need your help," he said. "It seems my wife has gotten into a bit of trouble."

Chapter Eleven

The refrigerator light illuminated the floor at Julia's feet as she rummaged for breakfast. It was barely six a.m. and Laura was blissfully asleep. Unfortunately, Julia was not. It was official. She had become an insomniac.

Tiptoeing down the hall, Julia climbed back in bed with a bowl of cereal and the remote control. After finding only infomercials and a talk show rerun about sisters who dated their father, Julia left the television on CNN. A reporter was wrapping her story on a nasty car accident.

"Eighteen-year-old Travis Butler was the fourth victim in this morning's fatal accident involving four high school students and Blythe Turner, the wife of Congressman Denton Turner. Sources confirm Mrs. Turner was taken into custody by local law enforcement under suspicion that drugs or alcohol played a part in this morning's events."

Julia watched the camera zoom in on the back of a police cruiser. A woman covered the window from inside with both hands, her wrists shackled in cuffs.

"Butler, who just today received news of a full athletic scholarship to Florida State University, died en route to the hospital. Three other victims, who perished at the scene, were helping him celebrate the good news."

The camera panned the area, trying to catch as much of the action as possible. Julia frowned at the television screen, her cereal forgotten.

"So far, Congressman Turner's office has been unavailable for comment. This is Amy Logan reporting live in Hardin, Georgia. Back to you, John."

"Holy shit," Julia whispered into the empty room.

The phone rang and she jumped.

"Julia," Gregory Stanton's voice came over the line abruptly. "Good. You're up."

"Don't you ever sleep?" Julia groaned and rolled her eyes. "It's six o'clock on a Sunday morning. If you woke Laura up, I'm going to kill you."

"That's no way to talk to your boss." He injected an intimidating air of authority in his already deep voice.

"Cut the crap, Gregory." Julia sighed. "What do you want?"

"Turn on the TV," he said, ignoring her snappy sarcasm. "What are you complaining about? I obviously didn't wake you. Don't you ever sleep?"

"I don't want to talk about it." Julia got up to close her bedroom door. She peeked across the hall and saw Laura stir in her bed then settle.

"Are you talking about the thing on CNN," she asked, climbing back into bed.

"Congressman Denton Turner's wife was arrested this morning for killing a car full of kids in Hicksville."

"Hardin," Julia corrected him, annoyed. "I know all this. I watch CNN too, you know. What does it have to do with us?"

"It has everything to do with us," he replied. She could hear uncharacteristic liveliness in his voice. Straight-laced Gregory Stanton only got this excited about one thing.

Media Frenzy.

Julia put aside her bowl of uneaten cereal and muted the television.

"It's not our jurisdiction, Gregory."

"Hear me out," he said. "The press is already eating it up and dishing it out to the world. A politician's drunken wife kills a bunch of kids in small town U.S.A. Think how people are going to react when jury selection comes. There's no way in hell she'll get a fair trial."

"A request will be filed for a venue change before anything else. There are only two other counties in the state that match the statistical criteria. We're one of them."

Julia slumped against the pillows and stared at the silent television, dumbfounded.

"It's scary how your brain works."

Papers rustled in the background.

"I want this. You want this. I've got to make some phone calls. We'll have to talk the local D.A. into letting us handle the Bond Hearing."

"What's all this 'we' business?"

"We're talking about a Congressman's wife and four dead kids." He made an exasperated noise, which made Julia nervous. Gregory never did anything as undignified as snorting. "Julia, there's no way I'd put anyone on this case but you."

Sweat broke out all over her body.

"Get somebody else."

"No way. You're my girl. You're the one I need. When can you be in the office?"

"It's Sunday," she murmured. Julia swallowed hard. The panic she felt was almost suffocating her.

"Damn," he said. "That doesn't leave much time to get you up to speed. There's a lot to discuss and you're leaving A.S.A.P."

"Up to speed?" Irritated, Julia smacked her hand against the comforter. "They are still scraping body parts off the pavement down there, Gregory! What is there to get 'up to speed' on?"

"You make us sound like ambulance chasers," he said. "You know you want this. Get dressed and get down here. Bring the kid if you need to. We've got a lot to talk about before you leave for Hicksville."

"It's Hardin and I'm not going anywhere." Julia sighed and dragged a hand through her hair. "Look, I've got my reasons. I'll come in at eight and we'll talk about it then. I've got to go."

Numb, Julia hung up before he could argue further. Laura stood in the doorway, rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

"Is it breakfast time yet, Momma?"

"Not yet. It's early still," Julia said, smiling despite her churning stomach. She patted the bed beside her. Laura climbed up and snuggled against her side. Julia rubbed a shaky hand over Laura's hair.

In her three years in the Dekalb County District Attorney's office, Julia had never turned away a difficult case. Recognizing a kindred, workaholic spirit, Gregory had assigned her some of the toughest cases he could find. When the Assistant D.A. in the Criminal Division resigned six months ago, she was offered the job. So far, Julia was batting a thousand but there was time yet for the floor to fall out from beneath her.

Laura fell asleep against Julia's side and CNN moved on to news around the world. The combination of Laura's warmth and a report on a rise in agricultural stock finally lulled her to sleep.

The ringing phone jarred her awake less than an hour later. Julia cursed vividly and snatched it off the cradle after the third ring.

"Damn it, Gregory," she muttered into the phone. "I told you —"

"Julia?" Paige interrupted, her voice strained.

"What's the matter?" Immediately alert, Julia sat straight up in the bed. "Is the baby okay? Are you all right? Where are you?"

"I'm okay," Paige assured her quickly. "Still pregnant. Listen, have you seen the news yet this morning?"

"Yeah. It's awful." Julia rubbed her eyes and looked at the clock. It was already seven. She'd only slept a little over thirty minutes. Not exactly a full night's sleep but a decent power nap was better than nothing.

"I bet the whole town is in an uproar."

"Yeah, something like that. Look," Paige hesitated, "Julia —"

"What's wrong?"

"It's about Mike," Paige murmured into the phone, dropping her voice. "His sister Samantha was one of those kids that were killed." Paige's voice broke and Julia sagged against the headboard.

"Oh Paige." She closed her eyes and listened as Paige tried to control her sobs. "What can I do?"

"I don't know." Paige sniffled. "We're at the hospital now with his parents and the other families. There is so much sadness here, Julia. I can't believe it."

"I'm so sorry," Julia whispered. She remembered the feelings all too well, the helplessness, the frustration and grief. "Can I do anything?"

"I don't know." Paige gave a shuddery sigh. "I don't suppose you could come down here?"

Julia remained silent, her mind racing.

Paige whimpered low. "I didn't think so."

"Paige," Julia said, weary to the bone. "I think I can do better than that."

"How?" Paige asked through her tears.

"It's too much to go into now but there's a good chance the case will come to Dekalb County. If that happens, Gregory wants to give it to me."

Julia sighed. "Which means I'll have to come down there for the preliminary hearings."

Paige was quiet for a few seconds. "Are you going to do it?"

"I was going to turn it down," she said. "But I changed my mind. For you."

"Thank you, Julia," Paige cried softly into the phone. "I don't know what to say."

"Just don't worry," Julia told her. "You'll make that baby sick if you keep crying like that. Get some rest and I'll call you when I know more."

"Thank you so much, Jules. We all thank you."

"Don't," Julia said on a shaky breath. She glanced down at Laura who remained sound asleep. "I haven't done anything yet."

"Here is your flight itinerary and car rental information." Gregory tossed a folder on Julia's desk as he entered her office an hour later. Annoyed, she ignored him and booted up her computer. He was entirely too arrogant, assuming she would change her mind about the case just because he told her to.

"I see you brought the progeny," he said, eyeing Laura.

Julia glanced at her daughter who sat on the floor near the desk. A coloring book propped her in lap, she was too busy picking out crayons to pay attention to Gregory. He took in the purple plastic dress-up shoes Laura insisted on wearing everywhere they went and her bright pink Barbie roll-a-way case with Power Puff Girl stickers all over it.

"Charming," he said, straight-faced.

"I assume you have news," she said, pulling his attention away from Laura. For some reason, her daughter always made Gregory uncomfortable. Perhaps because he was unmarried and childless, or because he was an only child primarily raised by nannies. Whatever the cause, Gregory had no clue how to relate to children.

"You assume correctly." Gregory sat in the chair across from her desk and opened a thin file on his lap. He licked the tip of one finger and began leafing through it.

"I can't say I approve of your choice of attire," he said without looking up.

Julia glanced down at her over-sized purple t-shirt. It had a picture of Laura's favorite cartoon stud, Johnny Bravo, and the words "Chick Magnet" emblazoned on the front.

"Not everyone falls out of bed dressed for an Eddie Bauer ad," she said, eyeballing his perfectly pressed chinos and spotless white shirt.

"What's wrong with what I'm wearing," he asked, frowning at his clothes.

"C'mon! Even the sleeves of your t-shirt have perfectly aligned creases. You need serious help, Gregory."

"Do I detect a note of jealousy?"

"Hardly," Julia said. "Just irritation. Today is my regular laundry day. It's your fault I didn't have anything else to wear."

"I like Momma's shirt," Laura said from the floor with pride in her little voice. "I picked it out."

Julia exchanged a wink with her daughter. Gregory was always so formal and proper she took perverse pleasure in baiting him.

"I'm not complaining," he said to Julia. "You're here, that's what matters."

"So what've you got so far?" Julia asked, nodding at the folder on his lap.

"You're in?" Gregory raised a brow in question. Julia gave him a hang-dog expression.

"As if you would accept it any other way. You already ordered my plane ticket, for the love of God."

"I know you." Gregory shrugged. "You wouldn't turn down a case this big. It would drive you insane to see someone else working it."

Though she resented his suppositions, Julia did not feel inclined to correct him. She opened the file he gave her and read the top page.

"She has priors," Julia murmured after a while, glancing up.

"Most definitely." Gregory nodded. "Wait until you see the hand-slaps she's been given. Someone has been working hard to keep her out of jail."

"Do we know who her attorney is?"

"Not yet." Gregory shook his head. "Congressman Turner usually hires the big guns right here in Atlanta. For this one he's decided to go with a local yokel. They're being very tight-lipped about the whole thing."

A nervous flutter started in the pit of Julia's stomach.

"If they plan to let her stand trial in Hardin, a local attorney may relate better to the jury." Julia hoped that upside-down, flip-flopping going on inside her chest wasn't her intuition screaming to get out while she could. "When are they going to set bond?"

"Tomorrow morning." Gregory stood. "You're going to be down there at least two days. You're flying out tonight so you will have plenty of beauty sleep."

Julia shook her head, confused. "So we won't know who their counsel is until —"

"Until you're standing in front of the cameras smiling pretty and making nice."

Julia fought her nausea and tried to focus on the file in front of her. Unease rippled through her. She had a very bad feeling.

"Hey, you're looking a little green there. Are you sure you're on board for this?"

"I'm fine." She smiled weakly. "I hate the media, you know that."

"Don't worry. I have complete confidence in you. You have always handled yourself like a professional in front of the press. Tomorrow will be no different."

"It's not the press I'm worried about," she said under her breath.

Gregory bent down to examine the picture Laura colored. He frowned and tilted his head the other way.

"You do realize, of course, that you're supposed to color inside the lines," he informed her four-year-old in his most adult voice.

"That's boring," Laura muttered without looking up. Gregory shook his head.

"Such a rebel at such a young age."

"She gets that from —" Julia paused, stunned. She'd almost said his name. Gregory looked at her with interest.

"She gets that from me."

"Of course," Gregory said, raising his brow. "You can't even stand it if the papers don't line up perfectly in the file. You're really living on the edge, Julia. I can see that about you."

She shrugged, embarrassed.

"Someday you'll tell me your story," he said on his way to the door.

"There's nothing to tell." Julia avoided his sharp-eyed gaze and busied herself on the computer.

"I have a feeling there's more to tell than any of us could imagine."

The door closed behind him and he was gone.

Chapter Twelve

The morning of Blythe Turner's bond hearing dawned cool and sunny. It was March, not quite spring, and a tang of south Georgian winter still hung in the air. Cade stared through the windshield of his jeep, his mind on the interview with Mrs. Turner the night before. Surly and unrepentant, her only concern was her release. Mrs. Turner did not ask about the victims, even refused to hear about the charges she was held on.

She waved a dismissive hand and informed Cade, "My husband will take care of all of that. Have you got a cigarette?"

Cade shook his head. Rarely did his clients admit guilt, even as strictly Client/Attorney privileged information. When they did, it was almost always apologetic and accompanied by promises that it would never happen again if Cade could only make it go away. Congressman Turner's wife was one of the few that not only admitted it, but she also felt no remorse.

Usually, he passed on cases like this. He had no patience for clients who could not learn the first time. However, Congressman Turner was not a man to turn away. Like it or not, he was stuck. He could drop the case and let someone else deal with the bitter Mrs. Turner, also effectively killing his growing network of powerful clients. Or he could take it on, win the shit out of it and watch his career skyrocket. Tough choice.

The press waited at the top of the staircase, lurking in front of the courthouse doors like vultures waiting to descend on a dying animal. Cade did not mind pushy reporters or being filmed. The media could be a very powerful tool and he intended to use them as often as possible.

As soon as he stepped into view, they swooped down the stairs, nearly knocking over a woman in their mad dash to be the first to get him on camera. Cade braced himself. Though he understood their eagerness, he still could not get used to the way they crowded so close, invading his personal space with microphones and bodies and bright, blinding lights. Questions were shouted before they even reached him.

"Mr. Taylor! Mr. Taylor!" They vied for his attention. "Any comments from Mrs. Turner or Congressman Turner about the four dead teenagers?"

"Mr. Taylor! Will Congressman Turner be staying in Hardin during the trial?"

"Is it true you're trying to move the trial out of Hardin County? Where will you go?"

"Is it true Mrs. Turner refused to be tested for drugs or alcohol? What is she trying to hide?"

"Mr. Taylor!"

Cade smiled into the closest camera. "Congressman Turner will hold a press conference later today to address his concern and heartfelt regret for the families of the victims. And yes, we are trying to move the case. It is our belief that Mrs. Turner would not receive a fair verdict in this county. We'll have to wait and see which venue meets with the judge's approval."

"Mr. Taylor," one persistent reporter shouted and shoved her way to the front. "What do you have to say about Dekalb County's District Attorney trying to move in on the case before a judge's ruling?"

"This is the first I've heard of it," Cade said truthfully. "That's a better question for Ed Slagle, Hardin County's D.A., don't you think?"

"Mr. Taylor!"

"That's all for now," he said. The questions grew louder as he tried to push his way through. He smiled easily, feeling the crowd shift and move around him as he tried to clear a path. He glanced up when he saw an opening.

Cade froze and stared.

Julia stood at the top of the stairs, looking exactly how he felt, as though a pile driver had hit her square in the chest.

The media, sensitive to their target, turned to see what had caught his interest.

"It's the ADA from Dekalb. What's her name?" The reporter closest to Cade scanned the small pocket notebook in his hand. "Julia. Julia Campbell. C'mon, let's go."

They lurched as one, surging up the stairs to crowd around her, throwing questions at her as they had him. Cade watched as she coolly ignored them, her attention focused down the stairs. At him.

She looked unruffled by the barrage of voices and bodies pressing in on her. They all shouted her name. Questions about her and the case bounced off the stone façade and echoed down the narrow corridor of the courthouse. Julia looked at him expectantly and he started up the stairs.

"Miss Campbell! Miss Campbell!"

"No comment at this time," she said firmly.

The shouting continued until Cade reached them. The wall of human bodies parted, making a space for him to join in the fray. They quieted, cameras and microphones waved between them, anticipating the exchange.

"It's been a long time," Cade muttered. He ignored the flashes as more pictures were taken.

"Not long enough." Her reply was like a slap in the face. *Bitch.*

"It seems fate had other ideas," Cade said, fighting his temper.

"Fate has always been a cruel bitch," Julia muttered and the microphones shot beneath her nose.

The avid eyes of the press bounced back and forth as though watching the last seconds of sudden death tennis match. The undercurrent of electricity Cade felt between them would be enough to send their equipment into spasms.

Cade drank in her upswept hair and prim little suit and wondered if she still wore her bad girl underwear. Suddenly, unbidden memories assaulted him. Julia flush with passion, her sinfully sexy black hair tumbled in an erotic mess over law books and legal pads and her silk clad legs wrapped around his naked waist. Damn, now he was hard.

"I think we're losing sight of who the real bitch is here, aren't we," Cade asked icily, striking out at her. After all that happened, how could she possibly still have power over him?

Cade sensed more than saw her flinch away from his attack. A sadistic sort of pleasure engulfed him at having cracked her composure.

"I'll see you inside counselor," she said, her voice cool. Julia turned on her heel and pushed through the media barricade.

Cade watched her leave from behind the tinted lenses of his glasses, disgust at their

behavior fueling his anger. He brushed past the gaping reporters who battered him with new questions.

"Mr. Taylor, how do you and Ms. Campbell know each other? Mr. Taylor, is there bad blood between you and the District Attorney's office?"

The heavy glass doors closed them out as he followed her inside. Cade fumed and watched the swish of her overcoat, her heels clicking a sharp staccato across the tiled floors of the hall. He caught up with her easily outside the courtroom and pressed the flat of his hand against the door before she could open it. She stiffened and cast a haughty stare over her shoulder. Her sunglasses tilted down her nose and she peered at him with barely veiled disgust.

"Don't ever do that again," he ground out, leaning heavily against the door and effectively trapping her between his body and the thick wooden surface.

"I wasn't the one who resorted to name calling," she replied. "Really Cade. How old are we?"

"Look who's talking, Miss Trash Mouth." Chaining his temper, Cade pushed away from the door and took a step away from her. That close, he could smell her perfume and feel the heat of her through his clothes. Jesus, what was she doing to him? He clenched his jaw and stared, watching Julia take a deep breath.

"Are we finished?"

"What are you doing here?"

"What do you think?"

"It's not your jurisdiction," he said, annoyed that she seemed to get a grip on her emotions a lot faster than he did. "Does Ed Slagle know you're here, poaching on his cases?"

"We discussed the situation with the local DA yesterday. I requested only to attend the hearing. I won't step in until the judge approves your change of venue. You were hoping for Dekalb County, weren't you?" Her brows arched over her sunglasses in question.

"How did you get your information?"

"It's true, isn't it? Why does it matter where I got it?" Julia took off her sunglasses and met his straightforward gaze. How could he have forgotten how beautiful she was?

"Look, Cade," she murmured. "I'm only here because I've got a job to do, just like you. So let's do it and put all of the kindergarten bullshit behind us for today. Okay?"

Cade studied her for a long, thoughtful minute.

"Fine."

"Good." She tugged on the door again. He moved aside and she breezed right through without a backward glance.

Chapter Thirteen

The corridors bustled with activity as Julia approached Gregory's open doorway. She waited, holding her breath and listened for sounds of life.

"No deal, George," Gregory said, anger clear in his voice. Julia waited for a response and when none came, she realized he was having a heated argument over the telephone. She hurried past the door.

"Julia!"

"Damn," she muttered under her breath.

"Get in here!"

Embarrassed, Julia swung around and retraced her steps to his office. He was still on the phone so she sat in a chair close to the desk and tried not to fidget. She had dreaded this moment all the way back to Atlanta. Explaining to Gregory how she'd managed to lose all common sense and throw a tantrum on national television was going to be difficult.

"I already said no deal, how much more plainly can I say it?" A garbled, masculine voice reverberated from the earpiece in the quiet room. Gregory shook his head. "I don't care if it's the damned First Lady of the United States. She killed our kids, George. Our kids. She's going to stand trial."

Julia almost believed the grief stricken crack in his voice was genuine. But she knew Gregory better than most and therefore, when he grinned triumphantly and winked at her over the desk, Julia did not bat an eyelash.

"Laying it on a bit thick, don't you think?" She raised a brow at him in censure as he hung up the phone.

"We'll get to that in a minute." Gregory pulled a legal pad from beneath a large stack of files on his desk.

"Brief me." His pen poised over the pad, he looked at her over the top of his reading glasses.

"Bond was set and Mrs. Turner will be released in the morning." Julia leaned over and pulled a file from the front of her briefcase. She handed it to Gregory as she talked.

"You were right. Defendant's counsel wasted no time filing for change of venue. It may take a couple of weeks to push it through but as far as I can tell, it will be approved."

"Good, good." Gregory skimmed the first two pages of her notes. "Just out of curiosity, what was bond set at?"

Julia grinned. "The congressman is about twenty thousand dollars lighter than he was yesterday."

Gregory did the math with a flick of his fingers. "You've got to be kidding me. The bail was only two hundred grand for four counts of vehicular manslaughter? That's it?"

Julia nodded. "Apparently, he's a lot better connected than we ever imagined."

"Well, well, well." Gregory took off his glasses and tossed them on the desk. "That would explain Judge Andersen's call this morning. He suggested we offer a deal to Mrs. Turner."

"What?" Julia almost laughed the idea was so ridiculous. "It's too early to talk about

deals. And isn't Andersen a federal judge? He won't even hear the case. What does he care if we cut a deal or not?"

"That's just it." Gregory leaned back in his chair and looked thoughtful. "I didn't understand it either until he casually mentioned that Turner was looking for a worthy candidate to back for senate next fall."

It took a minute for the information to sink in. Once it did, Julia collapsed in her chair, completely shocked.

"A bribe." Julia was floored. It was no secret that Gregory Stanton had higher political aspirations.

"Exactly."

"But he's a federal judge," she argued.

"Don't be so naïve, Julia. George didn't offer the bribe. He just let me know, in so many words, it was there for the taking if I wanted it. You heard what I told him. No deal."

Julia resented being called naïve. She was not innocent or stupid. She simply couldn't fathom a federal judge risking his career on such a high profile case.

"What's Turner got on Andersen? He had to have held something over him to get him to make that call. It's too risky."

"I like the way you think," Gregory said with a half-smile. His chair creaked as he leaned forward again and searched through the papers on his desk.

"Look into it. Also, I had the driving records for Mrs. Turner faxed over this morning. You'll have to go over them yourself and get back with me. I wish I had more time to hash it all out with you but I'm already running behind."

It took everything Julia had not to snatch the records from his outstretched hand and run out of the office. She was almost home free.

"Thanks." She tucked them in her briefcase as she stood. "I'll take them up to my office right now and let you get back to work."

"One more thing," he said, halting her hasty exit. "What the hell did I watch on CNN yesterday?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Julia said, trying to keep the blood from draining out of her face.

"That's bullshit and we both know it. I thought I saw my Assistant District Attorney and some hot shot good ol' boy fighting like spoiled brats on live television."

"I'm sorry," Julia said, swallowing hard. "I don't know what to say. You probably want to put someone else on the case."

"No way," Gregory said. Julia sank back into the chair, quickly deflating. She secretly hoped he would agree. "Granted, I didn't realize that there was a history between you and Taylor, but we can use that."

"No!" Julia's back went ramrod straight.

"Is there something you need to tell me?"

Silence filled the room and Julia avoided looking her boss in the eye.

"Look," Gregory replied gently. "You don't have to tell me anything that you consider too personal, but if you and Taylor keep shooting sparks off each other in front of the cameras, I'd rather hear it right now than watch it unfold like an episode of Dawson's Creek on CNN."

Julia felt trapped. There was no way Gregory would let her out of this case, not to

mention she would be letting Paige and her whole family down. Now, after seeing Cade so unexpectedly and the ending result, Julia realized there was a lot more at stake than she ever imagined. Cade still held some inexplicable appeal that scared the hell out of her. All she had to do was tell him the truth and Gregory would have to take her off the case. But how could she be so selfish?

"There's nothing to tell." Julia drew a slow deep breath and forced herself to relax. "I know Cade Taylor because I grew up in Hardin and we both interned as law clerks at the same firm. I don't like his style, that's all there is to it."

"Fine," he said after a long, thoughtful moment. "From now on, try to keep your personal feelings about Taylor out of it. However, if you feel you must say something, do it off camera."

"I will. I promise," Julia said, relieved. Gregory let her off the hook — for now. Though she knew a trap when she saw one. If he got even token resistance out of her on this case, he'd use her promises against her.

Cade poured over his files all night and well into the wee hours of the morning. He made notes for tomorrow afternoon's firm meeting, as well as sent a couple of emails to his secretary for scheduling time with Congressman Turner first thing in the morning.

After the last several hours of poring over his wife's paperwork, he had some serious questions for the man. Cade glanced at his watch. Four a.m. He needed to catch an hour or two of sleep. If he knew his secretary, Shelby, she would have the congressman cooling his heels in the conference room no later than eight-thirty.

Cade snapped the file shut and tossed it on the desk and stretched with a groan. Exhausted, he rubbed the back of his neck as he left the office and crossed the hall to his bedroom.

The lamp on the bedside table cast a small, intimate circle of light across the empty bed. Cade unbuttoned his shirt and tossed it in the corner, missing the hamper by a foot. He was sleeping alone and, for once, he felt grateful. Tonight there would be no woman to push out before dawn. No clingy female to hassle him with whens and wheres and whys. Cade stepped out of his slacks and they joined his shirt in a rumpled heap.

No warm body to chase the demons away.

Naked, he slid between the sheets and crossed his arms under his head. Cade stared at the ceiling and let the floodgates open.

He thought about Julia a lot more than he liked to admit. Cade even dreamed about her and on his worst nights, he woke in a cold sweat with her name and taste on his tongue. He hated himself for that. For still wanting her, still needing her.

It was only sex, Cade reminded himself a thousand times. He wanted her and he got her. It was that simple.

Being in lust isn't so bad. It's damn fun being in lust.

His own words came back to kick him in the ass. Cade remembered the doubtful look she had given him that summer night five years ago.

She was gone. Get over it. Easier said than done, he told himself. The harder he tried, the more he closed himself off.

Cade was a machine. Work, sleep, eat, and occasionally, fuck. He wouldn't pretty up

the act with words like “love” or even “lust.” It was sex. Pure. Simple. Raw. He never questioned it. He needed, they provided and deep down the real need, the one that drove him to push Julia’s image, her scent, her touch farther away with every woman he took to his bed, was never sated. It burned inside, not with the intensity of a brushfire, but with the slow, patient heat of a candle. He prayed that one day soon it would finally reach its end and sputter out.

But from the very moment he saw her again, Cade’s stomach tied in knots and his blood ran hot. Even now, his body reacted as it had when he leaned in close enough to smell her perfume. As angry as he had been, Cade wanted to touch her, to press his body against hers and taste her sweet skin. Fuck. He felt like a teenager with his first hard-on.

It really pissed him off.

Cade threw aside the covers and stomped into the darkened bathroom. He angrily splashed his face and neck with cold water. Droplets fell from his chin onto his bare chest. Cade dragged in a deep breath. His chest hurt and his skin felt like it was on fire.

It had to stop. Cade turned off the water and stared at his shadowy reflection. In his experience, the easiest way to get rid of his desire for a woman was to sleep with her. Cade almost laughed.

Maybe when hell froze over.

Too bad, though. The image was enough to sustain him through at least a good night’s rest. One thing seemed certain. If Cade didn’t do something to purge her from his mind, he would go slowly insane with her so close. *And that*, he thought as he climbed back into bed, *is not an option*.

Chapter Fourteen

"Is this where you used to live when you were a little girl, Momma?"

"It sure is." Julia dropped Laura's duffel on the Paige and Mike's front porch and pressed the doorbell. Laura fidgeted by her side, craning her neck to look up and down the deserted street.

"Where's the kids?"

"It's Monday, honey. Most of the kids are probably in school."

Julia peered through the window. What was taking Paige so long to answer the door?

"Then who could I play with?"

Julia spared a glance for her daughter and sighed. Laura's boundless energy taxed her nerves all day. She would be relieved when Laura had someone else to ask her endless questions.

"We won't be here for more than a week or two," she said wearily. "Just hang out with Aunt Paige and help her get ready for the baby, okay?"

"Okay," Laura replied, dragging out each syllable. Julia saw the expression on her face change and braced herself for another barrage of questions.

"Where's my girl!" The door flew open and Paige's seven-month-pregnant belly jutted through the opening before she did.

Laura's eyes went big and wide as she stared at Paige's stomach.

"Wow," she whispered in wonderment, "you're tummy is enor-na-mous!"

"Laura!" Julia gasped, embarrassed.

"I'm enormous, too." Paige laughed. "Y'all come on in."

Julia held the screen door open for Laura then followed them inside. When Mike and Paige first offered the spare bedroom to them, she refused. Unsure how her parents' house would affect her after such a long time, Julia decided a hotel room would be easier on everyone. At the last minute, Paige convinced her to stay with them.

The first thing that struck Julia as she entered her childhood home was how different everything was. Gone were the restful peaches, yellows and mint greens her mother decorated with twenty years ago. Now the walls were painted in a vibrant rainbow of colors. Julia's old, heirloom pieces sat in a storage unit in Atlanta and Paige's eclectic collection of furniture and knick-knacks now filled the spacious rooms.

Each piece had Paige's unique stamp on it and Julia suddenly realized she was in someone else's home. No longer did she experience the familiar sense of homecoming when she walked through the front door. It was a stranger's house.

"Thanks for coming," Mike said quietly from behind her. Julia turned and offered a smile. She would have hugged him but his hands were stuffed in his pockets. He had a fragile, don't-touch-me look that broke her heart.

"Thank you for inviting us to stay," Julia said softly. "I really appreciate it. We'll try to stay out of your hair as much as possible."

"Don't worry about that. We're glad for the company. It keeps our minds off —" Paige paused and shrugged. "You know."

"I'm hungry. Can I have a snack?" For once, Julia was grateful for Laura's whining distraction.

Julia closed her eyes and sighed. "She's tired. It was a long drive."

"We've got snacks in the kitchen, right through that door." Paige leaned over as far as her belly let her and smiled at Laura. "There's a cookie jar on the counter."

"Can I have two?"

"Two what, honey?" Paige rubbed her back and winced as she stood.

"Two cookies."

Julia brushed a hand over Laura's hair. "Just one," she said.

"Okay." Laura moaned as she took off for the kitchen.

"Just one," Julia reminded her. She waited until Laura was out of earshot before she turned her full concentration on her friend. Paige looked haggard, which Julia was sure wasn't helping her pregnancy.

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

"I'll be okay," Paige answered even though her chin began to wobble. "We'll be okay."

Mike turned on his heel, leaving the house through the front door. Paige watched him go with tears on her cheeks. "It's been hard on him. She was almost ten years younger than him but he was still very close to his sister."

"I am so very sorry." Julia hugged her hard and stroked her hair. The stance was uncomfortable with Paige's big belly but Julia didn't mind, especially when she felt the baby move between them.

"Oh Paige." Julia gasped and hugged her harder, feeling her own eyes fill with tears.

"It's okay." She sniffed against her shoulder and they laughed through their tears. "It happens all the time."

"I don't want you to worry." Julia let go, pulling away only far enough to place a hand on Paige's belly. She held it there, struggling to control the tremor of anxiety in her voice. "We're going to do the best we can to make it as right as possible."

"You're amazing." Paige placed her own hand over Julia's and looked into her eyes. "Don't ever forget that. No matter how it turns out, always remember that we love you for trying. As much crap as I've been giving you, both Mike and I know how hard it was for you to come. We knew what you were risking and we still asked. I wish you knew how much it meant to us."

Julia met Paige's gaze and her heart constricted. "I guess you know what happened at the courthouse last week."

Paige nodded. "But you came anyway. Thank you."

"I haven't done anything yet," Julia said, pulling her hand from Paige's.

"I almost backed out," she said with a sigh. "When I saw Cade on those courthouse steps I was ready to drop the case and run home to Atlanta."

"But you stayed." Paige ran her fingers over her belly, watching Julia as she moved farther across the room.

"I didn't know how I'd feel," Julia murmured. "Seeing him again was an eye-opening experience."

"I can only imagine."

Julia half-laughed. "God." She shook her head. "Was he always that gorgeous?"

"Yeah." Paige joined her beside the window. "It was always a little hard for you to focus when he was in the room."

They could hear Laura's chatter through the kitchen door.

"It's time to stop running away, isn't it?" Julia ran her hands over her arms.

Paige nodded. "Yeah, honey. It is."

"I know." Julia sighed.

"What are you going to do?"

"All I can think about is Laura and what Cade will do when he finds out I kept her from him. What if he tries to take her from me?"

The very idea made Julia's heart race and her hands shake. The room closed in on her and she recognized panic building in the back of her throat. She closed her eyes and took long, deep breaths until she could speak without hyperventilating. "Or even worse, what if he doesn't care?"

"You're getting hysterical." Paige reached for Julia's hands again, gripping them tightly until Julia looked her in the eye.

"Let's just take it one day at a time." Paige squeezed her hands harder. "When the time comes, you'll make the decision that best for Laura and, hopefully, you."

"I'm dreading that time," Julia whispered.

"You wouldn't be a good mother if you didn't." Paige rubbed her thumbs over the top of Julia's hands. "I'll take care of Laura for now. We won't even leave the house if it will make you feel better."

"I can't ask you to do that." Julia shook her head hard and pulled her hands away.

"Hell," Paige said, shrugging. "There's a lot I shouldn't ask you to do but it never stopped me, did it?"

Julia wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. She faced the window and sighed again. "Sometimes I don't know whether to thank God for a friend like you or have myself committed."

A low, humorless laugh came from Paige. Julia turned, her tone serious as she looked at her friend.

"Promise me you won't over do it, okay? Laura can be a handful."

"I promise," Paige said, holding up her hand. "We'll take good care of her while you work. The faster you get done, the sooner this will all be over."

Paige leaned her head against Julia's shoulder and they both stared through the window at the street that held so many memories for her. "The sooner it's over, the sooner I can go home."

Chapter Fifteen

Cade entered his small conference room and Micah Sampson rose in one, graceful movement to shake his hand. Congressman Denton Turner remained seated and glanced at his watch.

"I sincerely hope you will not make a habit of demanding my presence in your office every morning, Mr. Taylor."

"I'm sorry if you were inconvenienced in any way, Congressman," Cade said as he pulled a chair close to the table and sat down. He took his time getting comfortable while he ran through the different ways he could approach the uncomfortable meeting.

"Next time," Turner snapped, "make an appointment."

"Excuse me, sir?" Cade raised a brow. He met the congressman's annoyed gaze. "All due respect but your wife is in a lot of trouble. This should take priority over all else."

Cade calmly flipped open the file he brought in with him and passed a sheaf of papers across the table. He seethed inside. The problems with the Turner case grew by leaps and bounds. Under normal circumstances he would not balk at a little bribery and a cantankerous, egotistical client. Lose a little sleep over the sexy legs of the ADA and he was ready to rip the head off a United States congressman. *Get a grip, Taylor.*

"As you can see," he said as the other men glanced through the copies of Mrs. Turner's driving record. "I was able to pull your wife's records. I have some questions about the way her traffic violations have been handled."

"We'll answer the best we can," Micah said, glancing over his copy.

"Two DUI arrests in the last year and a half alone are enough to raise a few eyebrows. However, the severely reduced sentences were conspicuous enough that I wanted to dig a little deeper and, as both of you well know, will cause the DA to do the same."

Cade flipped a few pages and ran his finger down the center.

"At first all I found were a few reckless driving tickets and a handful of traffic violations, the fines for each ridiculously low and all issued by the same two officers." Cade glanced up, catching Micah's eye. "Sterling Mayer and Elijah Bond. Do those names ring any bells?"

Congressman Turner put down his copy and clasped his hands on the table. The two men exchanged a glance but neither said anything. Micah seemed amused.

"Atlanta is a big city, gentlemen." Cade put aside his own papers. "I highly doubt Mrs. Turner was pulled over thirteen times by the same two cops."

Congressman Turner leveled a serious gaze on Cade. "Son, I'm going to ask you a question and I want you to answer as honestly as you can."

Wary, Cade leaned back in his chair. "I'll do my best, sir."

"Do you like your job?"

Surprised, he answered honestly without thought.

"I do, sir. I like my job a great deal."

Micah tossed a copy of the police report on the table while Turner nodded his approval.

"We've been watching you and I have to say, so far you've proven yourself a damn

good defense attorney. I know you're taking on Pete Breckinright and I have to say, anybody who can look that horny sonuvabitch in the eye and shake his hand has got to be good."

Cade sat up in his chair, suddenly tense. "Client and attorney privilege prevents me —"

"I know, I know." The congressman waved a hand, interrupting him. "You don't have to tell me anything or confirm what I know. Hell, I've met Beth. If I were about twenty years younger I'd have a hard on for her, too."

Micah cleared his throat. "Sir," he interrupted. "You're getting off topic."

"You're right," Congressman Turner said, his voice gruff. Cade relaxed. It wasn't hard to see who was in charge. Micah was good. Almost too good. The aide was unobtrusive when it was necessary but Cade could see the ambition. The drive. What would he do to keep his money ticket to power in office?

"My point is that I could have called anyone in the state to help me out on this one, Cade. Do you mind if I call you Cade?"

"No, sir."

"I chose you specifically." Turner paused meaningfully, Cade could only guess, for effect. "I chose you because I think we could develop a very profitable relationship."

"How so?" Cade forced himself to be patient. He knew exactly what the man hinted at. The very same reason he was put in the awkward position he was in.

"Let's not kid ourselves. My wife is sick. She's an alcoholic and I've been throwing good money after bad for longer than you will ever know trying to keep it all private. That's what you wanted to ask me about, correct?"

Cade hid his surprise. "Correct."

The congressman may be a puppet but the man was still sharp. For the first time he wondered if maybe he was getting in over his head.

"See," Turner said with a grin. He relaxed, resting his hands on the arms of his chair and nodding to his aide. "I told you he was a smart boy."

Micah nodded, his expression blank but watchful.

"Thank you, sir." Cade opened the file and pulled out another sheet. "However, the fact is your money is no good anymore."

"Excuse me?" The grin slowly faded from the congressman's face. His gaze flicked to Micah.

"I don't understand." Micah spoke for the congressman. "Please explain."

"The reports dating back as far as four or five years ago are detailed and precise. No one would question them or give them a second glance. Whoever your man was, sir. He was good. It took me the better part of the night to find them all."

"But you found them," the congressman pointed out.

"Yes, I did and so will the district attorney." Cade closed the file and leaned forward, his elbows on the table and hands clasped in front of him. "Because your wife is a repeat offender the District Attorney's office will be forced to go over her records with a fine-toothed comb. It won't take him long to find what I found and your carefully crafted world will blow up in all our faces."

"What did you mean about our money being no good anymore?" Micah spoke for the first time. Cade turned his attention from the stricken congressman.

"It was the last one that caught my attention first. After that I began to recognize the pattern. It was sloppy. Whoever corrected the most recent records didn't even bother to hide what they were doing. If I didn't know better, I would think someone was setting you up."

"But you don't think that's the case?" Micah stared at Cade with an intensity that made him uncomfortable. He shook his head.

"I'm not sure," Cade answered honestly. "There is no way anyone would want to go back and look through these records unless your wife committed a major crime. It was an uncontrollable variable that happened to come true. Whoever did this wasn't trying to cause trouble, they just didn't care if you were caught."

"I see," Turner said. "How does this affect my wife's case?"

"As I said, the DA will pick apart these records. The harder we fight the conviction, the more likely they will turn to them for answers and, eventually, discover your little bribery ring."

"Are you saying we should leave my wife out to hang?"

"No, sir. Not at all." Cade shook his head again. "My responsibility to my client comes first and foremost. I will do everything I can to get Mrs. Turner out of this. However, I am warning you that your poor money handling is going to cause me some considerable problems."

"I can see that." Turner pushed away from the table and walked to the window. "The answer is obvious. It's time to let her go."

Micah glanced sharply at the congressman. "You can't be serious. She's your wife."

"Think about what you're saying," Cade said rising from the conference table. He felt his temper rise and pushed it away. "She's looking at fifteen to twenty years per victim."

"She's a drunken, sour woman who has given me nothing but trouble in the twenty years we've been married." The congressman turned away angrily. "I'm tired of cleaning up the ungrateful bitch's messes."

"I'm sorry, sir, but you hired me to do a job and I'm going to do it. Your wife is going to walk out of that courtroom, if not a free woman, at least with a reduced sentence."

"Don't forget who pays your bill, boy."

"You'll be paying me a lot more if I have to defend you both, congressman." Cade raised his voice. The other man stared at him for several seconds before he broke contact.

"There is another option," Micah broke in, drawing the attention of the two men. "We could offer a deal," he said with a shrug.

"The DA has to come to us with the deal," Cade pointed out. "Not the other way around."

The congressman ignored him, his attention riveted on his aide. "Do you think it would work?"

"Who's this girl Gregory Stanton has assigned to the case?" Micah pulled his cell phone from the inside pocket of his jacket and flipped it open.

"The ADA with the legs?" Turner asked, surprised. "Camp? Castle—"

"It's Campbell," Cade corrected, unease flowing through him at the nasty turn in the conversation. "Julia Campbell."

They spoke of the same beautiful legs he knew from experience were long, lean and creamy smooth. Legs that were white and wicked and strong as they wrapped around his

waist. Jealousy and anger tangled inside him with white-hot heat.

"Let's see what we can find out about her," Micah said, dialing. "We'll dig around and see if there's something we can offer to move things along."

Cade reached across the table and snagged the phone from Micah as he dialed. The congressman sputtered as Cade snapped it closed and tossed it on the table between them with a loud clatter.

Micah raised a brow in question. "Do you mind?"

With a narrow-eyed glare at the two men, Cade crossed his arms over his chest. It was the first time he'd let the fury building inside him surface enough for the other men to see. He wasn't just angry, either. He was pissed as hell.

"This is manslaughter, gentlemen," he said evenly. "A felony sentence cannot be hand picked according to your specifications or how much you're willing to pay."

Congressman Turner gave him a placating smile. "C'mon, Cade. It's just a little wheeling and dealing. This kind of thing happens all the time. You should know that."

"Maybe you're not hearing me clearly," Cade cut in. "The entire state of Georgia is watching to see what their judicial system is going to do with your wife, Congressman Turner. The District Attorney is planning to run for Governor this fall. The media is already salivating with every bit of information that is leaked to them. They are all out for blood, sir, and it would take a miracle to keep them from going to trial."

"Don't be smart, boy." Turner's voice turned steely.

"You hired me to be smart, congressman. That's why we're here today." Cade held his unwavering gaze. The older man's cheeks flushed red with fury.

"If we're quite through with our pissing contest," Micah said blandly, breaking the silence, "I think we're finished here."

Abruptly, the congressman broke eye contact and turned to the door. "Do whatever you have to, Taylor," he said as he walked away. "But keep me out of it."

"Start praying, sir." He watched the congressman stalk from the room. Micah rose more slowly, taking his time as he smoothed his tie and re-buttoned his suit jacket. Cade met his scrutiny across the table.

"You have to understand," Micah said. "This whole episode has caused a serious blow to the congressman's campaign."

The hair on the back of Cade's neck rose and a cold chill passed through him.

"What about the havoc this has caused in the lives of four families, Micah?" His voice was soft and deceptively calm.

"Of course." Micah's expression transformed with the detached sympathy one would feel for a neighbor who mourned the death of a pet. "Our prayers and thoughts are with the families of those young people."

Cade snorted and looked away in disgust. "Drop the PR bullshit."

"I don't know what you expect me to say." The aide dropped his eyes and hesitated for a split second before he started for the door. Cade stepped in his path.

"You and I both know he's over, don't we Micah?"

"Try not to make things too difficult on yourself," he replied. Cade searched his gaze and saw the threat clearly. Micah patted him on the shoulder as he passed.

"Talk to the ADA," he said from the door. "Or we will do it for you."

Chapter Seventeen

Julia stared at the sparkling windows of Cade's office from her car and fought the anxiety attack that threatened to suffocate her. Cade asked to see her today. She was unprepared for any personal questions he might ask, still unsure how she would, or if she even could, come forward with the truth about their daughter.

However, there was still the case and as unusual as it was for opposing counsels to meet in private, Julia could not resist the temptation of seeing him alone once more. Besides, Gregory had insisted.

One deep, fortifying breath later Julia made herself leave the car and go inside. The receptionist informed her he would be right down.

He did not keep her waiting long. Almost immediately Cade appeared at the top of the stairs. She watched as he walked toward her with his easy, carefree gait and the confidence that radiated from him suddenly irritated her. It was an irrational response, she knew, but Julia would rather be irritated than driven mad with longing for this man any day. His full lips curved slightly when she stood up to meet him, giving a hint of the dimples she used to love so much.

"Julia." He offered her a professional, detached handshake that maddened her even more. She took it and willed herself to be calm, polite and completely removed from the hot, driving lust that wracked her body at the touch of his hand. "Thank you for coming."

Every erotic memory or dream she had about him in the last few years swept through her like a current of electricity. A silent exchange took place that left Julia breathless afterward.

"No problem." What was he looking for in her eyes? Was he feeling it too? Julia bit her tongue and avoided looking into his eyes again.

"Do you mind if we speak in my office?" Cade gestured to the staircase.

"Not at all."

"Good."

"After you," she said.

The working sounds of a busy office were muted in the thickly carpeted hallways and glass partitions. Julia looked around the beautiful office space, curiosity getting the better of her. He paused in front of an open doorway at the end of the hall and waited for her to go in before him.

Julia chose a seat in one of the large leather chairs across from his desk, draping her overcoat over the arm and resting her briefcase against the side. The room looked like a man's study, all dark leather and mahogany. Wall to ceiling shelves filled with old, dusty law books lined three of the four walls. Cade sat behind his desk. At his back rose the Hardin skyline, as small as it was, through floor to ceiling windows framed in mahogany arches and sills.

"Very nice," she said. *There. Right there.* That flutter of *something* whenever he looked at her.

She sat down across from him and took another long look around his office. If his intent was to intimidate her with his success, she had news for him. His obvious wealth did

not scare her. What scared her was that she could smell his cologne across the desk and it caused a fine sheen of perspiration to break out all over her body and her skin to tingle.

"Thank you," he replied.

This is ridiculous, she thought. We'll be here all day exchanging pleasant small talk. She stiffened her spine and attempted to tame her hormones.

"What did you want to see me about, Cade?" She made herself look busy and pulled a legal pad from her briefcase.

"I thought that after that mess at the courthouse you and I should talk." He pressed his fingers together and rested his elbows on the arms of his executive chair. She blinked at him without a word. "I don't want this case to turn into a personal vendetta for either of us."

"I was unaware that you saw this case as a way to exact revenge, Cade."

"I didn't say that." He frowned. "I just wanted to clear the air."

"I don't see what you could possibly have against me after all of these years," she said, though Julia knew there was an accusatory tone in her voice. She had no doubt she'd been the wronged one, not him.

"The few years we've spent apart hardly qualifies as 'all these years,' Julia." He leaned forward, abandoning the sophisticated and intelligent pose. "The way I remember it, you acted as judge, jury and executioner. You didn't want to hear what I had to say then, and I'd put money on it that you have no interest on what I have to say now."

"That would be one bet you'd win," she said. Why was he so angry? Could it be possible she hurt him?

"You could have fooled me," he muttered. "If it matters so little to you then why did we put on such a show for the press last week?"

"The key word is 'we,'" she replied scornfully. "Perhaps the real problem lies with you. Maybe it's you who can't let go of the past."

"To tell you the truth, I'd forgotten all about that summer until I saw you again. Since then all I've wanted to do is put it behind me. That's why I asked you here today. I thought we could at least be civil."

Julia looked away. *Oh. That hurt.* It hurt so bad that she was speechless for a full minute. She never believed her heart could literally ache but as she concentrated on breathing slowly, Julia felt like a twenty-pound weight struck her in the chest. I won't cry, she swore to herself.

When she knew for sure she could speak without her voice cracking, Julia faced him.

"Well that's obviously out of the question, isn't it?"

"I wish it could be different, Julia. I really do."

"Get to the point, please." Her patience was thread-thin. The worst part, she realized, was she had to go home to his daughter and know that he had never really loved her at all.

Thoughts of Laura immediately sobered her.

"We want to make a deal," he said.

"You what?" She laughed, changing gears so fast her head spun. She couldn't help it and she laughed again. "You've lost your mind."

"You think this is funny?" Cade's voice lowered and Julia felt like the room temperature dropped ten degrees. The smile faded.

"You're serious."

"As a heart attack."

"Cade," she said with false patience. "You can't possibly think the DA will deal with Mrs. Turner. She's a repeat offender and there are victims."

"We're prepared to make restitution to the families."

"The state isn't seeking restitution." She grew very still. "You know that."

"Yes."

An ice-cold chill covered Julia's skin.

"You mean your client's husband is willing to pay off the families to save his wife," she said. "You can tell your client that the district attorney's office does not accept bribes."

She shot out of her chair and loomed over his desk. Disgust and disappointment warred deep inside. "I thought you were better than this, Cade. I can't believe what you've become."

"You're over-reacting," he muttered. He started to stand but Julia stopped him with an upheld hand.

"From here on out we do not meet without a mediator. Is that clear?"

"Crystal," he replied. Julia struggled with the urge to say more. Her strong sense of professionalism finally won out and she turned to leave. Once at the door, it struck her that it might be the last time she ever saw him like this. Alone.

She looked back, drinking in his handsome face, deep blue eyes and squared jaw. He looked so much older and mature and ten times sexier than he'd ever been in her girlhood fantasies. And he broke her heart.

Her gaze skimmed the bookshelves lining the walls of his office.

"For as much as you claim to have forgotten," she said, "you certainly have gone out of your way to recreate the first scene of the crime."

For a parting shot, it certainly did its job. The stricken look on Cade's face was enough to get her from his office to her car before she gave into her tears.

"It was awful," Julia told Paige in the produce section of the grocery store later that afternoon. "He looked me in the eye and said he didn't remember a damn thing."

"You said a bad word, Momma."

Julia looked at Laura, exasperated. Her daughter led the way through the grocery aisle, strolling along so she could take her time choosing the perfect box of cereal.

"Sorry."

"S'okay." Laura shrugged and stopped to study a box of Lucky Charms.

"So do you believe him?" Paige kept her voice low.

"I don't know," Julia said honestly. "He seemed pretty sincere."

"You're right," Paige said, nodding her head. "That sounds pretty awful."

Desperate to change the subject, Julia looked in the cart. "What else do we need?"

Paige glanced at her list.

"Oh crap." She bit her lip. "I forgot to grab juice for Laura."

"It's okay. I'll get it."

"Aisle seven," Paige called after her.

"Did you know that crap is a bad word?"

Laura's voice carried and Julia winced. Sometimes Laura could be more of a handful

than even she could take. Grateful for the brief respite, Julia took her time fetching the juice. When she caught up with Laura and Paige again, she saw an older woman leaning down to help Laura choose between the Lucky Charms and Cheerios. Paige sent her a frantic look.

"Hey guys," she said with a cautious smile as she approached. The older woman turned around and Julia thought her face might crack with the effort to keep her smile in place.

"Olivia," she said, her knees gone rubbery. "How are you?"

"I'm just fine." Olivia's smile held warmth and invitation as she stood to clasp Julia in a hug. "I was just talking to this adorable little girl."

"She's going to be a grandma someday," Laura announced with glee. Lately Laura had become fascinated with family life. She interrogated everyone they met about it.

"I'll just, uh, go get some milk." Paige pushed the cart away.

"Good luck with that one, Momma," Olivia called after her. "She'll keep you on your toes."

She thinks Laura is Paige's daughter. Relief swept through Julia with such force she almost passed out. Cade's mother looked at her with concern.

"Are you all right, Julia?"

"Yes. I'm fine. Just a little over-worked." She struggled to recover, offering a half-hearted smile as she met Paige's glance before she turned the corner and went out of sight.

"Well you should go home and get some rest. You look ready to pass out."

If the situation weren't so dire, Julia would have laughed.

"Are you going to be in town long?" Olivia asked.

"Only a week or two." Too long, Julia finished the thought. God, what am I doing? She blinked rapidly and tried to focus on Olivia's face. "I have some work to do here in town before I have to go back to Atlanta."

"That's a shame. Perhaps you can find time to come out to the house and see everyone. I'm sure Doug would be happy to see you."

"I'll have to see." She darted a gaze back toward the corner where Paige and Laura disappeared.

"Go home. I won't keep you anymore. Get some rest, sweetie. We'll see you again." Olivia patted her hand awkwardly before Julia walked away. She found Paige and Laura in the dairy department and walked right past them and into the restroom where she promptly threw up in the closest toilet.

"Ew," she heard Laura's voice echo off the tiled walls when they followed her in. "That's so gross."

"Shut up, Laura." Julia moaned from deep in her gut, her stomach heaving again.

Her daughter gasped. "Momma, that's not a nice word."

Julia drowned her out and pulled her hair away from her face. Her hands trembled and her face broke out in a cold sweat.

"Take deep breaths," Paige instructed from the stall doorway.

"I think I'm going to puke again," Julia whispered and closed her eyes tight.

"Oh." Paige whimpered. "Please don't. Pregnant women are sympathetic vomiters. If we see it, hear it or smell it, we're right there with you."

Julia laughed feebly and wiped her brow with the back of her shaking hand. "I can't believe that just happened."

"Me either. I thought you were going to faint right into the Cocoa Puffs." Paige leaned heavily against the stall door. "And the whole grandma thing was too weird."

"What was that about, anyway?"

"Her oldest daughter. Vanessa?"

"Janessa," Julia corrected automatically, picturing the gorgeous blond on her wedding day. She shoved the memory away because it only invoked more that tore at her heart.

"Janessa is trying to get pregnant with no luck." Paige went to the sink and wet a paper towel.

"So Olivia and Doug have no grandchildren." It was a statement, not a question. Julia looked at Laura who busied herself washing her hands. She was soapy all the way to her elbows and having a blast.

"Technically, no." Paige followed her gaze and handed her the wet towel. "Maybe you should just call Gregory and tell him you can't do it."

"No," Julia said. She pressed the scratchy brown paper against the back of her neck and avoided Paige's gaze. "It's too late. I am already in this too deep."

"I'm sorry Julia. I never should have let you do this." Paige sighed. "I knew the risks and I could only think of myself."

"Don't turn this around on you. I couldn't have turned this case down if I wanted to." Julia's hand dropped to her lap. "This is my job, Paige. You can't always choose your cases."

"I know." Paige sighed again.

"I think this case chose me," Julia admitted. "There's a reason I had to come here. Whether it's to come clean to Cade or finally get over him, I don't know."

Laura's giggles drew their attention. Julia watched her daughter playing.

"I'm afraid, Paige."

"Of what?"

"Of the truth." Julia met her gaze. "What if he really did forget?"

"Don't think about that," Paige said gently. "That doesn't matter."

"But it does matter. It matters so much it hurts." Tears threatened in the back of Julia's throat.

"Don't you see? You got the very best part of him. You had his child. Laura will always be a product of your love for him." Paige smiled, her eyes shining with emotion. "No matter what he says, you'll always have that."

"I can't do it," Julia said. "I can't put her through that and have him reject her like this."

"Then don't." Paige wiped at a tear that escaped down her cheek. "Keep running away, Julia. Never face the truth. Never put yourself out there again for love, for affection. For a 'forever.' "

"God." Julia sniffled indelicately and wiped her face with the crumbling paper towel. "You're so melodramatic."

Paige laughed through her tears. "It's the hormones. I can't help it." Her face softened and she pushed Julia's hair away from her face. "But you know I'm right."

She nodded and a sigh shuddered through her whole body.

"Crazy pregnant woman," she said, wiping her nose. "Those hormones must be contagious."

“If you don’t get off that nasty floor pretty soon you’re going to find out the true meaning of contagious.”

The restroom echoed with their laughter.

Chapter Eighteen

"Janessa, I thought I told Mom to stop buying my groceries."

Cade opened his front door and gave his sister a stern look as she pushed past him with her arms full of paper sacks.

"There are more down in the car," she said, ignoring him.

Rolling his eyes, Cade walked down the driveway, the night air cool through his dress shirt. He had been working in his office for the last hour or so, no longer able to concentrate at the office since Julia's scent lingered there. It was pretty bad if he couldn't even look at his walls without remembering her naked. He was so stupid. So blind. How could he have believed for even a second that she would buy that bullshit about him not remembering? Of course he remembered the most erotic, most fantastic sex of his lifetime. He was a guy, wasn't he? Cade shook his head as he reached for the last three grocery sacks and closed the trunk of Janessa's SUV.

Talk about bullshit, he berated himself. That night in the library had been more than just sex. He was pretty sure he fell in love with her the moment she stepped out of the shadows.

He took the stairs two at a time and closed the door with his foot more roughly than he intended. The sound reverberated through the condo. When he entered the kitchen his sister was folding a paper sack and placing it under the sink.

"I'll just throw those out after you leave." His tone was short, bitter. Janessa slanted him an ugly look and Cade bit the inside of his cheek.

He grabbed a banana to keep himself from saying anything further.

"Show some appreciation, why don't you?" She scolded him just like his mother had. Cade scowled at her.

"Sorry." Reduced to mumbling like a little boy, Cade peeled his banana in silence.

She slammed the cabinet door and started unloading another sack. His sister's motions were jerky and abrupt as Cade watched her practically mutilate a bag of grapes when she slammed them on the counter.

"What's with you?" he asked around his banana.

"I'm tired, I'm emotional, I'm sick to death of doctors and shots and charts."

"So stop." Cade swallowed. "Stop and take a break."

"I can't," Janessa said, stopping to stare at a grape that fell out of the bag and rolled down his marble countertop. "I wish I could. I just can't."

Her voice was soft, broken. She sniffled and abruptly turned away from him.

"Aw hell," Cade tossed what was left of the banana on the counter and stooped. "Don't cry, Nessa. Just—hell—c'mere."

He took her in his arms and hugged her tight. Her slighter form shivered against him and she sniffled harder. "I just want a baby, Cade. How come it has to be so hard?"

"I don't know, kiddo. I don't know." He rubbed his chin against the top of her head. "I wish I could give you an answer that you'd be happy with."

She whimpered into his shirt and he could feel a full-on crying jag building inside her. "Don't cry, Nessa. It can't be good for you to be carrying on like that all the time."

She pulled away from him and narrowed red, tear-soaked eyes at him. "All the time? I do not cry all the time."

In a blink she was angry, back to throwing around grapes and tomatoes again. Cade swiped his hands over his face and drew a deep breath. Christ. He had nothing left in him to deal with his hormone-laden sister.

"Besides," she snapped. "How the hell would you know what I'm doing all the time? It's not like you're around all that much."

"De ja vu." Cade dropped his hands and braced them on his thighs. Better to do that than wrap them around her scrawny neck.

"Nobody likes a smart ass, Cade."

"Do me a favor, huh?" He stood and took her by the arms, propelling her toward the door. "The next time Mom coerces you into coming here, tell her I'm a big boy and can buy my own food."

Janessa snagged her purse off the counter as he pushed her out of the kitchen. "But—"

"Nothing," he finished for her. "Go home and play your Sybil routine for your husband."

"You really are cruel," Janessa said, her eyes filling up again. "What happened to you, Cade? What happened to make you so mean?"

He paused. Had he really become so cruel and heartless that his own family was getting the brunt of it?

"I got my heart broken," he replied, surprising himself with the candid admission. Janessa searched his eyes.

"Really, Cade?"

He closed himself off from her probing gaze. It had to be Julia's sudden reappearance. Nothing in the last five years had opened him up this way since she came back into his life. He felt vulnerable, exposed. He hated every minute of it.

"No," he said, tweaking her nose. "Not really. I just had a bad day."

Cade wiped the tears from his sister's face and kissed the top of her head. She had the same look in her eye that she did the day he burned the hair off her Birthday Surprise Barbie the year she turned nine. Cade exhaled into her hair and tightened his hug.

"I've got so many other things going on right now, I just wasn't thinking."

"I know." She sighed soulfully and rested her head against his shoulder. "With the big case and everything."

"I can't really talk about it," he said, gently pulling himself away from her.

"I know it's a hard one for you." She wiped her cheeks with the back of her hand. "You'll never guess who I saw at the grocery store."

"Who?"

"Julia Campbell," she said as pulled her purse onto her shoulder. Cade felt a swift kick in his gut. He couldn't help wondering if he would ever get away from reminders of Julia.

"Did you say anything to her?" he asked, feigning disinterest. He tugged her jacket closed. Janessa seemed so small and fragile lately. Cade really worried about how many fertility drugs she was taking. He promised to make more of an effort to keep track of what was going on with his older sister.

"Not really, but Mom did. She said Julia looked like crap and that she must be working

as hard as you. Then Julia ran past me on my way out of the bathroom and I thought she was going to either pass out or throw up on me. Is she married or anything?"

"I don't think so. Her name stayed the same. Why?"

"Oh, it's silly, I guess." Janessa shrugged. "I guess I just have babies on the brain or something. It's all I ever think about anymore."

"I doubt she's pregnant," Cade said, though the idea of Julia sleeping with another man made him want to punch something. Hard.

"Mom's going to be waiting for me to call her with a report," Janessa said with a sigh. "I better go."

"Don't tell her I snapped at you," he warned. "She'll wind up on my doorstep within minutes and I just want some time to myself."

"Come for dinner tomorrow night." Her expression turning sly. "Or else."

He growled good-naturedly. "Sisters are such a pain in the ass. Fine, fine." He pushed her toward the door gently. "Go."

She left as quickly as she came and the condo was silent once more. Appetite gone, Cade went into his office to check his email. There was a note from his sister Carly reminding him of their upcoming trip to the University of Florida for a campus tour. After entering it into his palm pilot, Cade shut down his laptop.

A restless energy possessed him and he felt the need to get out for a while. It was too quiet. He found his overcoat, abandoning his suit jacket and tie on the bed and took his jeep down to the lake. On evenings like this, he found the peacefulness of the lake the most calming place to gather his thoughts.

There was no reason to dance around the issue. His meeting with Julia had ended less than pleasantly. He had good intentions when he'd first asked her to come. Cade realized, of course, that his true reason to get her alone had backfired in his face. He'd hoped that the strange, gut-wrenching feeling that coursed through him when he leaned over her in the courthouse was a fluke.

He believed there was no such thing as coincidences. Fluke, be damned. The minute he'd laid eyes on her in his lobby, he'd become excruciatingly aware of every breath she took. Every move of her body and rustle of her clothing. By the time she left, he was so wired he could hardly see straight and it annoyed the hell out of him.

To pine after her several years later was almost embarrassing. What the hell was the matter with him?

Cade pulled into the parking lot and climbed out of the jeep. Except for one other car, his was the only vehicle in the graveled lot. Cade carefully walked down to the small picnic area, his dress shoes slippery on the worn gravel.

As he neared, he realized a woman had scoped out his favorite spot. He passed the area where she sat, her face hidden in the shadows of the large Spanish moss hanging over the table. He felt her gaze on him as he walked by.

"Cade."

That voice. He would likely never forget it, especially the way she said his name.

"You're out a little late, aren't you, Julia?"

"How did you know I was here?"

"I didn't," he said honestly. He halted a few yards from the picnic table where she sat.

"I'm as surprised to see you as I'm sure you are to see me."

Julia did not respond right away so he moved closer so he could see her face. She'd been crying. After brief deliberation, he decided it was best not to notice and move on.

"I guess I'll leave you alone."

"Why?" She asked, interrupting his departure.

He stopped and looked out over the water. "I don't know."

Julia rested her feet on the bench seat, staring at him.

"I come here a lot when I need to clear my head and think. Despite what you might think, it's not usually a two person task for me."

He saw her nod from the corner of his eye. She sniffed and wiped her face with her hands. The old, Georgia Tech sweatshirt she wore was too big for her and the sleeves hung over her fingers.

"Isn't that my sweatshirt?" he asked, surprised to see his Greek letters embroidered on the sleeve.

Julia laughed humorlessly through her tears. "Yep."

"I thought I lost it years ago."

"You did. At my house."

They fell silent, each wrapped up in their own thoughts and memories. There was something oddly stirring about her wearing his old, college sweatshirt. He pushed the feeling away.

"What are you doing out here?" He tucked his hands inside his coat pockets.

Julia shrugged. "I couldn't relax. I needed to get out for a while."

Cade turned his gaze back onto the water. "Same here."

The crying bothered him. He half hoped it had nothing to do with the things he'd said to her earlier that morning. Cade didn't even want to consider the other half, the one that wanted her to cry over him. It would only bring into light how much of a bastard he truly was.

Julia smoothed her hair back and wiped her face again. "I need to go." She climbed off the table, tugged the sleeves of the sweatshirt and whipped it over her head.

"You don't have to do that," he said as Julia held it out to him. "Keep it."

"Fine." Julia let loose a shuddery sigh as she draped the garment over her arm. "Thanks."

Julia hesitated before she moved away, heading toward the path that would take her back to her car. "I'll see you around, Counselor."

"Don't go."

The sound of his voice seemed to paralyze her. Only an arm's length away, Cade could see her more clearly and he realized she had probably been sitting there for a while, crying her heart out. He bit back a sigh.

"I'll go."

She shook her head, refusing to meet his eyes. "No. I've sat here pitying myself long enough. You stay."

"I'm sorry," he said gently. "For whatever it's worth. I'm sorry."

Julia met his gaze for the first time that night. "Why are you doing this to me?"

"I don't know," he said. "I just knew I had to say it."

"I won't let you hurt me anymore, Cade." Her green eyes searched his.

"I never wanted to hurt you, Julia."

She shrugged, a careless gesture that pissed him off. He turned away from her.

"I forgot," he snapped. "You're the one who knows everything and sees everything so clearly. Don't let me keep you from your pity-party."

"You're such an ass," Julia snarled. "You've never changed as long as I've known you, do you know that?"

It was his turn to shrug.

"How sad you are, Cade. How pathetic to still be a boy trapped in a man's body. Tell me. Are you still sticking your dick in everything that moves?"

Anger burned his cheeks and the back of his throat. He clenched his hands inside his pockets and turned so fast the bottom of his coat flared around his legs. "Since you're so hell bent on getting things off your chest I think I'll take a turn. Do you want to know what really happened between me and Elisabeth Westly?"

"I already know what happened." Julia's voice trembled and he thought she might be crying again. It was hard to tell since she moved away from him, back into the shadows.

"Did you know that Elisabeth sexually harassed me for three months?" Cade asked then closed his eyes. Divulging the long-kept secret out loud left him shaken for a moment. "My entire internship as Kelly, Bright & Hale was spent hiding from that sadistic bitch who held my career in the palm of her hand."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Julia asked. There was condescension in her tone and disbelief. "How can *you* have been sexually harassed and nobody know about it?"

Cade exhaled long and slow, trying to sort his feelings from the facts before he continued. It was difficult to admit the fear. The helplessness he experienced whenever Elisabeth cornered him in his office. When she threatened to squelch the budding promise of his career before he even got a chance to show his father he could succeed at something.

"I thought I could handle it on my own. I told myself if I could just get through the summer, I'd get the associate's job and no one would have to know what happened. But it just got worse. Then that day." He looked at the shadows in the trees and sighed wearily. "God. That horrible day when you walked in and everything fell apart."

"But I saw you," Julia whispered as she moved closer. She came out of the dark, her face illuminated by the security lights and half-moon. "I saw you with her, leaning against your desk. It looked like—"

She cut herself off. Cade met her gaze and let her see what he tried to hide from everyone so long ago. She shook her head, the motion jerky and incomplete.

"Why?" she asked, her face crumpling. "Why didn't you tell me the truth before it was too late?"

"You didn't want to hear it then, Julia." Cade turned to face her fully. "I don't even know why I told you now."

Silence greeted him as she stared sightlessly over his shoulder. Many emotions danced across her expressive face, none of them completely discernible but each seemed to draw her deeper inside her own thoughts.

"Are you ready to hear it now?" Cade asked. He pulled his hands from his pockets. "Do you want to know how hard it was to let you believe the worst because if I told the truth,

she would ruin me?"

Tears leaked from under her lashes and slid down her cheeks. "It's too late," she said again. Cade made a move to stand beside her.

"No." She held up her hand and backed away. "I have to go. I have to go right now."

"Julia." He reached out for her but she sidestepped him. "Wait."

"You made your choices," she said as she backed away. "Now I have to make mine."

Cade obeyed her silent command not to follow and watched her leave him yet again. It was a gesture she did so frequently that he was really beginning to hate it. Especially since he'd obviously never gotten over it the first time.

Chapter Nineteen

"Julia?"

Paige's whisper filtered through the darkness of Julia and Laura's room. Julia tried to sound as normal as possible when she answered.

"Yeah?"

"Are you in here crying?"

"No."

"Liar."

"I'm not."

"Mike and I can hear you through the wall."

Julia sighed. "I'll be right out."

Paige waited in the hall while Julia pulled herself together and joined her. They went into the kitchen where Paige started making tea and Julia blew her nose with a paper napkin.

The worried glance Paige gave her made Julia feel worse.

"You know," Paige said slowly. "If you're cold we can turn up the heat."

"I'm not."

"Okay."

Julia wrapped Cade's sweatshirt around her body and buried her nose deep into the neckline. It smelled like the outdoors and it made her heart ache. God she ached all over. What was happening to her?

Paige placed a cup and saucer in front of Julia and filled it with hot water. Julia, who didn't even drink tea, watched with little interest.

Finally, Paige sat down in front of her and clasped her fingers on the table.

"Okay. I give up. What's with the sweatshirt?"

"It's Cade's."

"Really?" Paige raised a brow. "Interesting. How did you get it?"

"I've had it for years. I just never wore it that often."

"Then why are you wearing it now?"

Julia shrugged, unable to meet her friend's gaze. "I saw him tonight."

"Now we're getting somewhere," Paige muttered. "Where?"

"The lake. I went up there to clear my head. Instead I had a nice, long crying jag."

"Oh honey." Paige reached for her hands but Julia had them tucked deep inside the oversized sleeves. "Why were you crying?"

"I don't know. I was thinking about Mom and Dad. About Laura and Cade and how lonely I am in Atlanta. I don't know," she said again. "I was just overwhelmed. Then Cade showed up and it got worse."

"Did y'all fight?"

"Yes," Julia said, nodding. Then she shook her head. "No. Hell, I don't know. Yeah, I guess we did."

"What did you fight about?"

"Usual stuff." Julia met Paige's eyes. "Present and past tense."

"Elisabeth?" Paige raised a brow. "You actually brought up Elisabeth?"

"I didn't have to." Julia picked up her spoon and dipped it into her tea. Tears threatened again and she refused to cry anymore. "I made a huge mistake."

"What did he say?" Paige spooned some sugar into her own tea.

"It's hard to explain."

"Try," Paige urged.

Julia took a deep breath and felt her chest expand. The pressure did not recede, even after she told Paige the whole, terrible truth. What was she going to do? Everything she believed, everything righteous thought and feeling she'd held onto for the last five years had crumbled to dust in less than twenty-four hours and she didn't know right from wrong anymore. Paige clasped her hand under the table.

"Do you love him still, Julia?"

"I don't know," she answered honestly. "I'm afraid to put a voice to what I feel inside."

Paige propped her elbows on the table and cradled her chin in her hand. "What about all that forgetting business he told you yesterday?"

"He said he lied. That he remembered everything."

"Yeah," Paige persisted. "But why did he lie?"

"I don't know, Paige." Frustrated, Julia met her steadfast gaze. "Maybe because he's afraid, too. Nobody wants to be the first to admit weakness."

"Do you think that fear is a weakness?"

"What are you, Dr. Ruth? Back off, okay?"

"Fine," she said abruptly, pulling away from Julia. "Drink your tea."

"I hate tea." Julia pushed the cup away.

"Then why did you let me make it?"

"I thought you liked to make tea." Julia shrugged and Paige rolled her eyes. Silence filled the room and Julia started to sweat inside the sweatshirt but she was loathe to take it off.

"Look, Jules." Paige leaned forward again and grabbed Julia's hand. "My point is that you're both human and it's okay to be afraid of what you don't know. If this is what you really want, you need to grab it with both hands."

Paige tightened her grip on Julia's hand. "Let go of the past. Cade is Laura's father. You have loved him for almost fifteen years. Nearly half your life, girl. That kind of staying power has to mean something."

"It means I'm pathetic," Julia said with a moan. "That I have an unnatural obsession with a man who hates me, who will never be able to forgive me for lying to him and who I have hurt immeasurably by being stupid, thoughtless and impulsive."

"Stop that," Paige snapped, dropping Julia's hand. "All I know is that I've seen you wallow in misery and loneliness for the last five years, unable to get on with your life. I would rather see you toss that huge block you carry around on your shoulder than live a lifetime of regret that you let this opportunity pass you by."

Julia was scared to death to go to Cade and admit to him that after all these years she was *wrong*. The very thought made her stomach churn uncontrollably. She swallowed hard. Throwing up once in one day was plenty for her, thanks very much.

"When did you get so smart?" Julia asked, lifting her head to look at Paige.

"Marriage, honey." Paige shrugged. "One minute you're giggling and batting your

eyelashes like a silly girl at every man you meet and the next you're dispensing profound love advice to all your unmarried girlfriends."

"How sad for you," Julia said with mock sympathy. Knowing Paige's inherent nosiness, it was probably her dream come true.

"Someone has to do it," she said, breaking into laughter.

"I'm glad it was you." Julia stood and pulled Paige into a hug. She felt the baby roll against her midsection.

"Good grief," she muttered. "That kid packs a whallop."

"No kidding." Paige was breathless for a minute, her hand laid across her belly protectively. "Go to bed. You've got a long day tomorrow. I'll be okay."

Julia did as she was told, climbing back into bed with Laura though she stayed awake for another hour anticipating the day to come.

By seven o'clock the next evening, Julia was exhausted. She dragged herself into Paige and Mike's house, her arms and legs like lead and her heart battered. She'd finished the last interview and she now had all the information she would ever need on the four teenagers who died in the accident.

Julia chose to do Samantha's absolutely last. It was the hardest, by far, and she did not want to use it as the precedent for the other three. She felt it would somehow unfairly minimize them in importance. Mike's mother forced them to sit in Samantha's room, which made Julia feel like a trespasser.

Teenage girls' rooms were a private haven, their only personal space in the world. Sam's whole life was chronicled on the walls of her bedroom. Tubes of lip-gloss and glitter littered the dresser top. Pom-poms lay in the middle of the floor next to a duffel bag with Samantha's name embroidered in the school colors across the top. Trophies and ribbons earned by her cheer squad covered an entire wall.

A room forever frozen in time.

After a subdued dinner, Julia closed herself in Paige's guest bedroom. Laura played on the floor with her Barbie travel case while Julia made her nightly phone call to Gregory.

"You sound like hell," he said without preamble.

"Thanks," she said, laughing low. "I feel like it too."

"That tough, huh?"

"You have no idea." Julia sighed and leaned back against the headboard. She drew up her knees and rested the legal pad across them with her notes. "I've conducted thousands of these interviews but somehow, this time seems different."

"How so?" Papers rustled in the background on Gregory's side. Julia looked at the ceiling.

"I've been where they are and being home makes it all come back."

"How do you mean?" Gregory's chair creaked and the papers stilled. He was listening intently. Julia realized in all the time they worked together, this was probably the most personal information she ever shared with him.

"My parents were killed in a drunk driving accident six years ago, right here in town."

The line fell silent. Julia frowned. "Hello?"

"I'm here," Gregory replied. She could tell from his voice that he was thinking. "I wish

you told me this sooner."

"Why? It's no different than trying DUI cases in Atlanta. I'm fine with this and it's certainly not a conflict of interest for me. No judge would consider it so."

"Think about what we've learned about the congressman so far, Julia. He's obviously got his hands in some pretty deep pockets. Considering the lengths he's gone to keep his wife's drinking habits under wraps, do you honestly think he won't try to get to you?"

Julia thought about the conversation she and Cade had two days earlier. "He already has."

"What? When?"

"When I met with Cade a few days ago, he hinted at a monetary settlement for the families if I could make him a deal."

"And?"

"No deal, of course. I told him we didn't accept bribes."

"Good girl," Gregory said. The papers resumed their rustling. "We're going to have to keep on our toes, Julia. These guys don't play around. You've turned them down so they'll start looking for your weak spots. This thing with your parents could be used against you. Do you mind if it becomes public?"

"Most everyone here already knows about it, Gregory. It's no real secret."

"We'll watch it and see what happens. Anything interesting to report from the interviews?"

Julia filled him in on the key points and went over her agenda for the next day. It looked like they would only have to spend another three days in Hardin. She did not know whether to be disappointed or relieved by that. Laura climbed onto the bed and laid her head in Julia's lap.

"One more thing," Gregory said before he hung up. "I procured an invitation for you to Friday night's formal dinner at the Mayor's house."

"What?" Julia's hand froze over Laura's glossy black curls. "Why on earth would you do that?"

"There's going to be some press coverage and frankly, you need some good media after last week. Get gorgeous and spend fifteen minutes schmoozing with the locals in front of the cameras then you can leave."

"That's day after tomorrow, Gregory. Don't you think you could have given me a little more notice?"

"Hey," he said with a chuckle. "Just be glad I gave you an extra day to shop for a dress."

"You obviously never shopped for a formal gown."

"You're a girl. Aren't you supposed to like that stuff?"

"Ha. Ha," she grumbled.

"Talk to you tomorrow."

"Good night."

Julia tossed the cordless phone on the comforter and sighed. Just what she wanted to do. Shop.

Great.

"Were you talking about my grandma and granpa?"

Laura's tiny voice surprised her. Julia thought she'd fallen asleep. With a melancholy smile, she brushed Laura's hair back from her forehead.

"Yeah baby. I sure was."

"What was my grandma like?" she asked. "Did she look really old like the grandma in the grocery store?"

"Olivia doesn't look that old," Julia said with a nervous chuckle.

"She has the same name as me." Laura lifted her head and looked at Julia curiously. "My name is Laura Olivia Campbell."

"That's right." Julia hid her surprise. Damn, Laura was getting far too smart.

Laura's head dropped back in her lap.

"Why doesn't my daddy live with us?"

The hand stroking Laura's hair shook. Julia was definitely not in the right frame of mind for a conversation about Laura's father. "I told you that already."

"Tell me again," she said sleepily.

"Your daddy lives far away from our house in Atlanta," she said, sticking to the same story she told Laura since the day she was born. "When you were a baby, he gave you to me to keep for my very own."

"Was I still inside your tummy, like Aunt Paige's baby?"

Julia nodded then cleared her throat. Tears built back there but she would not shed them in front of Laura. The less significance she put on the subject, the better. "Yep," she said. "You were as little as a peanut."

Laura giggled and yawned.

"Did he ever see me?"

Julia looked down at Laura's sleepy profile. Usually, her questions stopped after the peanut comment. They were treading on dangerous ground. She shifted uncomfortably.

"Why do you want to know?"

Her little shoulders shrugged against Julia's leg.

"How could he knowed he still wanted to let you keep me if he didn't ever see me? Sometimes I let Kayla Abbott keep my Sabrina doll but after I see her again, I want her back. Kayla gets really mad."

"That's not very nice," Julia scolded her daughter.

"But what if my daddy sees me again and says he wants to keep me too? Will you get mad?"

"I don't know," Julia answered honestly. The idea frightened her.

"Maybe my daddy could live with us like other mommies and daddies. We could be a fam-blee."

"Family," Julia corrected faintly.

"Fam-blee," Laura repeated, her voice fading into sleep.

Chapter Twenty

The ringing phone greeted Cade as he walked into his office Thursday morning.

"You're late," his secretary, Shelby, said as she hustled in behind him and laid a stack of files on the credenza beside his desk.

"Good grief," she muttered. "Have you slept?"

He yawned and scratched his head. "No."

Concern furrowed her brow. She was nearly twice his age and treated him like one of her own children. Shelby harassed him about everything from his late hours to the women he dated. Cade inwardly groaned. He was not in the mood for one of her nagging tirades.

"I don't have time —"

"You got that right," she interrupted. "Congressman Turner and his wife are waiting in the small conference room downstairs."

Cade snapped his wrist and looked at his watch. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I did."

"When?"

"I said 'you're late.'"

"Christ, Shelby." Cade snatched the file she held out for him. "Can't you be more specific than that?"

"Like what?"

"Never mind," he muttered.

Outside the small conference room, Cade took a minute to catch his breath. He practically ran down the stairs, grumbling to himself about Shelby's sassy attitude the whole way.

"I'm sorry to keep you waiting." Cade greeted the Turners with an apology.

Congressman Turner stood at the window, his arms clasped behind him. Blythe Turner glared at her husband's back, ignoring Cade. Obviously he had walked in on an argument between the couple.

"I'm sorry," he said again as he sat down. "We'll get started right away. Is that okay, Mrs. Turner?"

"Whatever."

The congressman's wife was a thin, angry looking woman who wore her black hair pulled tightly off her face. Her features were pinched and gaunt. Blood red lipstick slashed across pencil thin lips. Her pale skin was a stark contrast to her unadorned, sleeveless black dress.

"Would you like anything before we start, congressman?"

"He's a big boy," she muttered. "If he needs something, he knows how to find it. Let's get this over with."

"All right." Cade lifted his pen. "Let's start with the day of the accident. I need to know everything you did and everywhere you went."

"What for?" Blythe pulled out a cigarette. She tapped it against the side of a small, black purse and put it to her mouth.

"To establish a pattern of behavior." Cade stared at the cigarette dancing between her lips. "I'm sorry, I don't allow smoking in the building."

The lighter flame licked high over the tip of the cigarette and she inhaled.

"So sue me," she said.

"Blythe." Congressman Turner warned from the window. She turned at the waist and glared at him.

"What Denton?" she snapped. "What?"

He remained silent, refusing to acknowledge her belligerent behavior.

"Nothing to say?" she asked. "Or is your little bitch, Micah, not here to speak for you?"

The tension in the room jumped another notch. The quarreling couple glared at each other.

"Perhaps we should do this another time," Cade said.

Blythe Turner broke eye contact with her husband and sucked on her cigarette. Her lipstick left a red ring around the filter.

"Cade, is it?" She exhaled through pursed lips and blew smoke over her shoulder.

"Yes."

A cloud of expensive perfume and stale cigarette smoke engulfed him when she leaned forward. Her eyes narrowed and a slow, dangerous smile crept across her crimson lips.

"You're new to how this works, aren't you, Cade?" Her ashes floated to the floor with the flick of her thumb and she puffed again on the noxious butt. "Let's quit wasting everyone's time and get down to business, okay?"

Cade learned the hard way to hold his ground with aggressive women like Blythe Turner. He snatched the cigarette from between her fingers and dropped it in her full water glass. She sat back, her gaze insolent as she exhaled her final drag of smoke.

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean," he replied mildly.

"Money, sweetheart," she said, as if Cade were too slow to understand. "How much is it going to take?"

He understood just fine. Whatever it took, she expected her husband to pay. Cade almost felt sorry for him.

Almost.

"Didn't you explain the situation to her, sir?"

Turner looked at his feet. "I haven't had the chance."

"He left that up to you, tiger." Her body language was surly yet Cade heard the uncertainty in the tremor of her voice.

"Your husband's money can't save you this time, Mrs. Turner."

She laughed, the sound brittle and harsh. "Of course it can. He's a God damned United States congressman. Denton Turner can do anything he damn well wants."

Scorn riddled her words. Cade shook his head, watching the play of emotions cross her face as comprehension dawned. Damn the congressman for leaving him to do the dirty work.

Her cry of fury shattered the silence. Blythe lunged across the table at her husband, knocking her chair to the floor.

"You selfish sonuvabitch," she screamed, slapping him across the face. "Throwing your own wife to the dogs to save yourself."

Cade grabbed the back of her dress and yanked Blythe off the congressman. She kicked

and screamed, landing a hefty blow to his eye with her bony elbow.

"Ah, God." Cade's vision blurred and white lights danced in front of his eyes. He dropped her and ground his palm into his socket.

The door burst open and Shelby stumbled into the room with Micah Sampson hot on her heels.

"What the hell is going on in here?" Shelby demanded.

"Grab her," Cade yelled. Micah lunged for Mrs. Turner before she could throw her water glass at the congressman's head. The water, cigarette butt and all, hit Cade in the face.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Blythe demanded. She clawed at Micah's arms around her waist. "Take your hands off me."

"Not until you calm down." He grunted as her foot connected with his shin. Micah jerked his arms tighter around her. "Stop it. Get control of yourself."

Panting, Blythe stilled in Micah's grasp. "Okay," she said, finally defeated. "I'm fine now. You can let go."

Micah released her and the three men watched warily as she collected herself. She smoothed shaking fingers over her tattered hair, and with lipstick smeared across her lips, she tilted her chin and looked every bit the regal queen's jester.

"I want to go home," she said. "Right now."

"The car is outside," Micah told her. His chest still heaved with exertion. "The driver will take you home."

He bent to retrieve her purse from the floor where it fell during her rant.

"This is not over." She snatched her purse from his hand. "We will discuss this again when you're little shadow isn't here to save you."

Congressman Turner glared at his wife and Micah's jaw clenched but both men remained curiously silent.

"See you at home, darling," she cooed nastily and glided out of the room.

Cade flexed his jaw and tenderly fingered his sore eye. "Shall we, gentleman?"

He gestured to the door and the other men followed him to his office. Cade unknotted his ruined tie and tossed it into the trashcan beside his desk. Seconds later Shelby appeared with a small hand towel.

"To dry off with," she explained. She cast distrustful glare upon the others as she left.

Micah pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and handed it to the congressman.

"You're bleeding, sir."

Turner took it and pressed it to the cut under his eye. "She scratched the hell out of me when she hit me."

"Your wife packs quit a punch," Cade muttered. He dropped wearily into his chair. "We need to talk."

"I agree." Micah smoothed the front of his jacket as he sat across from Cade's desk. It irritated him that the aide looked unruffled by the chaos.

"What are you doing here, Micah?" he asked. Blythe called him Turner's shadow. The fitting nickname was not lost on Cade. Micah seemed to be everywhere. "Did we have an appointment?"

"I was supposed to meet the congressman here after your meeting. I was waiting on information about the matter we discussed a few days ago."

"Refresh my memory," Cade said, puzzled. He scrubbed the towel across his face and hair where most of the water had hit him.

"We uncovered some very interesting information about Ms. Campbell that I hope will prove useful."

"You had Julia investigated?" He dropped the towel in his lap, torn between shock and annoyance. "I thought we decided that was unnecessary."

"I ran a standard background check," Micah replied. "I do that anytime someone poses a threat to the administration."

"The Assistant District Attorney, as an individual, is not a threat to anyone, least of all Congressman Turner's career."

Micah's frowned. "I thought you would be on board with us, Cade. It was my understanding there was tension between you and Ms. Campbell."

"What gave you that impression?" Even as he asked, Cade knew the answer.

"You exchanged words on national television. I naturally assumed you disliked her on a personal level."

"Hell," he replied. Cade fiddled with his sore eye and tried to think.

He was not prepared to discuss his private life, nor was he required to. However, he knew denying the incident would only open him to probing questions about his involvement with Julia. Considering his confusion on that score, he didn't trust himself to explain it in terms the congressman and his aide would understand.

With a beleaguered sigh, Cade dropped his hand and looked at his watch. Nine o'clock in the morning and he already had a hell of a day under his belt. What he wouldn't give for a do-over. Resigned to the inevitable, he gave his attention to Micah.

"What have you got?" he asked.

"Surprisingly little actually. Ms. Campbell is a very private person. Most of our information we received by word of mouth." Micah removed a sheet of paper folded lengthwise from his breast pocket and read from it.

"We found out through public record that she was born here in Hardin, as I'm sure you already know. You both attended the same high school and college and interned at the same firm."

"Did you run the check on her or me?" Cade asked irritably.

"Just her," Micah answered, quirked a brow. "Though I couldn't help notice the connection."

"Nothing is jumping out at me yet."

"As I said, we had to ask around to find out anything personal. Do you remember the accident that killed Robert and Laura Campbell?"

"I didn't live here when it happened but I heard about it." Unease worked its way across his shoulders. Tension built in his gut and he wished he didn't have to ask. "What about it?"

Micah's posture changed from cool detachment to deliberate consideration. "That was alcohol related, wasn't it?"

"I don't remember."

"Try."

"Spell it out," Cade snapped. "What are you trying to say?"

"We are low on options here." Congressman Turner finally spoke up, his tone placating. "We tried to buy our way into the D.A.'s good graces but Gregory Stanton has a bug up his ass. I need time for damage control. This is the only way."

"In other words," Micah finished for him, "we have to clean house. Get rid of the trash before it starts to stink up the place."

Given the nature of his practice, Cade habitually used every stall tactic and legal loophole available to help his clients out of similar situations. On the other hand, dragging out this particular case in order to spare the congressman pain and embarrassment at the hands of his crazy wife was not high on his priority list. Especially when it required using Julia in such an unforgivable way.

Cade shook his head. "The judge will just bring in a special prosecutor or someone else from the D.A.'s office and we'll be back in the courtroom in a matter of days. That's not enough time."

"Think bigger than that, Cade." Micah lowered his chin, his eyes shining with intent. "Wouldn't it be a shame to see Mrs. Turner suffer at the hands of a prosecutor with a score to settle? What do they do to people in public office who abuse their power for personal interest?"

"Fire them, I think," Turner said. He squinted with a far off, pensive expression. "Or would it be disbarred, since she's a lawyer?"

For a horrible instant, Cade thought he would be sick all over his desk. "No."

"We can't just take her off the case." Micah leaned forward in his chair. His voice lowered. "We have to take her down."

"No." Cade surged to his feet with such force his chair rolled into the window behind him. "I won't do it."

"I was willing to let my wife pay the consequences but you wouldn't do that either." Congressman Turner huffed in his chair. Cade's mind reeled.

"Your wife would go away for life," he shouted. "I would throw away my career if I allowed that."

He raked his fingers through his hair and dropped his voice to a deceptively calm level. "I've built my practice on my success in the courtroom. I have yet to lose a client to the life and I refuse to start now. Not for this."

"Then you've already decided." Micah pointed out. "We can't have the press sniffing around us while we clean up this mess, Cade. There has to be something more newsworthy to take their attention away from the congressman, even for a short time."

"So you're going to ruin a perfectly innocent person?" Cade's heart constricted. He envisioned Julia's tear-streaked face turned up in the moonlight, begging him not to hurt her anymore. How could he go through with it and live with himself?

"Sacrifices must be made," Micah said. His indifference sickened Cade. The congressman's aide tucked his cheat sheet on Julia into his pocket as he stood. "Ready to go, sir?"

It suddenly became clear. The deferential treatment was all an act. Micah Sampson was the mastermind behind Denton Turner's corrupt administration and Cade suspected the aide would have let the congressman take the fall for it all had he just been able to pull out fast enough.

Congressman Turner gave Cade a gruff once over. "You look like death warmed over, son."

"Can't sleep," Cade muttered, lost in thought.

Micah straightened his tie in the mirror over the credenza. "Take the day to think about it. Go home. Clear your head." He lifted his chin and assessed his handiwork. Cade met his cold eyes in the reflection and knew this was a man he should not cross. Micah winked.

"You wouldn't want to make the wrong decision."

Chapter Twenty-One

Julia was exhausted by the time she and Paige hauled a day's worth of shopping bags through the front door. Too tired to go on, Paige dropped hers in the middle the floor and sagged against the wall.

"I can't wait to take a hot bath and relax." She moaned. "My back is killing me."

"I'm sorry I dragged you along," Julia said. "I had no idea it would be so hard to find a dress. I should have gone by myself."

Frantic about the event she had to attend on Friday, Julia had pried invaluable information out of Paige about the Mayor's March Madness Formal. When Mayor John Wilcox had been elected four years ago, he'd revived the spring formal cotillion that had been popular back in the fifties and sixties. It was the closest thing to a high society event in Hardin and every businessman in town rated his importance on how he received his invitation. Personal phone calls or hand written notes from the mayor were coveted while those who bought their way through the door prayed no one ever found out.

Paige assured her that Cade would be in attendance, which meant Julia had a chance to soften him up before she broke the news that he was a father. They hunted for hours, hitting every shop in town until they found *The Dress*, capital letters and everything. Red. Slinky. Sexy. Underwear was not an option.

It was perfect.

"I'll be all right." Paige pushed her ungainly body away from the wall. "I just need to lay down for—"

"Go, Uncle Mike, go!" Laura's shriek drowned her out. Alarmed, Julia dropped her purse and ran into the living room where she found Laura and Mike in front of the television playing a video game.

"You scared me to death," Julia said, clutching her chest beneath her jacket.

"I'm playing video games." Laura clapped her hands and jumped up and down.

"It looks more like Uncle Mike is playing," Paige pointed out as she came into the room. A guilty flush spread across his cheeks and he grinned sheepishly. "I was showing her how."

"Uh huh." Paige rolled her eyes at her husband. "Did she get a turn?"

"I got to hold the mc-troller while he went potty." Laura giggled, thoroughly pleased with that arrangement.

"Controller," Julia corrected, laughing.

The doorbell pealed. Paige emitted a miserable whimper.

"Go lay down," Julia told her. "I'll get it."

She smiled as she went to the door, glad to see the discussion she and Laura shared the night before about her father had not left a negative effect. Once she got back to Atlanta, Julia resolved to tell Laura the whole truth about Cade. There were far too many unknown factors at the moment to go into details with her four-year-old.

Julia was unsure if she truly loved Cade or if her feelings carried over from years of fantasy. Paige had a point. She'd loved Cade almost half her life. Perhaps she put him on a

pedestal and would only be disappointed when she got close enough to see him fall off. Laura would be devastated. Better to wait, Julia thought as she opened the front door, than to scar them both for life where men were concerned.

"Cade." Panic and fear congealed in her throat and made it difficult to breathe. "What are you doing here?"

Wildly disheveled and fidgeting restlessly on Paige's front porch, Cade stared at Julia with an intensity that sent her heart thundering to her feet and back up again.

"Your office told me you were here. We need to talk."

Julia closed the door behind her and joined him on the porch, closing off the gleeful squeals from inside. In the natural light, she got a better glimpse of his handsome face and gasped.

"Oh my God. What happened to you?"

A black and blue bruise slashed across Cade's cheekbone, just below his eye. She noticed the wrinkled state of his suit and – good grief. His hair looked as though he'd driven mach three with the top down in his jeep.

Julia reached out to touch him but he pulled back, out of her reach. Mortified by the impulse and stung by the subsequent rejection, she dropped her hand and tried to appear cool and unaffected.

"Did you get into a fight or something?"

"Or something," he answered evasively. Julia glanced anxiously at the door. The last thing she wanted to do was drag every word out of him. Any minute Laura could lose interest in Mike's video games and start looking for her.

"What's going on, Cade?" she asked. He opened his mouth once or twice but nothing came out. Finally, Julia threw up her hands. "I thought you wanted to talk."

"I have to ask you a question," he finally said. "It's not easy and you'll probably hate me for it."

"Then why ask?" Uneasiness weakened her knees and turned her stomach upside down. Julia sank down on the stairs and looked up at him. *It's Laura*, she thought. *He's found out about Laura*.

"I don't want to," he said, unable to meet her eyes. "But I have to know."

The changes in him over the years were starkly obvious these past few weeks but now, his cool detachment had fled him. Gone was the disinterested, hard to impress man whose dynamic self-importance was a force to be reckoned with. In his place was a glimpse of the old Cade, the one she knew and loved from so long ago, standing in front of her struggling for words. Julia's chest constricted and she swallowed hard. Oh yeah, she most definitely still loved this man.

"In that case, it'll be easier if you do it fast." Julia clasped her hands together between her knees. The colossal effort to appear composed made her muscles ache. It had to be about Laura. What else would make him look as if his very soul depended on her answer?

"Would you seek the maximum penalty for Blythe Turner because of what happened to your parents?"

Alternately relieved and shocked, Julia was rendered speechless. She was so sure he would ask about his daughter it did not occur to her to be offended by the question. She answered honestly.

"Absolutely not."

He dropped onto the step below her.

"I knew it." Cade closed his eyes. "I knew it," he said again and sighed heavily.

Julia lifted her hand and it hovered over his bent head. His soft, golden curls beckoned her comforting touch but she would not give him another opportunity to refuse her. Julia let her hand fall back in her lap.

"If you knew, then why did you ask?"

"What I'm about to tell you could ruin me, Julia." He met her eyes and even though not an inch of their bodies touched, Julia felt as if he'd caressed her down to her toes with a single look.

It poured out of him like a purging of his soul. He told her everything from the bribery ring, which was not surprising since she and Gregory already had their suspicions, to the disgust he felt for his client, Blythe Turner. When he finished, she didn't know whether to scream or cry.

"You broke your client's confidentiality," she said after a long pause. The implications were astounding. From her standpoint, his practice was the least of his worries. He stood to lose everything. Just like her.

He nodded. "I could be disbarred."

All of her dreams, her hard work and the long hours taken away from her daughter would go down the drain because of one, selfish, spineless man's ambition. She might cry after all. Still unable to touch him, she simply held his gaze.

"Why did you tell me?"

He hesitated.

"There's more, isn't there?"

"It's not directly related but there is a reason I had to tell you."

She sighed raggedly. She was not sure she could handle any more earth-shattering revelations.

"I've been doing a lot of thinking since you came back, Julia." He paused to watch a couple of kids ride by on bicycles. "There's still something here, isn't there? Between you and me?"

Cade glanced over his shoulder. "Am I wrong?"

"No," she whispered. Terrified she might hyperventilate if she kept talking, Julia inhaled slowly and tried to slow down her heart.

"I want to explore this. I have to know if my regret is the only reason I can't stop thinking about you," he said and his gaze dropped to her mouth. "Or if it's something more."

She licked her lips. "There's a lot of bad things between us, Cade."

He propped his elbows on his knees and was quiet for a few moments while he seemed to sort out his thoughts. Julia studied the back of his head to the soft, blond curls that wrapped around her fingers when she used to clutch his head to her shoulder while he made love to her. She dragged in a deep, shuddering breath.

"I chose my career over you before," he finally said. "I haven't been happy in years and I can't help thinking—"

"Stop," she said breathlessly. She scooted down the steps and sat beside him. He turned his head and looked at her. "Stop before you say things that you'll regret later."

"No." He stroked a finger down her cheek, taking tears she didn't even realize she'd shed with it. "I can't stop myself any more. I want to touch you, to feel you close to me. I have to know."

Cade kissed away her tears and stroked her hair away from her face. His hands cupped her cheeks and she craved his lips on hers so desperately she thought she'd die. Just this one last time, she begged.

"Please," she said aloud.

"Momma? Are you okay?"

Julia jerked out of Cade's hands so hard she wracked her skull against the iron rail behind her.

"Jesus," he cursed. He shot to his feet and took two steps backward, away from the porch. Startled, both he and Julia turned together to look at Laura at the top of the stairs.

"Was that man hurting you, Momma?"

His head snapped so fast in her direction, Julia swore she heard his neck pop.

"No baby, I'm fine."

"Yours?" Accusation and distrust wavered his voice. The longing she saw in his eyes seconds before had vanished.

"Yes." There was no point denying it. He stared hard at Laura who stared back, her blue eyes, so like her fathers, were huge and watchful.

"Mine."

Julia nodded slowly, watching the play of emotions on his face go from pain and disbelief to revulsion.

"Ours." A single word said with such bitterness and anger that Julia flinched.

Laura leaned over and whispered loudly in Julia's ear. "Who is he?"

Grief flashed in Cade's eyes and Julia felt it all the way through her body. She could do nothing about the way he found out about his daughter but she could prevent the experience from being as traumatic for Laura.

"Come on, honey." She stood on trembling legs and pulled her daughter toward the door. Laura protested.

"But—"

"Now." She spoke firmly. Laura must have sensed the edge of panic in her voice because she immediately obeyed, though she kept her eyes on her father until the very last second.

Julia closed her eyes and kept her back to Cade while she braced herself to face the fury.

"You lied."

Cade willed her to turn around and look him in the eye. Amazingly, she answered the unspoken dare.

"I never lied," she said boldly.

"You're lying now," he shouted. Cade opened and closed his fists at his side. It was the closest he ever felt to committing physical violence toward another human being. He feared his tempter if Julia got within arm's reach. The way his blood boiled, he could seriously hurt her.

"I swear to you—"

"Save it," Cade sneered. "It's too late for that.

"But I—"

"Did you know when you left?"

The question halted further appeals. Julia dropped her gaze.

"Yes," she said so softly he had to strain to hear, though he already knew her answer.

"I knew."

"Why?" he asked. Rigid self-control kept him on the ground. Cade wanted to grab her, shake her, hurt her as badly as he hurt inside. God, the pain went so deep he could hardly think straight.

He been so close to admitting he still had feelings for her. Hell, he'd kissed her. Cade felt like the stupidest son of a bitch on the face of the planet.

"You never told me about your problems with Elisabeth," she pleaded, inching forward. "If you saw what I did, you would have thought I betrayed you."

"No." He shook his head. "I trusted you. I would have believed anything you said." The truth led him to another, more unbearable thought. An anguished sound came from the back of his throat. "You took her from me and hid, Julia."

"I didn't." Julia cried her denial. "I didn't hide. I just never came back."

"Did you think I wouldn't want her?" Fresh waves of hurt and disgust crashed inside him. "Did you ever feel anything for me at all, Julia?"

"Of course I did. I loved you." She was crying now but this time her tears had a different effect on him.

"You knew how important family is to me. You have always known that and yet you still ran away with my child—my *child*, Julia—and never told me about her."

"I was going to! I swear—"

"You're no better than a kidnapper." The accusation was harsh, said with such malice that Julia froze in horror.

"You're crazy." She gasped and took a step back.

"You haven't seen crazy yet, sweetheart." Cade launched up the stairs and pushed his face into hers.

"You owe me," he raged. "You took years from me and my daughter without my consent. What would you call that?"

"Are you threatening me?" she asked, barely above a whisper. Cold satisfaction filled him when he saw her fear.

"Are you scared?" His voice dropped low, viciously antagonizing her. At the moment, he didn't care if he frightened her or caused her distress. All he wanted was to wound her as badly as she had him.

"What do you think a judge's ruling would be on that one, Counselor?"

"You wouldn't," she said with a jerky shake of her head. "Please." She whimpered.

"Momma." The child burst through the front door, her voice rose to an ear piercing volume. "Momma! You have to come quick. Aunt Paige hurt her tummy."

Julia jumped away from Cade and swiped her tears.

"Where's Uncle Mike?" she asked, her voice trembling.

"He told me to get you. He said to say it was contraptions."

"Contractions!" She rushed to the door.

Cade could not take his eyes off his daughter as Julia brushed a hand against the little girl's hair. A wave of possessiveness rushed through him.

"This is not over," he said, his voice ragged.

"I have to go." She pulled the child behind her. "Come on, Laura."

"Leave her," he bit out.

Julia hesitated, casting a worried glance toward the driveway where he'd parked his jeep.

"I won't take her," he snapped. Disgusted with her and the situation, he struck out at her again. "I'm better than that."

The insult was like a slap in the face. Julia's cheeks flushed and she went inside.

Laura. Cade said her name over and over in his head. She stayed behind, close to the door. He slowly sat down on the bench beneath the front window, keeping an eye on her in case she decided to bolt.

Now that he was alone with her, Cade wasn't sure what to do. He wanted to know if his daughter knew of the truth and what Julia told her about him but he didn't know where to begin.

"You're my daddy, aren't you?" she asked in a small, bubbly voice. That was a start, he supposed. There was the barest hint of a quiver in Laura's little chin but she immediately firmed it. She was incredible. Especially since he could hardly hold back his own tears.

"Yeah, baby," Cade said, his voice husky with emotion. "I am."

"Why were you so mad at my mommy?" She edged closer to the bench.

"Because your Mommy did a bad thing." It was probably the wrong thing to say but Cade didn't care. He wanted his daughter to know their separation was not his fault. Laura came close enough to touch but he kept his trembling hands on his lap. He would wait for her to come to him.

"What did she do?" Laura asked wide-eyed.

"She told a lie."

"You're not supposed to lie." There was awe in Laura's voice. She was obviously impressed. Cade did not know whether to laugh or groan.

"Are you going to give her a spanking?"

Cade did groan then. "No," he said tightly. "Your mommy is too big to get spankings."

Laura fell silent, no doubt absorbing this news as she climbed on the bench beside him. Cade held his breath. Her feet dangled over the edge. A pair of gaudy, purple plastic shoes dangled from her tiny toes.

"Did you knowed I was your little girl?"

Cade glanced away, a lump forming in his throat. He did not want to lose his composure in front of his daughter so he shook his head.

"No." His voice cracked and he cleared his throat and tried again. "No. But I do now."

"Are you still mad?" she asked after a moment of silence. Cade glanced down at her, taking his time before he answered.

"I think I'll be mad for a while, yet." He tensed as anger surged through him. Just thinking about Julia's deception made him want to rant and rave all over again. It occurred to him that Laura was a victim too. "Aren't you mad?"

She looked up at him, her blue eyes a mirror of his own. With her chin tilted up, he could see the tiniest freckle on the tip of her nose. Just like his mother's.

"I'm not mad," she said. His dimples winked back at him through his daughter's smile. "I knowed you are my Daddy now. We won't get lost again."

Chapter Twenty-Two

"I don't have to go," Julia whispered, brushing Paige's blond hair off her cool forehead. Her friend smiled tiredly.

"Yes you do," Paige said with a yawn. "Gregory would kill you, for one. Secondly, I don't need you hovering over me like a mother hen. I'll be fine. The doctor said I just overdid it yesterday with all the walking around. The contractions have stopped."

"I feel so guilty," Julia moaned and rolled onto her back. They lay side by side in Paige and Mike's huge bed, a small bedside lamp cast a rainbow of colors across the ceiling through its Tiffany shade. "I've made such a mess of things."

"Stop being so melodramatic," Paige shifted uncomfortably.

"It's true," Julia said. "Cade will never forgive me and Laura is hardly speaking to me. Did you know he told her I lied?"

Paige sighed. "Well, technically you did."

"Technically," Julia agreed though she would never admit as much to Cade.

"If anyone is to blame, it should be me. I'm the one who told you to forget about him. I encouraged you to move away and keep Laura to yourself."

"You were just being a good friend. We did what we thought was best. You couldn't have known."

"Neither could you," Paige said as she laid her hand across her belly. "You had your baby to think about. You couldn't afford to be selfish."

Julia reached between them and grabbed Paige's hand.

"I'm scared."

"I know you are," Paige whispered sleepily. "Don't worry. You'll be great tonight."

"I could always call Gregory and tell him it's an emergency."

"Julia," Paige whimpered. "I walked all over town for that dress. You're going to go to the party, wear the hell out of it and come home to tell me all the juicy details."

Fully dressed for the March Madness Formal, Julia carefully slid off the bed and stood in front Paige for inspection. Paige lay on her side with her hands pressed together and tucked under her cheek, a huge bed pillow wedged between her knees. She perused Julia sleepily and giggled.

"It kind of reminds me of the scene in *Gone with the Wind*, you know? When Rhett Butler made Scarlet wear the red dress to Melanie's birthday party."

"The branded woman," Julia muttered, unamused.

"That's the one," Paige laughed and yawned. Julia leaned over and kissed Paige's cheek.

"Thanks for being my friend," she whispered. "Even when you didn't agree with what I was doing and went along anyway."

"That's what friends are for." She grinned. "Knock him dead, girl. Make him remember why he wanted you in the first place."

Slowly, Julia rose to her feet. The deep crimson satin slid over her naked skin like cascades of cool water, pooling at the base of her bare back and draping modestly over her

breasts. The skirt flowed down her legs, hugging her curves and ending just over her toes in her red, six-inch satin heels.

"With this dress, I'm hoping he'll do more than remember."

Limousines lined the long, circular drive of the majestic Wilcox Plantation. A landmark from the Civil War era, the home had passed through generation after generation of Wilcox men and had more than its fair share of Hardin mayors in residence.

Julia watched nervously from the back seat of the black stretch sedan Gregory provided for the evening. Guests alighted from the limousines and paraded in their finest to the tall, stately double doors. The flames within the lanterns lining the walkway lent a fiery glow to the burnish hues of sunset and caught the glitter of diamonds and sequins. Soon it would be her turn.

Anticipation caused her insides to flutter. Julia was on a mission. Nearly fifteen years ago she'd fallen in love with the boy with blue eyes, pale blonde curls and a dimpled grin. Tonight, she wanted the man who turned her inside out with wanting and filled her heart with joy—the father of her child.

Her car inched forward and Julia leaned back in the seat, willing her confidence not to desert her. The valet rushed forward and opened the door of the car in front of her.

Cade suddenly appeared, smoothing the front of his black tuxedo jacket. The wind ruffled his hair and the light caught in the dark golden strands. His smile took Julia's breath away, all charming dimples and full, sexy lips. Every time she looked at him, she ached with longing.

There was an impressive media turn out for a small town society event due to the highly publicized Turner case and Cade Taylor's arrival caused quite a stir. The cameras flashed while a slender blonde in an elegant black sheath took his hand and exited the limousine.

Julia shrank against her seat, sucking in air. Her stomach lurched when the car moved. It never occurred to her Cade would be involved with another woman. The door opened abruptly and Julia found herself staring at the valet, panic choking her.

"Miss?"

"One moment," she murmured. It was too late. She couldn't turn back. Julia gathered her purse, her shawl and her courage and left the limo.

The flashes blinded her and someone called her name several times. Neither the suffocating surge of bodies or the heat of the camera lights could take away the clammy chill that swamped her.

Another woman.

Automatically, Julia smiled and nodded. A media machine, she avoided direct gazes and refused to comment with the subtle shake of her head. She dared not speak around the lump in her throat. Severe concentration kept the tears from her eyes. Perhaps she was an acquaintance, she thought desperately. No one special. It took several excruciating minutes to disentangle herself from the crush of reporters.

The ballroom filled quickly, making it impossible to see anyone without standing on a chair. Julia made her way around the room, pressing a hand against her jittery stomach. Several people stopped her to talk and congratulate her on her success in the D.A.'s office. In

no mood for small talk and mingling, Julia politely excused herself at the first opportunity.

She found him, staring into the adoring eyes of his date. Two table lengths away, Julia watched him slide his hand across the blonde's shoulders and introduce her to a group of people. He smiled and laughed and acted as though nothing untoward had happened to him the day before. He had no worries, no problems, no daughter.

Julia sighed raggedly and fanned herself with her hand. A hot flush crept across her chest and face. Tears threatened to spill over and ruin her mascara. She recognized love and affection when she saw it. This woman was no acquaintance. This young, beautiful woman on Cade's arm possessed the one thing Julia was after, his love.

Suddenly, he lifted his head. His intense blue gaze swept the area and landed on her. Julia swallowed hard, certain her tears were illuminated in the candlelight. His jaw tensed and those lips, so lovingly curved in a smile just moments before, set in a firm, unforgiving line. She drew a shuddering breath, her skin prickled hotly but she refused to look away.

She had nothing left to lose. He was already gone. Tears spilled over as she braved a smile. Misery caused her lips to quiver. She wanted to be blasé, to shrug and smile and pretend as if she did not ache so deeply it threatened to suffocate her. Truly, she wanted him to think he did not matter. But he did and she could no longer hide it.

The muscle in his jaw flinched and he broke eye contact. His wide shoulders rose and fell under the handsome black tuxedo jacket as he sighed. The blonde laid a hand against his forearm and jealousy raged through Julia. Cade linked his fingers through hers and finally met Julia's gaze.

There was no anger, no censure. Only regret. She could feel it across the small distance as if it was her own. Then he left with the blonde on his arm.

Julia couldn't breathe. She had to get out, right away.

"Excuse me," she said, pushing through the crowd. Bravado deserted her. There was no way she would make it through the entire room with her head held high. Sobs clogged her throat and tears threatened in earnest.

The closest exit was a pair of French doors. Julia escaped, gladly losing herself in the Mayor's gardens to wallow in her sadness.

The cool, night air breezed through Cade's hair as he stepped onto the veranda. Beyond the wide, marble staircase the mayor's prized gardens and hedgerow maze beckoned in the moonlight. Behind him, the party continued and light poured through the large windows.

"You should go back inside," he urged. Carly shrugged and wrinkled her nose.

"I don't want to leave you out here alone," his sister said. The breeze mussed her pretty blonde hair and she shivered in her borrowed black evening gown. Janessa was at least an inch or two taller than Carly but, luckily, the eighteen-year-old seemed able to hold her own in her big sister's dress.

"I'll be fine," he told her gently. "Go back inside. Dance and have fun."

Carly slanted a longing glance toward the French doors. "Are you sure?"

"Go ahead," he said. "I'll be there in a minute."

When the door finally closed behind Carly and he was alone, Cade exhaled long and slow. He closed his eyes and tilted his head back. What in the hell had happened in there?

Angry did not begin to explain how he felt toward Julia, yet the minute he laid eyes on her across the ballroom he'd fallen spellbound. Elegant and graceful, she moved among the guests smiling and glad-handing like every other businesswoman in the room. However, he was painfully aware that Julia was no ordinary woman. Black as sin hair swept up in a mass of curls, she was an Amazon Goddess in fiery red satin. Cade wanted to shake her and kiss her in the same breath.

He carried his scotch to the end of the veranda. Ice clinked against crystal as he drained the glass and placed it on the wide rail. Cade rested his forearms against the balustrade, narrowing his gaze at the wide expanse of gardens below.

He still wanted Julia. He would be insane not to, just like any other man he caught staring at her tonight. No matter how his body reacted to her, he could not forgive her for hiding their daughter.

My daughter. Laura. God, she was beautiful. Cade swiped his hand across his forehead. So small and smart and brave. The world seemed so simple through Laura's eyes. She amazed him. He'd gotten to spend time with her earlier in the morning and they had pancakes, which he found out were her favorite, and walked along the beach at the lake. But then he had to take her home.

Julia had only allowed an hour.

Allowed, he thought bitterly. That's exactly made him so furious. He had to ask permission to see his daughter. He worked himself up into another rage. He would find a way to get more time with her. Never before had he considered fatherhood but now, as he had no choice, Cade felt ready to take it on full steam. He wanted his daughter close, not a five-hour drive away.

A ragged sigh escaped. Who was he kidding? Seeing Julia before he knew about Laura was hard enough. Now he felt a connection to her that extended beyond physical. Beyond memory. They shared a child. What he felt for her five years before had culminated into an incredible miracle. He could push her away, punish her with his distance for hiding the child but he knew it would be far more difficult to run from himself.

He pushed away from the balustrade. It was time he went inside to find his sister, who he'd asked to join him at the last minute. Usually, Shelby reminded him to find a date weeks before the actual event but his staff was so overworked with his massive caseload, she swore it had slipped her mind. Carly was a very willing, and excited, stand-in.

"Beautiful night." A male voice intruded the darkness and Cade turned. He wasn't surprised. Micah Sampson tried to catch his eye all night. It was only a matter of time before Micah found him.

"It was," Cade said. "I'll leave you to it."

"Not so fast," Micah replied easily, reaching inside his tuxedo jacket and withdrawing a silver flask. "Share a drink with me."

Congressman Turner's aide tipped the flask and poured rich, dark liquor over Cade's melting ice.

"I doubt you've had anything finer here in Hickstown. Small-minded, unsophisticated bastards that they are, half you people are high on your own homemade moonshine."

Condensation dripped from the outside of Cade's glass as Micah handed it to him. "Drink. Fifty-year-old scotch should never be wasted."

Jaw working tensely, Cade accepted the drink and drained the glass. He already felt like driving his fist through Micah's urbane grin. The other man only added to Cade's ire with his smart-assed remarks. Micah sipped straight from the flask.

"You've had more than thirty-six hours to think about our proposal, Cade." Micah replaced the flask and brought out a cigarette. "It's time to make a decision."

Honestly, Cade had thought very little about Congressman Turner and Micah Sampson over the past day and a half. Though they lurked in the back of his mind, all else was eclipsed by thoughts of his daughter and Julia and the mess they were in.

"I thought I made my position pretty clear yesterday," Cade said. Micah took his time lighting a slim cigarette. The red tip glowed in the darkest shadows of the veranda. They were out of sight of the windows. Anyone who left through the doors Cade used would be unable to see them until they walked right up on them. It was the perfect place for conspiracy.

"I hoped you would change your mind." Micah exhaled, the blue smoke forming a hazy fog around his face. He stared thoughtfully into the darkness. "I don't suppose there's anything that would sweeten the deal for you?"

Even though he expected the offer, it still shocked him. He gritted his teeth and swallowed hard. Inside he teemed with rage. The sooner he rid himself of these men, the better.

"And put myself in the same position you're in now?" Cade shook his head and laughed disdainfully. "No thanks."

Tilting his head, Micah looked at him with an amused smile. "How ironic, coming from a man with secrets of his own to hide."

He went very still. "I have no secrets."

A small, smirking laugh came from Micah's direction. "Oh yes, you're the squeaky-clean boy next door. I forgot." An inhale and swift exhale. Cade saw the glowing butt of Micah's cigarette sail past. "Then again, maybe not. We all have our own little secrets, Cade. High school heroes with illegitimate children—"

Before Micah could finish his sentence, Cade hauled him on his toes by the front of his tuxedo. Fury made his vision blur. "You even say her name, I'll fucking kill you. I swear it. You're not good enough to even breathe the same air as her."

"Do it," Micah rasped. "I fucking dare you."

Cade's gut twisted with disgust and he shoved Micah away. The other man's ragged breathing filled the air. Cade turned away and gripped the balustrade. If he let go, he might wrap his hands around Micah's throat.

"It's a little different when it's your ass on the line, isn't it?" Micah asked.

"Get the hell away from me," Cade growled.

"Make your decision." Urgency rose in Micah's voice. "Or we'll make it for you."

The satisfying crunch of Micah's nose under Cade's fist resounded in the air. Micah stumbled backward, his hands over his bloody nose. Cade gingerly shook his open hand. A gratifying throb began at his knuckles.

"Don't ever threaten my family," he said, his chest heaving. "Ever."

"You'll regret this for the rest of your life," Micah muttered between gurgles. Blood oozed between his fingers and down the front of his pristine white shirt.

"I already do," Cade said, his voice cold. He turned on his heel and strode down the

stairs into the garden, leaving Micah to explain his broken nose alone.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Cade cursed as he rounded on another dead end. He'd been lost inside the mayor's hedgerow maze for twenty minutes and it only added to his aggravation. Backtracking, he found a familiar shaped shrub and stopped to get his bearings.

He refused to think about how good it felt to hit Micah Sampson. Never before had Cade let his emotions rule him enough to physically assault another man. His father taught him years ago that real men never threw the first punch. Yet another way he failed Doug Taylor.

He looked at the three available paths in front of him. Two of which he already ruled out as dead ends. The center one had to be it. He pushed through the shrubbery and followed the twisting turns. This deep in the maze, the only sounds he heard were his own breathing and the rustle of his evening wear. He was near the center of the maze. He felt it.

He stopped and tried to get his bearings. He heard it then, the sound of someone crying. He walked closer to the farthest hedge and tilted his head. He held his breath and listened. Yes, it was most definitely crying. Cade followed the sound until it grew louder.

His whispered expletive drowned out the sobs as he fell into another dead end. The crying was so loud he could make out the sniffing in between. A woman's tears. He focused and tried to decide which direction it came from when he realized he knew that cry. The hiccupping sniffle was unique to only one woman.

Julia.

Urgency filled Cade as he tracked backward and tried another path. *I'm coming, I'm coming*, he thought frantically. Why was she crying so hard? God, where the hell was she?

He hit another dead end and the sound began to fade. *Shit*, he swore silently and jogged back to where he started. She sounded close, so close. Should he call her name? Would she answer? Cade ran his hands along the shrubbery. The pointed branches scratched his knuckles and wrist as he ran down another green corridor.

Suddenly, he burst through an opening in the shrubs and found her, sitting on a bench with her back to him. She cried out and jumped to her feet. Cade could tell he scared the hell out of her but he didn't care.

Moonlight bathed the hidden crevice inside the maze and Julia stood in its center, the blue-black glow of her curls tumbling against ivory white skin. Cade simply stared.

She was breathtaking. Tears glittered in her eyes and on her cheeks. Breasts rose and fell under the modest yet heart-stoppingly sexy slope of her gown. He followed the view to the shadowed hollow accentuated by the clinging red satin at the apex of her thighs. Her beauty wiped his mind clean and all that filtered through was how badly he needed her. Right now.

Cade crossed the clearing in ground eating strides and reached for her. He wrapped a hand around the back of her neck and hauled her roughly against his body. He starved for her taste. Mouth, lips, tongue ruthlessly devoured Julia and Cade reveled in the feel of her body close to his. They touched from head to toe but it wasn't enough.

He wanted to be inside her.

Julia clutched his shoulders and dragged him closer, opening under his greedy kiss. She whimpered and Cade felt it all the way through his body as if she stroked him intimately. His hands trailed down her bare back as his mouth left a nipping trail over her neck and shoulders. Her head fell back and she moaned. Her fingers drove through his hair and held his head while his teeth raked over her nipple through the bodice of her dress. He stared through eyes heavy-lidded with passion at his handiwork. The satin clung, wet and dark, to the distended peak. Cade blew on it softly.

"Ah God," she cried raggedly. Her knees gave out beneath her and Cade caught her as she fell. He half dragged, half carried her to the bench where he sat with her draped across his lap. Desperate to taste her skin, Cade tugged the front of her dress until her breast fell free. He devoured her, tasting, licking and biting his way across the fragrant skin as Julia shoved his jacket from his shoulders. Her fingers worked recklessly over the hook on his tuxedo pants. In the back of his mind, he knew she was crying.

He didn't care.

All he wanted was to slake the thirst that had driven him insane for years. He needed to be inside her so badly Cade thought he would die.

He ran his hands up her skirt and clutched her bare thighs, guiding her until she straddled his lap. The cool satin pooled around them. One hand trailed higher until he found heaven. Naked heaven. There was no barrier and he thanked God for small favors. She was soft as silk and wet. God, so wet. Ready for him. Cade thrust his finger deep inside and Julia's hoarse cry filled the night.

The heat, the slick wetness that surrounded him ripped a ragged moan from his chest. Cade pulled out and freed himself. With both hands he shoved her skirt above her waist and exposed her to the moonlight. Her thighs spread wide and Cade buried his face against her breasts and drove himself, throbbing and aching, deep, deep inside.

Their breath came in harsh pants, filling the air and drowning out the frantic whispers Julia rushed against his ear. He was so close. She fit him like a white-hot glove, milking him with every rise and fall of her hips. He could feel his climax building inside. A sensation like no other. A taste of paradise.

"I love you," Julia whispered with his every thrust. "I love you. I love you."

Cade closed his eyes and gritted his teeth. He couldn't look at her, couldn't hear her. It was there. *Oh Jesus, so close.* Soon. Soon he could purge himself of his intolerable obsession with this one woman.

Julia's hands clutched his hair and pulled. Her teeth glided sharply over the curve of his ear and she continued her frenzied cadence.

"I love you."

It hit him like a tidal wave. A massive surge of pleasure washed over Cade until he was lightheaded. His entire body shivered violently with the power of his climax and Julia held on for the ride, her hips jerking up and down, wringing every last drop from him.

"I love you," she cried one last time and she succumbed to the force that tore through her body. He felt every shudder, every wave of pleasure that coursed through her. If he weren't already half dazed with gratification, Cade thought he might come again with the pulse of Julia's orgasm.

He tried to open his eyes but his vision was blurred and his ears rang.

“—for so long,” he managed. He’d wanted her for so long. To finally have her in his arms, intimately connected. Cade sucked in a harsh breath as she moved her hips.

“God,” he groaned. “I feel,” he mumbled thickly, “all over, I feel.”

“I know,” she whispered and stroked the back of his head. Cade found his face was still buried against her breasts but he was reluctant to move. Her hair surrounded them like a cocoon and he vaguely realized it had fallen free during their frenzied lovemaking.

“Cade?” Julia tugged on a lock of hair at the crown of his head. “We need to talk.”

“Can’t,” he said simply. His legs felt like rubber and after tonight, Cade seriously doubted his heart would ever beat normally again. He couldn’t talk now. Hell, he could barely think.

The truth smacked him square, like a ton of bricks straight in the chest. He wanted more. A simple taste of heaven and Cade realized years of fantasizing had only prepared him for an appetizer. He would never appease the hunger that gnawed deep inside him for this woman.

He’d made a terrible mistake.

Carefully, Cade extricated himself from their intimate embrace and Julia slid from his lap. The air was suddenly cold, or perhaps it had been cold all along but the moment he touched Julia he ceased to notice. The dress, that maddening dress, slithered down her thighs with a soft rustle. Still, he could not look at her.

She was like a drug, one taste and he was hooked for a lifetime. Would he ever stop needing her with the brain numbing intensity that swamped him even now?

Cade righted his clothing and stood, avoiding her searching gaze. He heard her breathing hitch as he bent and retrieved his jacket from the behind the bench. Cade kept his back to her as he shrugged it on then ran his hands through his hair, smoothing it back.

“Cade?” A pitiful, strangled cry came from Julia. It killed him but he could not meet her gaze. What he’d done. What they’d done together. He couldn’t face it. It was so wrong. It was too right. Doubt overwhelmed him. He had to get out of there.

“I’m sorry,” he said quietly over his shoulder. Without another word, he left the clearing. This time, when he heard Julia crying, he did not turn back.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Saturday morning dawned unseasonably warm and sunny and the children in Mike and Paige's neighborhood took advantage. Julia sat on the porch, curled in the corner of the swing as she watched Laura dance in the front yard to her own tune.

Last night, Julia had stumbled into bed some time after midnight, heartbroken and bone weary. She cried herself dry before she'd fallen asleep, grief and loss so stark she could hardly breathe. She might never know what caused Cade to seek her out in the mayor's garden. There might never be an explanation for his feverish lovemaking under the stars or the broken declarations he'd made afterward that confused the hell out of her. The only thing Julia was sure of, Cade still could not forgive her.

He could have sex with her, could kiss her and touch her intimately and give his body to her without compunction. But Cade could not love her. Not fully. Not until she made up for her betrayal.

The answer was simple. A sacrifice. An eye for an eye. While Julia could never part with her daughter, even for Cade, she knew the next best thing. And she fully accepted the responsibility.

Julia picked up the cordless telephone she brought onto the porch with her and dialed Atlanta.

"Gregory Stanton, please."

An all over body shiver raced through her as she waited for the operator to connect her. Nerves wracked her and last minute doubts clouded her mind.

"Stanton."

Abrupt, arrogant. To the point. God, she would miss him.

"Gregory? It's Julia. We need to talk."

Silence. Then, "What's wrong?"

Julia lifted her gaze and stared at Laura whose tiny brows wrinkled in concentration as she tried to jump rope.

"We have to make a deal," she began. "There's something you need to know."

It took almost an hour to spill her guts to Gregory. She told him as much as she possibly could without embarrassing herself. The mystery of her life before Gregory Stanton fell away under the guise of guilt. Laura's parentage, Julia's relationship with Cade, both then and now, and the depths to which Congressman Turner and his aide would sink to get themselves out of trouble all tumbled out of her in breathless detail.

When she finished, Gregory did not make a sound.

"Say something," she whispered worriedly.

"Well," he said finally. "I hate to tell you 'I told you so' but we both knew Congressman Turner would try something like this."

Of all the things she told him, Julia was surprised he latched onto that first. She nodded her agreement even though she knew he could not see her over the phone.

"Just the same, I never imagined it would be to that extent." She sighed and rubbed her gritty, puffy eyes. "That's why I'm resigning."

"The hell you are," he snapped. She flinched but remained silent. "You're my best litigator, Julia. I can't afford to lose you over something like this. We'll work through it, though if what Taylor says is true, we haven't got much time. The congressman may be leaking things to the press as we speak."

"There may be a way to save face," Julia said carefully. She would drop the topic of her resignation for now, but the letter was inside the house, signed, sealed and waiting to be delivered. But she had another reason for calling. "Which brings me back to the deal. Gregory, we're going to have to eat it on this one."

"I was afraid you would say that. I'm sorry, but I cannot allow it. I'm making arrangements right now to fly down there tonight. There are a few things I've been working on here that I need to brief you on in person."

"You're coming to Hardin? Tonight?" She sat up straight on the swing and stared blindly at the street with her mouth open. "Gregory, you never leave Atlanta."

"Well since my favorite ADA is threatening to quit and there's a job to be finished, I guess I'm going to have to, aren't I?" His sigh rasped over the phone line. "Just don't do anything until I get there. Promise me."

Julia looked down at her hands and the wet, ragged tissues torn to pieces during her confession. "I can't make any promises. But I can say I'll try."

"Try hard," he instructed. "I'll see you tonight."

Cade sat in his office on a beautiful Saturday morning, brooding. His mood was dark and stormy and the gorgeous, sunny day seemed to laugh in his face. Files stacked behind him waited for his immediate attention and Peter Breckinright was due in another hour. He had no time to stew in his own juices yet there he sat, thinking about Julia.

Just her name in his mind brought back every scent, every taste, every touch he'd received from her last night. He made love to her under the stars, filling her deeply and sating a need that built inside him for so long he could no longer remember a time he did not want her. Which brought him back to brooding.

It didn't work.

He deluded himself into thinking the only way to get Julia out of his system would be to satisfy his lustful fixation. After indulging, he came to the depressing conclusion he would never get enough of the taste of heaven he found in Julia's arms. And that was a problem.

A big problem.

When Julia was around, Cade could not think past his raging hard on, figuratively speaking. Ever time she was in the same room, or the same building even, Cade knew. Awareness of her plagued him day and night. The knowledge that she lived across town, with their daughter, burdened him even now.

Therein lay the problem. His daughter. No matter how much he wanted to forgive and forget, he couldn't get over the fact that he had a child he did not know. All because of Julia. He had to do something, anything, to get time with Laura but he hated to go through Julia for it. His first thought was to file a suit against her for custody of the child but he nixed that idea almost as fast as it was born. He would not put Laura through that and, if he was honest with himself, he did not want to burn his bridges with her.

Something existed between them, a soul-deep bond that went beyond Laura, beyond

the burning needs of their bodies. He wanted her, yes. But when he looked at her, Cade not only felt his blood heat up and his body tense. No, it wasn't that simple. When Julia turned her green eyes on him, memories swamped him.

The night they'd made love in every room in his small apartment then drove down to the lake and watched the sunrise, laughing and talking quietly. Or the way she blushed when he complimented her or poured herself a cup of coffee but never drank it.

"It tastes awful," she once told him, "but the smell keeps me awake."

Julia grounded him. He felt real. Cade was himself. He was in love.

It was a hard thing to let go. Especially twice in one lifetime. Cade dragged his hands over his face and slouched in his chair. There had to be a way to get what he wanted, Laura and Julia, without giving up his career. The damage he'd inflicted last night with Micah could not be undone. Cade simply waited for the shit to hit the fan.

The phone on his desk rang, interrupting his thoughts. Cade swung around in his chair and waited through another ring, reluctant to pick it up. If it was Micah, he wanted to put off the inevitable. Finally, he answered on the fourth ring.

"Cade Taylor."

"Taylor," a gruff, no nonsense voice barked over the phone. "This is Gregory Stanton, the District Attorney of Dekalb County. Got a minute?"

Interesting. Cade leaned back in his chair, not fully relaxed but definitely relieved.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Stanton?"

"It's not what you'll do for me, Taylor. It's what I'm going to do for you."

"Julia!"

The shout came from the front yard and scared the bejeezuz out of everyone in the house.

"Julia! Get out here right now!"

Julia, Paige, Mike and Laura all ran to the living room window and stared in disbelief.

"It's Daddy," Laura announced to no one in particular. Julia's heart constricted. Laura talked non-stop about her morning with "Daddy" all afternoon. Julia was losing her baby.

Paige and Mike both looked at Julia in question.

"I'll go see what he wants."

"Do you want us to stick around?"

Since Cade's visit two days ago, Mike worried that he was dangerous. Julia assured him several times that Cade would never physically harm either her or Laura, but Mike was concerned just the same.

"No," Julia said. She smoothed the wrinkles out of her clothes. She wore Laura's favorite Johnny Bravo t-shirt and a pair of lightweight cotton sweats. She'd pulled her hair up in a ponytail and she knew her face was red and swollen from crying. She looked like death and felt it too.

"I'll be fine. Keep an eye on Laura for me." Julia met Paige's eyes over her daughter's head. "Just in case."

Cade banged on the door. "Julia!"

She hurried to the door and opened it before he drew the attention of the neighbors.

"What are you doing?" she demanded. "You're acting like a crazy person. Someone is

going to call the police.”

The minute Julia opened the screen door Cade grabbed her wrist and dragged her onto the porch. He turned her to face him and wrapped his fingers around her shoulders.

“Why did you do it, Julia?”

She frowned up into his searching gaze and tried to think. His nearness, so soon after last night, made it difficult. “Under the circumstances, I’m afraid you’ll have to be more specific.”

His hands fell away from her and he stepped back. Cade’s eyes suddenly became shuttered. “Why did you try to broker the deal with the DA?”

“Oh,” she said, sinking down on the swing. “That.”

“Yes. That. What made you change your position?”

“You know why.” She clasped her hands and tucked them between her knees. “I did it to save myself.”

“That’s bullshit and we both know it.” He lurched forward and pointed a thumb at his chest. “I know, Julia.”

He nodded, his eyes narrow. She looked away.

“You resigned.” His voice dropped low and harsh. “There is nothing for you to save. I want to know why.”

“I don’t owe you any explanations.” She finally met his gaze. “My life is my life. I resigned my position as the Assistant District Attorney. Period. How did you find out?”

“The DA called me to let me know someone else would handle the Turner case. Why did you try to deal?”

She rested her elbow on her knees while her face dropped in her hands. Mentally, she felt exhausted, though physically her nerves danced like live wires. Julia wanted to touch him, run her fingers through his soft, golden hair and press her nose against the warm crook of his neck. She wanted to fall asleep against his chest, listening to his heart as she had so many times that summer five years ago. Last night she’d felt cheated out of that privilege.

“That was for you.”

“For me?” He leaned against the wall opposite her. “Why?”

Her head felt heavy against her palms. “Because I didn’t want you to have to make a choice. I wanted you to be able to walk away from this case freely without owing the congressman or Micah Sampson a single drop of your integrity.”

There was a long pause before Julia raised her eyes and looked at him. “I did it because I didn’t want you to sacrifice anything for me. I don’t deserve it.”

“You’re doing it again. You made a decision for me without consulting me first,” he said angrily. He pushed away from the wall and squatted down in front of her. “When are you ever going to learn, Julia?”

“What does it matter?” she demanded, dropping her hands and sitting up straight. “Gregory turned me down.”

She stared into his sky blue eyes, frustrated and ready to scream. “I tried to help you. I gave up my job, Cade. My job.” Julia pressed her hands against her chest, her voice growing hoarse with emotion. “I love my job and I gave it up for you and for Laura. So she can live closer and you can see your daughter.”

Cade rocked back on his heels and sat down on the cool concrete.

"I can't believe you."

He ran his hand through his hair and cradled his forehead in his palm. "Why do you think you have to do everything alone?"

"I am alone, Cade. I decide where I work, where we live, what we eat. I do it all by myself. When Laura got chicken pox last year and was hospitalized with a high fever, nobody held my hand or cried with me at her bedside when she was so lethargic she couldn't even complain about the itching. That is as alone as it gets."

"I should have been there," Cade murmured. "I could have held your hand. I would have held you while you cried."

She sighed tiredly. "I can't take it back, Cade. God, I wish I could but I just can't."

Silence greeted her declaration. Cade's eyes narrowed against the glare of the sun as he stared into the yard. Laura left her jump rope and her bucket of sidewalk chalk in the grass. He looked at it and Julia saw him swallow hard.

"Tell me about it," he finally said. "Tell me about the day she was born."

Julia sucked in a sharp breath. That day had been one of the worst in her life. Alone did not begin to describe how she felt the day Laura was born.

"I almost gave her up," she admitted softly. She'd never told anyone, especially Paige. "Seconds before she was born, all I thought about was how hard it would be to finish school or take the bar exam with a newborn."

"But you didn't," he said. "You didn't give her up. Why?"

It was difficult to explain how she felt the first time she held Laura in her arms. She was desperately lonely, heartbroken and overwhelmed with responsibility and yet, here was another mouth to feed, to take care of and be accountable for. How could she keep the baby when she could hardly take care of herself?

"I cried all night and refused to see her. The doctor tried to tell me it wasn't that bad, to give the baby a chance." She waited until he met her eyes.

"He didn't know, though. Nobody knew that I was mostly crying over you. I hated you that day, for not being there. I know," she said when he started to talk. "It wasn't your fault. But I thought it was then. And it doesn't change how I felt when our daughter was born and I was all by myself."

"I would have been there," he said, his eyes intense. "I swear I would."

"I know."

"You still haven't said what changed your mind."

"Laura was one day old and I still hadn't named her. A nurse brought her into the room and told me I needed to bond with my baby so I could find a beautiful name that fit her."

She stretched her arms out, lost in memory. "I refused to see her. I told the nurse to take her away but the woman persisted. It was the first time I held my baby and when I looked into her eyes, just like yours, and saw all that black hair. God," she smiled and her eyes welled up with joyful remembrance. "She was so perfect. So tiny. I fell in love."

"What's her full name?" he asked.

"Laura Olivia Campbell," she answered softly.

"Olivia." He glanced up. "You named her after our mothers."

She nodded.

"Laura Campbell." He said it again then the smile hinting around his lips faded. "Campbell."

"We can change it," she said. The thought of giving up Laura's name never occurred to her but given her daughter's enthusiasm for reuniting with her father, she knew giving Laura his name was the right thing to do.

He sat in pensive silence then he suddenly climbed to his feet. His hands went deep into his pockets.

"I have to go. I have to think about some things."

She watched helplessly as he left the porch. Before he reached his jeep, Laura burst out onto the porch.

"Daddy," she cried from the stairs. "Daddy! Where are you going?"

Cade froze mid-step. Julia straightened in her seat, fixated on his response to his daughter. Slowly, he turned. Laura waited patiently for him to come to her, completely confident that he would. To be four-years-old and have that kind of trust in people...Julia hoped she could keep Laura little as long as she could.

Several heart stopping moments later, Cade finally went to their daughter and wrapped her up in a huge bear hug. Laura squealed and pressed her nose in the spot Julia had longed for minutes ago. He buried his face in Laura's hair and closed his eyes.

Julia felt sobs she thought long dried out well inside her chest. He hurt so deeply inside she could see it in the taut lines of his face. Laura was a balm for him. No matter what, she would make it right. Julia vowed she would make it right.

Chapter Twenty-Five

The water lapped against the sandy shore and the cool, late March breeze was almost icy. Cade dug his hands deeper inside his overcoat, staring at the lightening sky. The sun would rise soon and he'd be there to witness it. All night Cade drove from one place to another, aimlessly seeking answers in places that could provide none.

It seemed he could only find ways to magnify his loneliness and confusion. He sought out his sister, attempting to talk to a neutral, non-parental party. There he found a joyous couple, celebrating news of impending parenthood.

Janessa bawled and Kyle embraced him and stuck a cigar in his mouth. Cade put on a happy face because truly, he was overjoyed. But he quickly became very aware of the non-traditional way he'd achieved his new status of fatherhood and he had to leave.

Next, he tried to go back to work. That lasted all of one hour before he slammed out of the office in disgust, leaving paperwork and unfinished files scattered across his desk. His search ended in the most unlikely place: his parents' living room, enduring an uncomfortable silence with his father while they waited for Olivia to come home.

Doug watched him warily, both men edgy and unmoving.

"What's new with you?" Doug finally asked.

Cade laughed humorlessly and dropped his head against the couch. "I'm a father. What's new with you?"

Silence stretched between them. "I don't know what you want me to say, Cade."

"Nothing, Dad. Nothing at all."

"Do we know the girl?"

He turned his head. "It's a long story," he finally said. "But if you've got time, I'd like to tell it to you."

His father listened patiently while the story poured out of him, nodding his head gravely and making comforting noises when speaking proved too difficult for Cade. At one point, Olivia came into the room but left when she saw her husband and son finally talking. When he finished, Cade felt both relieved and horrified. He waited anxiously for his father to berate him for being irresponsible and tell him what a screw-up he was. It was nothing Cade hadn't thought of himself over the past few days.

To his surprise, Doug placed his hand on Cade's shoulder. The weight of it was so familiar he had to swallow hard to not break down again.

"All I've ever wanted was to be here for you when you needed me. I'm glad you finally realized that," Doug said. "If there was anything I could say now to make everything right for you, I would."

"What do I do, Dad?" he asked. For so long he'd made all his decisions on his own. It felt so good to ask someone else for a change.

"Follow your heart, son," Doug said simply. "The rest will fall into place."

Cade shivered as the wind kicked up. He'd spent the rest of the night in his favorite spot beside the lake, mulling over his father's words and deciding exactly where his heart wanted to lead him.

There were so many memories wrapped up in this one place that nostalgia swamped him. Chasing his sisters through the water, picnicking with his parents or playing catch in the grass with his father. As he grew older, it became a private place—somewhere to brood and gather his thoughts. Had he not cherished the special quiet time the lake provided, the shadowy curves along the shore would have been a perfect make-out place with teenage girlfriends.

But he only brought one girl here.

He'd exchanged kisses in the moonlight with Julia under that tree. They'd whispered love words in the darkness of his old truck, overlooking the lake and loving her body from head to toe to the sounds of the water lapping against the sandy shore. The sun peaked on the horizon and the water glittered and sparkled under its brilliance.

He felt cheated out of the bittersweet aftershocks of making love to her in the mayor's garden. The breathless kisses and damp, sweet scent of her skin. Cade missed the way she used to lay her head against his heart and sleepily laugh at his jokes.

At the time, he thought making love to her when his emotions were so raw, the sting of her betrayal so fresh, was a mistake. Now, as Cade admired the golden hues of sunrise, he acknowledged that it saved them both.

Without realizing it, Cade followed his heart. Life irrevocably changed the day he noticed Julia Campbell and whether he wanted it or not, she loved him. He doubted there would ever be a woman in his life who made him feel the same, or offered what Julia could. A second chance with her, and their daughter, beckoned.

The decision was simple. Executing it, however, was not. There was still the matter of Micah Sampson and The State of Georgia versus Blythe Turner. Both Julia and Cade had reputations riding on the outcome. Sacrificing her own, Julia had resigned and given Cade the out he needed. He was not satisfied with that.

He wanted to take Micah down before he could ruin Julia or their chance together. Fortunately, he knew just the man to help. A glance at his watch told him it was almost six o'clock. Time to go home and get ready for his confidential Sunday morning breakfast with District Attorney Gregory Stanton.

All morning Julia waffled between going to the courthouse and staying home. Gregory had called her late Sunday night and informed her that an emergency meeting had been called and her presence was not required but would be appreciated. Cowardice, plain and simple, kept her from accepting the open invitation right away. In all honesty, she didn't know if she could sit in the same room with Cade and keep her feelings, or her hands, to herself.

At the last minute, she dressed in a simple black suit, primly buttoned to her collarbone with long sleeves and skirt that fell an inch or two below the knee. It was the most modest suit she owned. After their encounter in the hedgerow maze, Julia did not want to incite any further volatile reactions from him.

The drive to Cade's office was fraught with nerves and apprehension. Gregory stayed surprisingly close-lipped about the purpose of the meeting, but knowing his penchant for dotting 'i's and crossing 't's, Julia figured he probably wanted to make a formal announcement regarding the status of prosecuting counsel. While he refused to accept her resignation, Gregory agreed she should no longer handle Mrs. Turner's case.

Both knew if she pressed the issue, he would be forced to acknowledge Julia's resignation and release her from further obligation to the state. She decided to wait until they were back in Atlanta tomorrow to address it again.

Cade's receptionist led her down a narrow corridor. "You're a little late but Mr. Taylor told me if you showed up, I was supposed to bring you right in."

Julia nodded and pressed her hand against her stomach. As the closed door came into view, she heard muffled shouts and her insides flip-flopped. The receptionist threw the door open and Julia entered.

"What in the hell does any of this have to do with my wife," Congressman Turner yelled. He was the only person standing in the room while the others sat around a long, oval mahogany table.

"Please sit down, congressman, and we'll explain everything," Gregory said.

Cade's head turned in Julia's direction and she froze. His gaze was unreadable. Gregory's dry tone drew her attention.

"Join us, Ms. Campbell. I'm sorry we couldn't wait for you."

Julia snapped to attention and moved across the room to sit in a chair beside Gregory. She refused to meet the stares of the four people across the table, though she got a brief glimpse of a man with two black eyes and a bruised, swollen nose.

"I'm sure all of you know Ms. Campbell," Gregory said by way of introduction. He turned to Julia and she looked up, surprised when he spoke to her directly. His expression was meaningful as he said, "We were just discussing a few mutual acquaintances."

"I think we're getting off track," the man with two black eyes said. Julia knew him by reputation, though it was the first time she met him face to face. Micah Sampson leaned forward and scowled at Gregory. "Try to stay focused."

"I am staying focused, Mr. Sampson." Gregory slid a single sheet of paper from a thin file in front of him. "Let's talk about Eli Bond for a minute."

Julia's attention darted to Gregory. He had his game face in place. Surprised to see him play his cards so early, Julia relaxed in her chair. It was his show after all.

"Who's Eli Bond?" Mrs. Turner asked. The older woman wore huge black, Hepburnesque sunglasses and an enormous hat with black, spiny feathers drooping over the side.

Congressman Turner, who still refused to sit, turned from them and paced to the window. He crossed his arms over his chest and said nothing. Micah leaned back in his chair, also remaining curiously silent. Blythe Turner snorted with disgust and turned away sharply, slapping the side of Cade's head with her feathers.

"Nobody knows?" Gregory asked, a hint of amusement lurking in his voice. After their discussion on Saturday night Julia knew he'd been able to unmask several people associated with Congressman Turner's bribery ring. She'd always found it interesting to see him in action but today he was in rare form.

"Nobody knows Officer Elijah Bond? Okay," he drawled, enjoying himself. "How about Lieutenant Sterling Mayer?"

Once more, no one responded. Blythe made more lip-smacking noises and crossed her bony arms over her meager chest. The ridiculous feathers fluttered over Cade's shoulder. Julia met his eyes over the table and he winked.

He actually winked. Julia's heart fluttered. *What did it mean?*

"Still no one?" Gregory sighed dramatically. "Well then I suppose there is no point going all the way down this list. How about we just skip straight to the bottom?"

Congressman Turner's head tilted and he glanced over his shoulder. Micah lifted his hands and steepled his trembling fingers against his lips.

Interesting.

"Who is Stacey Mazerick?" Gregory peered at Congressman Turner over his glasses. The other man turned suddenly and smiled, relief spreading across his face.

"I'm afraid I don't recognize that one." Turner shrugged. "Mazerick you say? Maybe she's related to Senator Mazerick?"

"She's his grand-niece," Gregory replied, nodding. "At least that's what she said when we arrested her."

The announcement seemed to act like a hot poker in Micah Sampson's backside. He lurched out of his chair so fast it overturned. The panic and fear on his face shocked Julia as he leaned over the desk, palms splayed on the shiny surface to brace his weight.

"When did you arrest her?" he demanded.

"Last night," Gregory replied calmly. Julia glanced at Cade and saw he was poised with wary tension. Congressman Turner and his wife both stared in confusion.

"What is she to you, Mr. Sampson?" Julia asked.

Micah shoved away from the table and ran his hand through his immaculate hair. The two white strips of medical tape across his nose wrinkled as he clenched his eyes shut. "What are the charges?"

"Extortion, embezzlement," Gregory said, ticking off his fingers. "And falsifying records. That's where you come in, congressman."

Turner's head swung around. "But I don't know that woman. When did we hire her?"

Cade, Julia and Gregory all exchanged glances but Micah and the congressman were so distressed, neither man caught the slip.

"Who is she, Micah?" Congressman Turner demanded.

The aide dropped his hands and glared at Gregory. "If she was hurt in any way, I'll kill you. I swear I will."

Gregory leaned back in his chair. It wasn't the first time a suspect had threatened him, Julia knew, but the conviction in Micah's voice was enough to take notice. "Your sister is safe," he said. "I swear it."

"Sister," Blythe squealed beside Cade and he ducked before her feathers whipped against his cheek. "I thought she was your girlfriend!"

"What do you know about it?" Congressman Turner demanded, rounding on his wife.

"I've got eyes in my head, Denton," Blythe said indignantly. "When a man has sex with a woman in my den, I tend to notice that sort of thing."

"You had sex with your sister in my house?" Disgust and anger mottled Turner's face. "What kind of sick bastard are you?"

All eyes swung to Micah who sighed and dropped his head back to stare at the ceiling.

"She's my half-sister," Micah ground out. "And we weren't having sex you stupid, drunk bitch. My sister was raped. I was comforting her."

"Raped?" Congressman Turner and his wife echoed together.

"By who?" Julia asked, unable to help herself.

"Denton, you fat fuck. Don't you remember the pretty brunette who interned for you during your first campaign? The one you talked the security boys into bringing to your hotel room after that grueling speech in Augusta?"

The congressman frowned thoughtfully. "That was your sister?"

"She was only nineteen and I brought her in to help because she admired you." Micah practically spat on the floor, hatred and disgust evident in his eyes. "I swore I would get you back for it and you would pay, but then your spoiled, rich-bitch wife ruined everything."

"Don't turn this around on me." Blythe's feathers flapped erratically. "You brought this on yourself."

"It was so easy to set you up," Micah croaked. "Stacey wanted to make you pay more than I did and so she took the job as an assistant records clerk at the police station. God," he snarled. "She's a law student at Harvard. It was so beneath her."

Gregory leaned an elbow on the arm of his chair and let Micah dig his own grave. Television couldn't have written a more dramatic, spell-binding script. So far, Cade kept silent and allowed the drama to unfold around him but Julia caught his gaze straying to her more than once.

"Two more months and we could have left. We almost had everything in place when the accident happened. I couldn't pull out in time and we were still in so deep that I had to do something to get the attention off us."

Micah wheeled around and growled at Cade. "If you had only gone along with it, I could have gotten the press off our backs long enough to finish what I started and bury the old man in scandal. But no." He sneered and shoved his finger toward Julia. "You were so busy panting after that bitch you couldn't see past the nose on your face."

Cade lunged out of his chair and grabbed Micah by his shirtfront. "Don't," he barked. "Don't even say it. Don't think it, don't even breathe. I swear I will break every bone in your body if you even look at her funny."

"She's just a whore," Micah whimpered. "How can you protect her after what she did?"

Julia's heart beat frantically in her chest. Micah knew about Laura. He was a bigger threat than Julia had ever imagined. Cade's fists tightened on Micah's jacket, a dull, red flush spread across his cheeks. Julia held her breath, waiting for his answer.

"Because I love her, damn it," Cade shouted. "I still love her."

Relief, joy, panic and fear washed through Julia so fast she felt weak and lightheaded. He still loved her. *Oh God*, she felt like crying. *Thank you. Thank you.* She wanted to jump up and shout that she loved him too but she couldn't find her voice. Beside her, Gregory lifted his cell phone and began to dial.

"Then you know why I did what I had to," Micah murmured. "I love my sister, Taylor. I didn't know what else to do."

Cade dropped him with a shove and Micah stumbled against the desk. The aide straightened his jacket with shaking hands, his trembling fingers smoothing back his hair. The door opened and two uniformed police officers entered.

Gregory rose and closed the file in front of him. "Micah Sampson, you're under arrest."

They read his rights as they led him from the room and handcuffed him in the hall.

Congressman Turner and his wife both stared, open mouthed at Julia and Gregory across the table.

Still shocked, Julia couldn't say anything while Gregory sat down again, calm and coolly collected, beside her and waited for the commotion to die down.

"What does this all mean?" Congressman Turner finally asked. "What happens to me?"

"What about me?" Blythe asked suddenly, turning on her husband. "Why can't you think about someone other than yourself for once, Denton?"

"Please," Gregory began. He lifted his hand to stop the bickering. "Both of you must listen to me, now."

An abrupt hush fell over the room.

"Congressman, a full investigation has been launched into your political and personal affairs," Gregory said. "I would not recommend that you leave the county until you are authorized to do so."

"Now see here," Congressman Turner sputtered. "Weren't you listening? That wasn't all my doing."

Gregory leveled the congressman his best what-kind-of-crack-have-you-been-smoking stare. "As I said, congressman, a full investigation has already begun. Unless," he added, flipping open his file again, "you'd like to add anything now?"

"What about my wife?"

"That is for the jury to decide," Julia spoke up. "But I can guarantee you that the state will pursue the maximum sentences that the law allows."

"Which is?" Blythe's lower lip quivered.

"Twenty years per victim. No time off for good behavior, no parole."

Congressman Turner clenched his jaw and jerked a nod. Blythe rose in a flutter of feathers and clutched her purse to her chest. Julia felt no sympathy for the woman as a tear trickled down her cheek.

"That's worse than death, I think," Blythe managed to say.

"What a small price to pay," Julia replied unkindly.

Blythe froze, her eyes hidden behind her glasses. She nodded slowly then left the room, her husband trailed behind her.

Cade turned to Gregory.

"I guess you two need to talk," he said. Gregory stood and gathered his folders, tucking them inside his briefcase. "I'll leave. Julia, I expect to see you in my office first thing next Monday. Take a vacation, kiddo. You earned it."

Still speechless, Julia nodded. The door closed behind Gregory and she met Cade's eyes across the table.

"I meant what I said," he told her. "Every word."

Chapter Twenty-Six

"I don't understand," Julia replied. Her fingers trembled at her throat and tears welled in her eyes. "I thought you said you could never forgive me."

Cade came around the table, unable to stay away from her another minute. He sat beside her and grabbed her hand, grateful to touch her skin and feel her warm, and close, beneath his fingers. "It doesn't matter what I said then. What matters is what I'm saying now. Julia, I love you."

She sucked in a ragged breath and he saw the battle to hold back her tears wage across her face.

"I love you so much that I'd do anything to have you and Laura in my life."

"Oh Cade," she whispered brokenly. "Please, don't do this if you don't really want it. I'll still let you see Laura if you don't want to be with me."

The very idea of not being with Julia forever clutched like a jagged claw around his heart.

"I love you," he said it again. It was such a liberating thing, speaking aloud the words his heart ached with.

He pulled her into his arms and kissed her lips tenderly. He tasted her tears, salty and warm against her cheeks and brushed her hair away from her ear.

"I love you," he whispered against it. She shivered in his arms. "Say it."

"I love you, Cade." She drove her fingers into his hair and kissed him hungrily. She slid from her chair and knelt on the floor between his knees, her mouth devouring his. Love and need surged through his blood and he held her close.

"One of these days we're going to have to try this in a real bed," he said against her neck. Julia giggled and kissed his ear.

"Where's the fun in that?"

A swift knock reverberated before the door abruptly opened. Shelby waltzed in and froze, staring at the embracing couple.

"Good grief," she muttered. Julia jumped to her feet, guiltily running her fingers through her hair. A blush spread across her cheeks. Cade rose more slowly, unimpressed with the silent, scowling reprimand she sent his way.

"Ms. Campbell?"

Julia nodded.

Shelby crooked her finger. "There was a phone call for you. Mike Lewis said to meet them at the hospital. His wife is having a baby."

"Oh my God," Julia cried, lurching for the door. "It's too early."

Shelby shrugged. "I just take the messages."

"I have to go to the hospital." Julia turned to Cade, panic shining in her eyes. "Come with me?"

"How long ago did they call?" he asked.

"About fifteen minutes. There was a lot going on. I didn't want to interrupt."

"Thanks," he said, ushering Julia out the door. "I'll be out the rest of the day."

"I figured as much," she mumbled as they passed.

They made record time to the hospital in his jeep and raced through the corridors to the maternity ward where a tall man with blond hair met them outside the door. He carried Laura on his hip and grinned ear to ear.

"It's a girl," he said, tears illuminating his eyes. "It's a girl. She's little but she's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

Laura reached for Cade and he took her automatically, reveling in the engulfing scent of her shampoo and sweet, little girl smell.

"Is Paige okay?" Julia asked, worry-lines creased her forehead.

"Aunt Paige said lots of bad words and her baby came out of her tummy," Laura said gravely. "It was so gross."

"You were there," Cade asked, amazed.

Mike smiled sheepishly. "It all happened so fast, we didn't have time to make other arrangements." He looked at Julia. "I couldn't leave Paige."

"It's okay." Julia smiled, her eyes watery. "Can I go in and see her?"

"The baby is getting ready to go to the nursery. You made it just in time. I'll take you."

Cade watched Julia go through a door down the hall and he and Laura were left alone for the first time in days.

"Babies are gross," Laura said again. Cade leaned back to look into his daughter's eyes.

"You were a baby once," he said, grinning.

"Is that why you let Momma keep me?" Laura asked and Cade's heart skipped a beat. "Because I was gross?"

"Not exactly," he murmured.

"Does that mean you want to keep me now?" The buoyant expression on her face was quickly squelched. "Will you take me away from Momma?"

Love swelled inside his chest. Such a sensitive, thoughtful being had come from him. She gave him hope. "Actually, I want to keep both of you. Would that be okay?"

Laura's eyes brightened and she grinned, her small, cheeks dimpling. "You mean we can be a fam-blee?"

He laughed. "A family."

"That's what I said," Laura replied, rolling her blue eyes. "A fam-blee."

The door opened and two nurses wheeled a large, plastic domed basinet out of the room. The smallest infant Cade had ever seen was swaddled inside, so pink and thin and fragile looking. Cade and Laura stared at the baby in silent awe.

Julia came out behind them, tears streaming down her face.

"What's wrong?" Cade asked, hitching Laura higher on his hip. "What happened?"

"Nothing." She sniffled and smiled. "Everything is just fine."

Women.

Cade stifled a sigh. She was going to fit in so well with his sisters. "Why are you crying then?"

She leaned against his side opposite Laura and grinned up at her daughter. He wrapped an arm around his girls — *my girls*, he thought.

"They named her Samantha," Julia said with a shaky, happy sigh. "And she's perfect."