

Revenge

"What is it?" Abi whispered, trying not to wake any of the neighbors.

"I'll be damned! Would you look at that."

"What? What am I looking at?" Abi asked, then came to an abrupt stop, her heart jumping in her chest.

"The whole place is rigged with explosives. I think that little package you received in the mail is the trigger. Get Kelly and I'll call the bomb squad."

Abi ran like never before. She reached the back door, then paused to listen to Miles yelling at her. "What?" she called out to him.

"I said, don't slam the doors and walk carefully by the package. I don't know what amount of motion could set it off. Now go!"

Perspiration formed on her upper lip as she brought the screen door closed with barely a tap. She moved past the kitchen table with care, yet with urgency. Taking the stairs two at a time, she reached her bedroom, clutching the baby monitor in her left hand.

She glanced at the bed and her breath solidified in her throat. She tried to scream but no sound came, only a low, disbelieving moan.

Tossing the pillows in every direction, Abi resorted to checking under the bed, in case Kelly had rolled off. She grasped at nothing. She searched, then rushed from the room, past the kitchen table and out the back door, letting it slam behind her. It sounded like a gun blast in the silent morning hours.

"I said don't slam...what is it? Abi, talk to me."

Tears rolled down her face and she struggled to speak, but everything seemed jumbled. In the distance she heard Jack bark once. She looked up at Miles and allowed him to pull her into his chest.

"Where's Kelly?"

"He's got her! My Lord, Kelly isn't in my bed. She's gone!" Tears blinded her eyes and choked her voice. Deep sobs racked her insides.

Rita Karnopp

Revenge © 2008 by Rita Karnopp

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

This book is a work of fiction. Characters, names, places and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to any actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

An Eternal Press Production

Eternal Press
206 - 6059 Pandora St.
Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada,
V5B 1M4

To order additional copies of this book, contact:
www.eternalpress.ca

Cover Art © 2008 by Ally Robertson
Edited by Lauren Gilbert
Copyedited by Sherri Good
Layout and Book Production by Ally Robertson

eBook ISBN: 978-1-897559-71-0
First Edition * November 2008

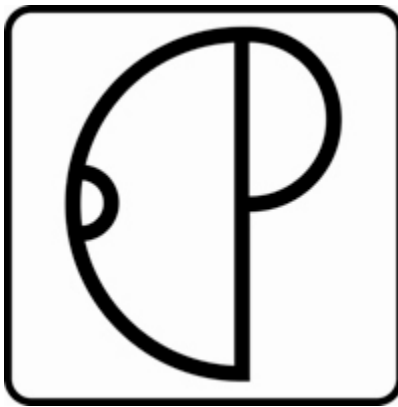
Production by Eternal Press
Printed in Canada and The United States of America.



Revenge

Revenge

Rita Karnopp



Rita Karnopp

Also by Rita Karnopp

Sacred Ground

Wind Song

Dark Spirit

Ransom Love

Kidnapped, coming in 2009

Dedication

I dedicate this book to my cousins Camille and Ed Shannon, who not only have been supportive of my writing, but have read every book I've ever published. They've been more than loyal readers, they've been that added drive that has kept me writing.

After my second book, they wrote, "You have a solid and excited fan base here in Michigan. We are so proud of you and can hardly wait for your next book!"

It warms this author's heart to have been blessed with cousins that have welcomed me into their lives, with a bond that has traveled the miles between us. Family ties that grow stronger as we share our lives with each other.

Chapter One

"How could Trevor do this to you?"

Abi looked at her sister, Chyna, and then glanced away. "If I'd known marrying Trevor would have caused me this much grief, I'd have run in the other direction. You'd think a woman like me would have the perfect relationship with her husband. I counsel couples for a living, so why can't I fix my own mixed-up marriage?"

"Didn't you have a clue? I mean, you dated him for five years."

Abi swallowed hard. "I saw what I wanted to see. I made excuses for the things I suspected or just ignored them. How's that for not practicing what I preach?"

"If things were bad between you, heck, I understand that. It happens, even to doctors of psychology and family planning or whatever. But for him to take you from your home, expecting his child no less, and put you up in a hotel, because he needed time alone, it's sadistic! It's cruel and inhuman. But, it's even harder to believe you let him do that to you. I'm sorry Ab. I didn't mean that the way it sounded."

Abi struggled to keep from breaking down. She drew in a ragged breath, then walked across the small, sterile room. She glanced out the hotel window and noticed the cloudless, bright, sunny sky, but felt no warmth. Her life was a shambles. She'd married Trevor barely nine months ago and they'd agreed to have this baby. Absently, she rubbed her swollen abdomen.

"I've been sitting in this room, doing a case history on my own marriage. I see fault with him, but I also see fault with myself. I should have faded my practice out way before we got married. I should have spent more time with Trevor. I should have given our marriage a little time to settle in before I got myself pregnant."

"Bull roar! You didn't get yourself pregnant, you decided together to have a baby. Geez Louise, Abi, you did nothing to deserve this. You know, I'd like to hire a hit man and get rid of the bastard."

"What did you say?" Abi snapped around.

"It's a figure of speech. I hate him, Abi."

"I know, Chyna. I'm starting to hate him too, and I don't like it. I don't like the horrible thoughts I have about him. I mean...I could never feel the same about him...but we still might salvage our marriage. I said through thick and thin, for better

or worse. I took those vows seriously, waited all those years to make that commitment. I've always said couples take the easy way out, divorce at the first sign of trouble. Now, I find my marriage is in trouble and I don't want to take the easy way out."

"Geez, girl. You can't be for real. It's not wrong to protect yourself, even if it means divorce. I don't think Trevor has a clue how to treat a woman, a pregnant woman at that. You can't believe you deserve this."

"Well, no. I...think we have some work to do on our relationship," Abi paused, realizing the words sounded incredibly hollow. If she were honest, she'd admit she didn't want to work things out with Trevor. The hurt his actions had caused her couldn't be repaired. Tears stung her lids and slipped slowly down her cheeks. I've only wanted one thing in my life, a husband to love me and his children to share."

"Yeah, I know. Not much to ask for, if you want the truth. Trevor's not the type of man to make that commitment. He's proven that with two failed marriages, hasn't he?"

Abi sat on the edge of the bed. "You would think a woman of my education wouldn't find herself pregnant and soon to be without a husband...all within nine months." She thought about Trevor, the man she thought she knew and loved. How could he be unfeeling enough to put her in a hotel? How could she explain to her friends and family why he did this to her, when she didn't understand it herself? "I keep thinking I'm missing something. I must have unknowingly hurt him or somehow let him down. Maybe I shouldn't have had the amniocentesis."

"You know you had to go through with that, although I can't imagine anyone sticking a needle into my stomach, it makes me shiver to think about it. A woman your age is a fool if she doesn't have a baby tested for problems. You were right to go through with it, besides what's that have to do with Trevor?"

"Believe it or not, he desperately wanted a son. Another daughter isn't what a rancher needs."

"So?"

"Well, when I told him this baby was a girl, he started going out drinking with his friends. A couple of times he even stayed out all night and wouldn't tell me where he'd been."

"Geez Louise. Why didn't you tell me this crap? I'd like to direct him off a cliff. Maybe if you're lucky, he'll get drunk and have a fatal encounter with a tree."

"That's not funny. That's down right evil, Chyna. Thou shalt not kill."

"I didn't say he should be killed. I just think a fatal accident would serve him right."

Abi drew in a breath to steady her nerves. She couldn't admit to anyone that she'd had many such dark thoughts. Of course, she'd never have the nerve to say it out loud. "You'd feel terrible if he got in an accident tonight and died."

"No I wouldn't! I'd be grateful."

"You might say that now, but I know you. You'd feel guilty and so would I. Trevor will get his due...some day."

"I just hope that day is soon." Chyna grabbed her jacket.

"Thanks for coming over. This seems like a nightmare, doesn't it?" Tears surfaced and Abi fought them. If her clients saw her life in such disarray, they wouldn't ask for her advice or guidance, and she wouldn't blame them.

"Why don't you come live with us? John wouldn't mind and you know the whole downstairs is space unused."

"I can't. Trevor said if I moved in with anyone, well, he wouldn't come to see me." She realized how foolish the comment sounded. If any one of her patients had given her a similar scenario, she'd have highly encouraged the break of his control. A partner should never give the other an ultimatum situation.

Yet, she couldn't bring herself to admit she had failed in their marriage. Maybe Trevor did need this time to sort things out. "He said he'd take us home from the hospital. I think I owe him a chance to make it work."

"You can't be serious. Are you hearing what you're saying? I realize love is a strange thing, but I wouldn't want Trevor if he came with flowers, candy and millions. He is bad news, Abi. I'm not trying to upset you, but geez Louise, you shouldn't let anyone treat you like this. I don't think you'd encourage any of your clients to let their husbands treat them like this. Why do you think you owe Trevor so much?"

"At one time he was warm and gentle. I think his drinking is part of the problem...our problem." Trevor had torn her world apart, yet she heard herself defending him. Why? "I know it's hard to believe I haven't told him to go straight to hell. It's probably the advice I should give him...but, I'm learning, things aren't always so cut and dry when feelings and emotions are involved. In ways, this is an eye-opener for me. I hope it makes me a better counselor."

"What, experience is the best teacher? I think you're putting yourself through a lot of heartache just to prove a point. You're a marriage counselor, but that doesn't guarantee you're going to have the perfect marriage. That your marriage should work no matter what, because you should have all the answers. Do you see how ridiculous that is? No one can control or predict how their partner is going to...what? React? Behave? Love? Support?"

"I hear what you're saying, Chyna. And I love you for it. I feel like such a failure. I try all my psychological talks on myself and they help for all of five minutes. Then I'm back to struggling with the why, how come, and what could I have done differently?"

"I'm sorry, Abi. I wish I could be of some help. I'm your sister and I'll be here for you. But, if you want my opinion, get rid of the jerk. Permanently would be the best choice."

"You've got to stop saying things like that. I know you're just joking, but it makes me nervous." The smirk on her sister's face gave her pause.

"You can't blame me for thinking he's a jerk, can you? I mean, he married you, got you pregnant, and now he's kicked you out of your home and has put you up in a hotel. Excuse me, but I can't find room in my heart to care about him. Will you file for a divorce?"

Abi froze at the sound of the word. Divorce sounded evil. Divorce sounded cold. Divorce sounded impossible. "I can't, and you know that. He deserves at least one second chance."

"What do you mean, you can't? You going to wait until he decides to toss you and your daughter out on the street?"

"Do you know how many people I've advised and counseled into trying to make their marriage work, in spite of setbacks just like this? They should forgive and give their marriage one hundred fifty percent to make it work. If it failed, then at least they would know they didn't give up on it easily. I think we need to wait until...we need some time apart. He promised to take me home after the baby is —"

"Yeah, I know. Like a happy family, you'll all go home and live happily ever after. I hate to break it to you, but it's just not happening. I'm not trying to upset you, but I wouldn't be surprised if he leaves you right here."

Abi didn't doubt there was that possibility. "I have to give him at least a chance to make it right. If I'm honest, I guess it boils down to—I don't want my daughter to be raised without her father. You and I had to go through that, and I remember so many times I wish I knew him, what his smile was like, how it would feel to dance with him, laugh with him. I'm sure you know what I mean." She rubbed her stomach.

"I do, Sis, I truly do. But, our dad didn't leave by choice. He died in Vietnam. No matter what, your daughter will know the difference. You need to move on with your life. You don't need Trevor. You have family and friends. Don't make it easy for him. He knows you're just waiting for him to take you back. I think it's a power thing with him. You don't need a man like that. Isn't that somewhere in your therapy sessions?"

"Maybe you're right. I wish I hadn't closed my practice. With a newborn, moving into an apartment or a small house, and facing a divorce, it will be a challenge to get it active again. But, like always, I'll do what I have to do, you know that. Trevor wanted me to stay home with our son until he started school. That was before Trevor knew we were having a daughter."

"That's sick."

"You want to hear sick?"

"Enlighten me."

"I shouldn't be telling you this." Abi paused, then quickly decided she needed to tell someone. "When Trevor found out I was carrying a girl, he wanted me to abort the baby." Tears threatened and Abi swallowed the lump that formed in her throat.

"You can't be serious?"

"I am. He left for three days when I refused."

"How could he ask you to do that?"

"He didn't ask exactly. He told me I had to. I think couples should discuss things like this. They have to make decisions together. He ordered me to kill this baby. I refused. I hadn't seen that side of Trevor before. I won't forget it either. It put a grave distance between us."

"Abi, I can't be sure. You know I wouldn't say something unless I was pretty sure. I didn't think I could ever tell you this, but now I think I have to. You remember that time you fell down the stairs?"

"Of course, how could I forget? I thought I'd lose this babe for sure." Abi hugged her stomach with both arms.

"I was coming into the family room, and I glanced up at you coming down the stairs. I don't think Trevor grabbed you to stop you from falling like he said. He pushed you."

"No! Chyna, that can't be true."

"Yes, it's true. I think it's true. He gave me such a guilty look, when he realized I was standing there, that it sort of confirmed my suspicions."

"Why didn't you say something then? I mean, this changes things."

"He swore he tried grabbing you and, well, I kept thinking maybe I just saw wrong. I think it was his expression that made me believe he was lying or at least made me wonder about it. I still don't know for sure and I shouldn't have said anything."

"Yes you should have. I'm not a fool, Chyna. I will take only so much, even for my child. If he did push me, then he's capable of just about anything. I wanted him to be a big part of my daughter's life. I've felt so strong about this. Now—"

"I'd like to spend ten minutes in a dark alley with that man. You'd be surprised what I can accomplish."

Abi couldn't help snickering. "You'd better get going. Trevor is coming at three and I'd like to take a shower and fix my face."

"What? You're not serious, are you? Maybe I should stick around. I just don't trust the bastard. Dang it, Abi. Come to dinner with me and leave him knocking at your door. I'm serious. Don't be so available for him."

"I'm sure you're right, but you know I can't. I want to see him. We have some things we should talk about. We should be alone for this conversation. If, and that's a big if, we are to resolve our differences, we need to be communicating."

"Don't do a therapy thing on yourself. Drop it for a bit and give yourself a break. What if he gets rough and you're here alone with him. I don't have a good feeling about this."

Abi thought for a moment, then wiped a single tear from her cheek. "I need to talk to Trevor and get some answers. Too many people will know he's here. He's not stupid enough to try anything. How did it ever come to this?"

"I don't know. I hate to see you suffering. I wish I could do something, anything to ease your pain."

"You have no idea how much your support means to me."

"You'll find out who your true friends and family are when times are tough. Some day we'll sit back and laugh at all this, wondering how we could have been so stupid."

"I'll have my act together, and who knows? Trevor and I might have worked things out and even have that son he wants."

"What about what you want?"

"That is what I want."

"I think you want a good marriage and a family. I'm not convinced that husband is Trevor."

"I'll pray for strength and the right husband." Abi walked to the door.

"You do that, Abi. You sure you don't want me to stay? I will."

"I'm sure, but thanks for asking." She leaned against the edge of the open door.

"I'll go but you call me if you need me. I'll be back here before he can blow wind."

Revenge

"Chyna, you really need to watch your mouth."

"Right, I'll keep that in mind. I still think it would be best if I stayed. "

"Chyna, I'm a big girl and I can take care of myself. Now leave before he gets here."

"I'll check with you later, but I want you to know I don't like it."

Abi gave Chyna a weak smile and a strong hug. Abi felt emptiness set in, as Chyna walked down the hall. The hotel room held no warmth, only a cold reminder that her husband had deserted her.

Chapter Two

Abi rubbed the firm round bulge beneath her sweater. The baby she'd always wanted. Her biological clock was ticking, and now she would soon have a daughter. They'd make it together, even if it meant just the two of them.

Why had her marriage failed? She'd always thought that if you loved a man with your whole heart, he would unconditionally love you back. He wouldn't have a reason not to.

Abi's thoughts wandered to the day she fell down the stairs. Could Trevor have pushed her? Chyna's confession caused Abi grave concerns. Abuse wasn't something she would tolerate, under any circumstance, or marriage vow. Had he meant for the abortion to go through, with or without her consent? Anger filled Abi. Sadness followed. She'd face this situation. It wasn't something she could ignore.

The clock chimed and Abi hurried to the bathroom. After a quick shower and makeup, she found herself ready ahead of time. She paced the confined space, then glanced at her watch and tensed. He'd be there in fifteen minutes.

She placed a small dab of Tuscany on her palm, then rubbed it across her neck and arms. Trevor's favorite. What was she thinking? Quickly she grabbed a wash cloth and scrubbed her skin until it hurt. Flashes of falling down the stairs filled her. The fear of losing the baby rushed back as though it happened yesterday. Had Trevor put them through that?

A dull headache settled in the base of her neck. Maybe he wasn't coming. Did he forget? Maybe he'd changed his mind? She glanced out the window, again. She couldn't see the parking lot from her room, but the gesture seemed to help. Forty-five minutes seemed a lifetime.

The knock at the door made her physically jump. Suddenly she didn't want to see him. She needed more time to think things through. Taking a slow, steady breath, she walked to the door and looked into the security peep. It was Trevor.

"Shit, open up, Abi."

She slid the lock, then the door open and stood aside as he barged in. "You're late," she stated in a monotone. Leaning against the door jam, she looked at his rugged, almost plain face. Dark piercing eyes stared back. She had loved pulling her fingers

through his sandy blonde hair. His new moustache gave him a cocky appearance. He'd aged, looking more than the ten years older than her. Why hadn't she noticed that before?

"Better late than never. You're looking good."

She closed the door, then noticed he'd taken several steps toward her. She pressed her back against the cold wood. "I thought we could talk a few things over. I need some answers." Her voice quivered and it angered her.

"I thought about you all day."

She drew in a breath and gagged at the smell of beer. "Is that why you're late?"

He grabbed her chin roughly between his thumb and crooked index finger, drawing her closer. "I missed you," he whispered.

She froze. "Trevor, don't play games with me," she stated in a cold tone, then pulled her chin free of his grip. "You forget that I'm not some innocent babe that you can sweet talk into bed. I—"

"I know, you have a degree, are smart and tell other people how to make love to their husbands. Why don't you show me how you make love to your husband?"

"Trevor, I don't feel like making love. Our baby is due in less than two weeks. We haven't been living together for five days now. We need to talk. We need to sort out where we're going in our relationship. We need to—"

"Cut the crap! I'm your husband—"

"Trevor, you've been drinking. We had an agreement about that, remember?"

"Ta hell with your agreements. I know what my rights are. I know—"

"I want you to leave, Trevor."

"Don't have to. The way I see it, I'm paying for this place and I'm not even getting to use it. Why don't we make that bed dance?"

She knew the level of drunk when he talked that way. She also knew he wouldn't remember a thing that happened in the morning. In her condition she couldn't shake off the fear that put her nerves on edge.

"Trevor, I'm not feeling all that well tonight. I thought we could go out to a restaurant and have a quiet dinner and talk. If you can't do that for me, then I'd prefer you leave and we'll do our talking another night."

"You sure you handled that right, Doc? I mean, aren't you suppose to try and sweet talk me or somethin'?"

Abi straightened her back and struggled to keep calm. "You know I don't like it when you call me Doc. Go home, Trevor. We're not accomplishing anything right now." She slid to the right of his stance, then inched out of his reach. "Please leave." She watched him open the door and immediate relief filled her.

"Why don't you go with me to Lucky's Casino across the street? We'll have a couple of drinks and come back here to finish off the night. What do ya say?"

"I don't think so. I'm just not in the mood. Besides, pregnant women don't drink."

"Let me get this right. You don't feel like having sex with your husband. You don't feel like having a drink with your husband. You only want to do what you want to do."

Fuck you, Abi. I can have a better time by myself. How do you like that?" He staggered out the door.

"I like that just fine, Trevor." Her calm low voice echoed down the empty hallway.

Chapter Three

Chyna watched Trevor enter the hotel. She wanted to charge up to him and give him a piece of her mind, but did neither. Hopefully there would come a time when he'd get his due.

Should she watch him and if he stepped out of line...what? John wouldn't understand, so she wouldn't tell him. Something pushed her, a nagging premonition to keep an eye on Trevor Madden.

What would he do next to Abi? Would he build up her hopes that they'd give their marriage another try, then months later send her packing to another hotel? He knew how to push her buttons and he knew how to hurt her. It seemed he had a sick feeling of power when he could reduce Doctor Madden to tears. It couldn't be good for her baby, either.

There was no way of proving he pushed Abi down those stairs. If he was capable of doing that, what else was he capable of doing? Chyna feared for her sister's life.

Starting the car, Chyna headed for home. It didn't take long to get groceries and a bottle of wine from the liquor store. She pulled her new Volkswagen bug into the garage. The shrill ring of the cell phone caused her to jump. "Hellllooo," she sang into the small speaker.

"It's me, Abi."

"Geez Louise, you crying? What did he do?" Chyna waited for the sobs to subside.

"He came drunk. I wanted to talk, he wanted to screw."

"My God, he didn't rape you, did he?"

"Fortunately, no. It's strange, I'm seeing him with different eyes and I don't like what I'm seeing."

"I'm surprised you're finally seeing it. Why don't I come get you? I've made Chinese and you know how you like that, besides there's always more than we can eat. It'd be fun. John is meeting a friend for pie and coffee around seven. We'd have the house to ourselves." Chyna hoped her tone didn't betray the disappointment of not having that quiet time to herself.

"I'm not good company. I think I'll just go downstairs and order something simple. Maybe I'll get a paper and check out apartments or houses. I should have done it

sooner. I wish he hadn't showed up drunk and that we could have done some serious talking. That's what I really need from him right now."

"I can't believe he did that to you. What am I saying; of course he's capable of doing that to you. Nothing would surprise me where Trevor is concerned." Chyna paused, silent sobs answered. "Let me come and get you."

"No. I need time to think. I need to figure out a way to get my life together."

"You do, but you don't have to do it alone."

"But he's my husband. I got myself into this and now I have to get myself out. I have a duty—"

"Geez Louise! Why do you think you have to do everything yourself? You can be human, you know." Chyna drew in a steady breath. "I think you should confront Trevor about pushing you down the stairs and see what kind of reaction you get."

"What would that accomplish? He'll just deny it."

"No doubt about that. It's his reaction that I'm most interested in. If it startles him, he's innocent. If he's ticked that you could think of such a thing, he's guilty." Chyna waited for Abi to respond.

"I don't know. What if he gets mad?"

"So what!"

"Even if he decides to be honest and admit it, I'm not sure I want to know."

Chyna thought for a moment. Would Trevor be cocky enough to be proud of his deed? "We should tape the conversation, that way it's not your word against his."

"It won't come to that. He's dumb, but he's not stupid."

"Don't be naive. It's one thing for a marriage to go wrong, but it's another thing for a husband to attempt to hurt, even kill, his pregnant wife." Chyna leaned her car seat back.

"I think you're exaggerating, as usual."

"Go ahead, don't take this seriously. It could cost you and your baby's life."

"I don't think he's that dangerous. He just likes to unnerve me. He likes to break me down, then point out that the Doc isn't in control of her own life. You see, it's always about control."

"What on earth do you mean?" Chyna snapped her seat upright.

"He...he likes to argue with me until I'm so upset I cry. Once he brings me to tears, he seems satisfied he made the Doc cry and he quits picking on me."

"Do you realize how sick that is? I mean it. You still want to make this marriage work?" Chyna waited as her sister paused.

"No. I know now that my marriage is unsalvageable. The trust is gone. Maybe if we went to a counselor, we might save our marriage, but not the love. At one time I would have done anything. Sounds strange coming from me, doesn't it?"

"I think it's the most sense you've made in months. I agree that once the trust is gone, you can kiss the marriage goodbye. If John ever betrayed me, I'd never be able to take him back."

"Trevor didn't betray me, like with another woman, but he tried controlling me. I'm not saying what he did was any less damaging, but it isn't the same thing."

"I agree. I hate to tell you this, but I learned yesterday that he's already seeing someone else." Chyna hadn't planned on telling Abi that bit of news, at least not until after she settled down with her baby. But the timing seemed right. She had to face the truth, better now than later.

"He is? Do I know her?"

The strain in Abi's voice made tears sting Chyna's eyes. "I'm sorry. I just thought you should know."

"He just wanted unprotected sex with me, and he's been with another woman?"

"I didn't say they had sex, I didn't see that. But they were pretty friendly at Jakers." Chyna closed her eyes, blocking out the image of her hurting sister. How much crap could one woman take? Chyna leaned back against the seat.

"Well, that's the last straw. It's over. The marriage failed. I want him out of my life." Her last words choked off with emotional tears.

"I know you don't want to hear this, but there are other guys out there. There are men who will treat you with kindness and love. They aren't all shit-heads."

"The last thing I'm thinking about is *Mr. Right*. I doubt I'll ever trust another man again."

Chyna didn't blame Abi for feeling that way. It didn't seem right. "Give it time. But in order to get on with your life, you have to face things. You must realize Trevor can't be trusted. File for a divorce and don't put his name on the baby's birth certificate."

"Why would I do that?"

"File for divorce on desertion charges and maybe you have a better chance of getting full custody of your baby after she's born." Chyna could only hope Abi was listening.

"I don't know. I can't file for the divorce. I'll let him do that. I don't want my daughter believing I gave up. He did this to us, let him file."

Again Chyna snapped her car seat forward. "Geez Louise. You can be stubborn, can't you? I think it's a mistake, but it's your business."

"Since when, Chyna? I never thought I'd hear those words from you! You've disliked him from the day you met him. I should have listened to you. You always seem to have a sense for people, kinda like a dog."

"Thanks for the correlation. Trevor makes me mad. If ever I thought there was a good use for a hit man, he is it." Chyna meant every word.

"I wish you wouldn't talk like that. He'll get his due on judgment day."

"Sooner if I've got anything to do with it! I'm still in my car, why don't you let me come and get you?"

"Oh...oh, no!"

"Abi, what's wrong?"

"My water just broke!"

"Stay there and I'll be right over." Chyna grabbed for the seat belt.

"No, please call me a cab. I've been having contractions ever since Trevor's been here. I don't think I can wait until you get here."

"I'll call a cab." There didn't seem much point in calling Trevor. He didn't care anyway. Chyna backed her car out of the garage and headed down the street. How

could he not want his own child? How could he not want Abi? She gave their relationship one hundred fifty percent and barely got five percent back for her efforts.

Abi looked down at the chubby round face of her daughter and marveled at the wonder of it all. She'd waited her whole life for this moment, and it was worth the wait. Kelly had to be the most beautiful child she'd ever laid eyes on, with soft red hair, blue eyes and pouting pink lips. Abi counted ten fingers and ten toes.

God had given her a healthy, precious daughter. "Thank you for the gift. She is so beautiful," Abi whispered, kissing the top of Kelly's head. She hadn't felt this happy in years.

On her wedding day she'd promised herself this marriage was going to be everything she'd always wanted: a house to call home, a back yard to look out on knowing one day her children would be playing on the swing set...and a husband to share it all with. A husband to love and be loved by. Her mate to share life with. Nothing had prepared her for the disaster her life had become.

"Well, you got what you wanted."

Abi jumped, then stared up into the cold grey eyes of Trevor Madden. "Meaning?" She pulled Kelly closer to her chest.

"This is all you wanted."

"Are you saying I wanted a baby, not you? Don't be ridiculous. It didn't matter to me whether we had a boy or a girl. But you only wanted a son. I'm right, aren't I?"

"I already have a daughter. If you had aborted we could have tried for a boy. You could have at least given it some thought. We don't need a pack of kids; one son would have been enough."

Abi fought the tears that swelled. "Look at her, Trevor. She's beautiful. You wanted me to kill her. Can you honestly say you still wish I'd have done that?"

"She was nothing when I suggested we try for a boy. I gave you a chance to make it work for us. You didn't even give it some thought. You did it your way, now you got what you wanted."

"You hear what you're saying, Trevor? I have wanted a baby my whole life. You had no right to ask me to do that." The conversation wore heavy on Abi's nerves and energy. She struggled to keep alert.

"You know what I wanted. I wasn't asking for that much."

Abi adjusted her position, struggling to get more comfortable. "Look at her, Trevor. Look at her. Isn't she beautiful? How can you not feel pride and happiness about what our love has produced? Tell me you feel nothing." Abi closed her eyes, praying he'd tell her this birth did mean something to him. Abi wanted to hear that he was happy with their beautiful daughter sleeping content on her mother's chest.

"I don't have the fairy tale answer you're looking for, Abi. You always want things to be perfect. Even if things were perfect, you'd find something wrong. Must be that psychology shit you're always shoving down my throat."

Revenge

Abi felt the sting of his words. This should have been such a happy memory. "That's not fair, Trevor. I tried very hard to make our marriage work." He didn't say a word and she sighed. "I'll be moving into an apartment or house with Kelly. Are you planning on being her father?"

"I'm not sure."

"I know our relationship, our marriage is over. But I can't imagine you turning your back on your daughter. She had nothing to do with what went wrong between us." Abi choked back the emotions that restricted her voice. He walked across the room and stared out the window. Her body trembled as she waited for his answer.

"You know, Abi, we'll just have to wait and see."

She remained silent, digesting his words. "Why don't you give Kelly a try? That's all she really needs. She needs her father, Trevor." Kelly wiggled and Abi rubbed the infant's back in an effort to calm them both.

"I've got to get going. My folks will be stopping by later to see Kelly. Keep in mind they're my folks. Don't go crying your hard-luck story to them."

Anger filled Abi. "Why are you being so cruel? I've just given you a beautiful daughter." Trevor opened the door and briefly waved his hand over his shoulder. He left the room without a word.

Her husband was not the man she thought he was. Five years ago he possessed sensitivity and kindness. That certainly wasn't the case now. Would Trevor do anything to have a son? Abi kissed Kelly's chubby hand. "Did your daddy push me down those stairs like Aunt Chyna thinks?" The question prickled the hair on the back of her neck.

Chapter Four

Chyna pulled into the narrow driveway of Kathy Madden. It might not be Kosher to question Trevor's ex-wife about her marriage, but Chyna wasn't one for protocol. For a brief moment, Chyna considered turning around, then quickly rushed up the walk and knocked on the door. "Kathy?" she asked, when the screen door opened.

"You must be Abi's sister, Chyna."

Chyna nodded. "I know this may seem strange, my being here, but I have to ask you a few questions. I don't want to pry, nor do I want to upset you, but may I come in so we can talk?"

"Good grief, where's my manners? Come on in. I made us some lemonade after you called."

Chyna entered the double-wide trailer, noticing it was plain and country, as was the tall woman before her. Kathy had short mousey brown hair. Her jeans and sleeveless plaid blouse boasted simplicity. "Lemonade sounds great."

Sitting at the table, she glanced around the room while Kathy filled two glasses. Chyna's tongue felt heavy. Raising her heel off the floor, she bounced her leg up and down. This wasn't going to be as easy as she'd thought.

"I keep trying to figure out what on earth you would want to talk to me about."

"I don't know how to ask this delicately—"

"No need for holding back with me. Straight out is the way I like things."

"Okay, straight out it is. When you were pregnant with Ambur, did Trevor know the baby was a girl before she was born?"

"Hell, yes. That started our troubles. He wanted a son. Macho guy thing I suppose. I had about enough of his drinking and buddies and was about to leave him, then I found out I was pregnant with Ambur. I didn't want to raise a child alone, so I stayed."

"Did he...did he ask you to abort the baby and try for a boy?" Surprise spread across Kathy's face.

"Now how could you know that? It's not exactly a common request."

Chyna drew in a breath. "So you're saying yes?"

"Yes. He wanted a boy. When he asked me to abort the baby I thought he was kidding. When I realized he wasn't, well, our marriage went down hill fast. I still tried

to make our marriage work. But Ambur was a constant reminder of what he didn't want. He started telling his family lies about me."

"What kind of lies?"

"Dumb stuff, like I didn't want to go anywhere with him. Like, I refused to let him hold Ambur without making a scene first. Like, I was keeping him from being with Ambur. Like, I refused to give him time with her without a big fight first. Must I say more? The courts decided on our parenting plan and our divorce. He had almost nothing to do with me until he married your sister. Now suddenly he's a kind, understanding ex."

"You have any idea why the change?"

"Sure. He's doing to her, what he did to me. He doesn't want me to corroborate Abi's story, so he's befriending me. If I go against him, my life will be miserable. He can do it. I've been there before and I don't intend on going through that again."

"So what you're saying is you're Trevor's new best friend?" Kathy winced.

"I'm sorry, but that's just how it's got to be."

"One more question. This may shock you, and I have to ask you to keep this in confidence." Chyna hesitated, took a sip of lemonade, and then cleared her throat.

"Fire away."

"Do you think Trevor is capable of ...would he...I mean—"

"What?"

"It's hard to put it into words, but I'm convinced Trevor pushed Abi down a flight of stairs, on purpose, to make her baby abort."

"Some things don't change."

"Kathy, did he do that to you, too?" A chill traveled up and down her arms.

"I can't prove anything. I was walking from the car to the house, it was really icy out. Trevor said he grabbed my shoulder to hold me up, but I went down. I swear I felt him push me, but he insisted he missed. I bruised my hip but Ambur was just fine."

"You think he'll try to make his marriage work with Abi now that they have Kelly?"

"Not on your life. He'll be looking for a new wife, someone to give him that son. Both Abi and I went against his wishes, we challenged his authority. We went from being his chocolate éclair to being his day old bagel."

"But that's ridiculous. You or Abi could have given him another child, a boy. I don't understand his thinking."

"Oh, I do. He only wants one child, a son. A house full of kids isn't his idea of bliss. He wants a submissive wife, one who will let him go out with the boys without putting up a fuss. Someone who will make his meals, keep his house and laundry clean without complaining. Someone who will make love at the drop of his shorts and be grateful for the attention."

"I hear you. Somehow I expected nothing less from Prince Charming. What Abi saw in him, I can't fathom. I'm sorry, I guess—"

"I had the shades dropped down on that one, too. By the time I pulled up the blinds, it was too late. But, I know what you mean. I've asked myself that question for years."

Chyna stood. "Thanks for talking to me, Kathy. I know it wasn't easy."

"I don't let things about Trevor bother me no more. I've accepted he wants nothing to do with Ambur or me. We've been divorced for five years and I even fancied the idea we'd still patch things up. He married Abi, so I got over that notion, too."

Chyna made no comment. She walked out to her car, gave Kathy a wave, then slid into her VW. Chyna found herself disliking Trevor more than before, which didn't seem possible.

Abi picked up her daughter and held her close. She was leaving the hospital and returning to a hotel, until she found an apartment. In all her years of counseling, she'd never encountered such a cold situation as this.

It would have been easy to cry and ask why. It would have been even easier to feel sorry for herself and Kelly, but that wouldn't accomplish anything either. Matter of fact, the more upset she became and the more she dwelled on the sadness of the situation, the more it hurt her and Kelly. It certainly wasn't hurting Trevor.

"Hey, you two ready?" Chyna asked, grabbing the suitcase.

"Ready as we'll ever be, right Kelly?" Abi refused to look at Chyna; afraid the tears would start and never stop.

"Come home with me. John and I would love to have you. Stay as long as you like. You know the basement area is never used. There's a whole house down there. You wouldn't have to come up for years!"

"Funny!"

"Well, just being a sister. Honest, Abi, you don't have to go back to a hotel. God, that's so pathetic."

"Chyna, please don't start. I've made up my mind. I'll start looking for an apartment tomorrow."

"How can you be so calm about it all? I'd be a basket case." Abi didn't reply and Chyna's mood shifted. "Can I come looking at apartments with you? I could help with Kelly and—"

"We'd love your help, wouldn't we, Kelly? You want Aunt Chyna to spend the day looking for a new home with us? See her smile? She's all for it."

Chyna rolled her eyes. "How can you be so patient with Trevor? I don't think I'd want him to be part of Kelly's life. If I were in your shoes, I'd give him a hard kick in the family jewels and send him packing. I'd bet my last nickel you'd go home with him today, if he asked. Right?"

"I would have, not that long ago. But once he put me in that hotel and that thing about the fall, well, I don't trust him. All the love is gone. I woke this morning and realized I was glad we weren't going home with him. I'm not even sure I want him around Kelly. Knowing that he tried to—"

"Kill you both?"

"I guess, if I'm honest with myself, yes. That's what's sticking in my craw. I thought he should at least be a father to her, but I'm not sure he deserves that privilege. Look at

Revenge

her, Chyna. She's precious." Looking down at her sleeping child filled Abi with emotion. "She's the only good thing that has come from my marriage to Trevor."

"I won't let him destroy either of you. You may be my younger sister, but you've always been there for me. I won't desert you or let you down."

Abi flicked away the tear rolling down her cheek. She opened her free arm and welcomed a smothering hug from Chyna. They'd been through a lot over the years, but they'd always been there for each other. "Thank you," Abi whispered.

Trevor kicked the flat tire. "Damn it to hell." He might understand one nail, but three. Someone had done it on purpose...like some teenagers out for kicks. Damn kids. He slid the jack under the truck frame and cranked out his anger.

Chyna had been sitting in her car watching as he'd gone into the hospital. She'd glared back at him when he'd glanced her way. Would she have done this? He didn't like her, never did. She hovered over Abi and it annoyed the shit out of him. John wasn't any better. Trevor cranked on the bolt, it resisted. He pushed hard and it gave way, jamming his fist into the ground. "Damn it!"

Things could have been different. Abi seemed so meek and quiet at first. She never argued, must have been her training. She went along with just about anything. Once they were married, it seemed like she changed over night.

One thing was for sure, Abi would pay for going against him. He'd warned her and by God, she had it coming. He'd file for the divorce, but she'd never live long enough to sign the damn thing.

He had let Kathy have her divorce and her kid, and he'd been paying for it ever since. No way in hell was he going to let another woman make a fool of him. Abi could have taken care of the problem when it was small and easy to deal with. Now he'd have to take matters into his own hands.

Times were tough these days, especially for ranchers. How could she think they needed to raise a passel of kids? They only needed one son to carry on the family name. Maybe he should have told her that if they didn't produce a son, he wouldn't get the ranch. His father reminded him every chance he got that Jenny had a son. He hated his sister for that. "Damn it to hell, nothing ever went right!"

Abi rocked Kelly in her arms and drew in a long, steady breath. Her gaze settled on the still unpacked boxes, the un-hung pictures, and the stack of unpaid bills mounting in a heap on the floor.

"Well, baby girl, we have a place to call home." It was a cute little place she'd put a sizable down payment on from her savings. Good thing she'd never told Trevor about the tidy stash she'd squirreled away before they got married. Between his drinking and gambling most of it would have been gone by now.

Abi smiled at her daughter. It felt good to take charge and move forward – without Trevor. The house was perfect. It even had a nice room near the front door that she could easily turn into a therapy-consultation room, to restart her practice. Earlier she had contacted and set appointments for a few of her old clients who hadn't acquired a new therapist. It was one of many bold steps Abi had taken in the past few days.

Things were starting to fit into place. She didn't fight the single tear that rolled down her cheek. It all seemed a little empty. She needed to have closure with her marriage and that wasn't going to happen until the divorce was final.

Humming softly to Kelly as she rocked, Abi thought about how Trevor had shared the disappointments of his failed marriage to Kathy. He'd wanted to give his daughter love and support, but Kathy fought him all the way.

It'd all been a lie. Abi wondered how she could have been so blind. The phone rang, causing her to bolt. Kelly cried from the shrill ring.

"Hey, sis, how's it going?"

"Hi, Chyna."

"Did I wake Kelly? I'm sorry. How you two doing?"

"We're rocking, getting in some needed rest."

"Still not sleeping? I thought I'd come over and help you do some unpacking. It's not good to have things piled around you, it's depressing."

"Very."

"That's it, isn't it?"

"What?"

"You're depressed. You know there is medication for that. I'd be depressed if I were going through what you are, too. Why don't you make an appointment with my doctor? Besides, you know all the symptoms, and you know the healthy thing to do."

"Chyna, hello, Doctor Chyna? I'm not depressed. I've already started my practice back up. As for helping us unpack, you're welcome anytime! It's a chore I hate."

"Are you covering up? Antidepressants do help."

"Right, help Trevor you mean."

"What the shit you talking about?"

"I go on antidepressants and he'll try to prove I'm not a fit mom. That I pose a threat to Kelly and he'll take her away from me."

"Is that what you think? He doesn't want Kelly. Heck, he tried killing her."

"How do I prove that in court? It's my word against his. No, I'm not taking any chances."

"Listen to me. I'm taking a mild antidepressant; do you think I'm out of control?"

"Of course not."

"Well, then why should it be any different for you? It runs in our family, you know."

"What does?"

"Depression. It's like a chemical imbalance and should be treated. Let me call and make an appointment."

"Chyna, I appreciate your concern. I'm really doing fine and so is Kelly. Actually I'm doing better than fine. I didn't realize how stressful my life was with Trevor. I have a whole new understanding of battered or controlled women."

"I guess I'll trust you on this one. But if you feel you're losing your grip, you just let me know. Has Trevor filed for a divorce yet?"

"He said he hasn't had the time to. He hasn't seen Kelly since that day at the hospital. I prefer it that way."

"You're better off without him. File for a divorce yourself."

Abi paused, and then answered, "You know I won't file for a divorce. That's the way it has to be with me."

"Do you hear what you're saying? Abi, don't cling to something that you imagine you want. If he wanted you, hon, he'd be begging you girls to go home with him."

Chyna, I'm not clinging to Trevor. Understand I'm handling this, but it all takes time. I need to go through all the phases of separation and then divorce. I just can't leap ahead in my life without experiencing all the emotions and steps along the way."

"You're analyzing this too much. But, do what you gotta do."

Abi sneezed into the phone. "Sorry. I've been thinking, Chyna. It seems Trevor is concerned with only one thing, a male heir to his father's ranch. Maybe he doesn't feel complete without a son. I should have seen that. Maybe I could have gotten down to the root of the problem and helped him."

"You've always thought his problems were something you should have the magical answers to. When are you going to realize they're his problems and not yours?"

Abi rolled her eyes upward. "Chyna, I've never thought I was so good a therapist that I could solve everyone's problems like magic. I like what I do for a living. I believe I'm good at it, but I don't think I'm anyone's savior. I've certainly proved that with my own marriage. You need to lighten up."

"When Trevor is no longer a threat, a thorn in your spine, a manipulator in your life, then I'll lighten up. Until you're free to live your life with Kelly, without the threat of that man, I have no intention of taking anything lightly."

"Alright, I'll respect that. Now, you think you can come over here and help us set up home? I have my first session on Monday, and that room really needs some work."

"You bet. Say, John is flying to Arizona today. I could bring over my pajamas, a bag of microwave popcorn, six-pack of Pepsi, and a good movie. We'll unpack 'till we drop, then have an old fashion pajama party. We'll sleep on the floor, instead of you two spending one more night in that hotel."

"It's a deal. Say, Chyna?"

"Yeh, what?"

"Thank you."

"Actually, you're doing me a favor. I get so lonesome when John goes on these trips. Seems like he's gone more than he's here."

"Are things okay there? John and you?" Abi asked, hoping her sister would be spared the indignities of a bad marriage.

"We're fine. Sort of like two ships passing in the night, as the cliché goes. He's like a roommate, instead of a husband. I'm not complaining, but I get lonesome."

"I'm sorry. I had no idea his work took him away so much. Have you guys discussed making some career changes? Or, maybe you need to plan things when you are together, making the most of the time you have together."

"John is way too busy to plan anything so structured. We'll work it out, don't worry."

Abi sensed trouble between John and Chyna, even if she hadn't realized or admitted it yet.

Chapter Five

Chyna stepped through the doorway of Abi's hotel room. The charred remains caused her to gasp.

"Scary, huh?"

Chyna jumped, then turned to find her sister standing behind her. "If we hadn't done movies and popcorn last night, you and my precious niece would be as charred at this room."

"I don't want to think about it."

"The fire started in the bedroom, that's what the fireman said. You realize this wasn't an accident, don't you? Someone set it up. I think that someone was Trevor."

"Chyna, you don't know that. Trevor may be a jerk some times, but he's not a killer."

"Didn't you say that he wanted to stay in control? Control is what it's all about." She waited while Abi thought things over before speaking, something that always annoyed Chyna.

"Control isn't always...well, it can turn to murder, like an abusive husband whose wife is moving out and he takes it personal. But, remember, in my case, Trevor already moved us out of his house himself. He'd have no reason to try and scare us this way."

"Abi, take the blinders off. He's not trying to scare you; this was meant to kill you and Kelly." Abi turned pale, then walked toward the blackened window.

"I think you're wrong. I don't know who set this fire, but it wasn't Trevor."

"Okay, innocent 'till proven guilty. I'm going to find proof. When I do, you and Kelly will be free of him, because he'll be serving time in the slammer!"

"You sound so bitter. Hatred only hurts the person hating. You should let me handle Trevor; after all, he's my problem, not yours."

Chyna slipped her hand through Abi's arm and guided her away from the window. "I think we need to do lunch. My treat."

"Your treat? Will wonders never cease?"

"Very funny," Chyna added, chuckling. They walked out of the room and Chyna gave it a final glance. It made her shudder.

The minute they found their table at Charlotte's Web, Abi headed toward the bathroom with Kelly for a diaper change. In those brief minutes Chyna reached a

serious decision. One she wouldn't share with Abi. One Chyna couldn't share with anyone, not even her own husband.

Her morning at the library had been enlightening. There were several ways to commit the perfect murder. The key was to make it look like an accident. Another important factor was the fewer people knowing about it, the better chance of getting away with it.

What would Abi think of her sister if she ever found out? No one would find out. Chyna never thought of herself being capable of even thinking of killing someone. But, no one ever threatened the life of someone she loved before either.

Abi would never know how close she came to dying. She would never believe that Trevor rigged her hotel room to kill her and Kelly in a fire. What a horrifying way to die.

But Chyna believed it and knew something had to be done. Her fears were confirmed by one of the firemen on the scene. Her friend confided that a wild and hysterical Trevor had charged past the firemen, heading straight for the burning hotel room. It took three of them to keep him from rushing into the uncontrolled flames to save his wife and daughter. His acting job had stopped when they told him no one was home; his family was safe. His shocked, almost disappointed reaction had realism to it. He was the prime suspect in the arson. Chyna knew then and there, Trevor had tried to kill this wife and daughter.

She wouldn't let him succeed. If she had to protect Abi and Kelly, she'd do it at any cost.

"Penny for your thoughts."

Chyna glanced up at her sister. The months of suffering showed in her face. "You actually think my thoughts could be worth a penny? I'm shocked!" A soft smile played across Abi's face, and Chyna answered with one of her own.

"What would I do without you?"

"You'd be fine, besides I haven't done all that much. You're amazing the way you've pulled it together. May I ask what's been going on?"

"I didn't want to say anything. I know how you worry, and how little latitude you give Trevor."

"Damn straight! You're not going back to him, are you?" Chyna felt a lump rise in her throat, air seemed sucked from her lungs like a balloon sputtering and gasping before lying completely airless on the ground.

"No, I can't seem to even look at him. He's filing for a divorce, but he's also filing for joint custody of Kelly."

"Now he wants to play daddy. Doesn't want to pay the piper, eh?" Chyna asked, surprised by this turn of events.

"Maybe he's decided he can't turn away from her. She does need a father, her father. The only thing is...I don't trust him. I have a feeling he has some motive that will work in his favor. Then, I worry I'm not giving him a chance to be her father and that's not right on my part. I can't help but think I shouldn't trust him, yet, everyone deserves a second chance."

"Abi, what he's done to you and Kelly...he doesn't deserve squat. Come on, girl. Think about all the days and nights you've cried your eyes out. The hurt, the desertion, the humiliation, the non-support, the loveless gestures and need I go on?" Chyna fell silent.

"I hear what you're saying, I really do. But, if we could mend those bridges, if we could put the past behind us and build a friendship of sorts, I owe that much to Kelly."

Chyna fought the rising frustration. "Listen to me, Abi. I know there isn't any proof yet, but Detective Sandler told me that he believes Trevor rigged that fire in your hotel room, too."

"If there was proof, then I'd be the first to believe, but until then, there's no way I'll accuse him of that heinous crime."

"I'm sorry. You want the truth or do you want to hide behind a few lies?" She hated being so blunt with her sister, she'd suffered so much.

"You know I want the truth. Did this Detective Sandler say why he suspects Trevor, or have you been pointing the finger?"

"Don't be so quick to blame me, Abi. No, I don't give a rat's ass about Trevor. Never did and never will. But I do care about you and Kelly. So I'll be blunt and I'll be honest. I didn't tell the police I think Trevor is guilty, but I didn't say I thought he was innocent either."

"When did this Detective Sandler—"

"Sandler. By the way, he's one good looking man. Tall, gorgeous red hair, handsome and what a smile—"

"Chyna, stop it! I'm not on the market. I'm trying to get my life in order and plan a happy life for my daughter."

"You stop it! Your life isn't over because your marriage failed. I think you're too smart to believe it's in Kelly's best interest for mom and dad to be together. But that doesn't mean you have to do it alone. You won't be ready for a relationship right away, but don't shut yourself off to men either. Realize one thing, not all men are jerks. Look at John, well, maybe you shouldn't." Chyna giggled. "Anyway, be ready for Sandler to stop by and talk to you today."

"What? I don't want to talk to him."

"Why? Afraid of what he'll tell you? You want the truth, but only if it's the truth you want to hear. Abi, wake up, take the blinders off. Face this once and for all."

"Face what? What are you getting at, Chyna?"

"You really don't get it, do you?"

"Please enlighten me."

Chyna knew her sister enough to know she had turned off reasoning. She wasn't listening, so now wasn't the time to push her. "I'm sorry, Abi. Tell you what, you talk with Detective Sandler. I'm sure he'll be a gentleman and won't push you into any kind of confession. I'll keep out of it. I won't cast any suspicions on Trevor; I'll do that for you, not him. But, if I find out any information that proves he was anywhere near your hotel yesterday—"

"What do you mean?"

"Hello! What do you think I mean?"

"Of course he was at the hotel yesterday. I was cleaning up the room and packing the last of my boxes when he came to see Kelly."

"And?"

"And what?"

"Geez Louise, Abi. Must I drag every word from you? And, did you leave him alone at any time? Did he have a chance to rig the fire?"

"Don't be ridi...alone...you can't be serious."

"He was, wasn't he? The bastard!"

"Chyna! He watched Kelly while I wiped down the shower."

"You trusted him to watch her; after all he's done to you?"

"I was in the next room, Chyna. That's not exactly leaving her with him."

"I know it's none of my business. Hell, yes it is my business. You're my sister and damn him for putting you through all this. How dare he expect—"

"Chyna, you're over-stepping your bounds. I'm a big girl. I'm not stupid and I don't need you to constantly remind me of all the mistakes I've made in the past. I know what I'm doing, and I have to do it my way. He wouldn't hurt Kelly, I'm positive."

"He didn't know you weren't sleeping at the hotel last night, right?"

"No. I didn't know myself until you decided on the slumber party."

"I rest my case."

"You are starting to get on my nerves. Whoever set that fire did it for another reason. You know it could have been one of my clients. A couple even comes to mind."

"Okay, maybe that's somewhat true. But, I think Trevor had a reason for being so willing to watch Kelly, an unsuspecting opportunity to rig that fire."

"Chyna, you're pushing this. Don't make me get angry with you."

Chyna rolled her eyes upward. "Honey, I wish you would get angry. Wake up! Shout! Get damn angry! Stomp your feet! Scream! When you're done, when you've shaken the cobwebs out, look at things in your honest way. Pretend your life is one of your patients, and then decide how Trevor truly appears to you. Do that, Abi. Use all your psychological schooling. You'll be surprised what answers you'll come up with. By the way, if you do decide to do a little fooling around, be sure to use protection?"

"What?"

"Protection? You know, the little rain coat thing."

"Chyna, you do push it to the limit, don't you?"

Chyna giggled. "Just joking. Geez Louise, you have to stop taking everything so seriously."

"I don't know, Chyna. I guess I wasn't given your sense of humor and the happy-go-lucky nature you were blessed with."

"Ok, so I've been a bit wound lately. I've had good reasons." Chyna only wanted to help Abi, but it seemed things were growing tense between them. It wasn't at all what Chyna had intended. "I love you, sis. I'm sorry I'm being so pig-headed about Trevor. I mean well...I just wanted you to know that."

"I know, Chyna, and I love you for it."

Revenge

Trevor smiled as he drove home. Doc had actually believed he wanted to spend time with Kelly. He knew she would. After all, she had a real hang-up when it came to fathers.

The police knew he'd been at the hotel room earlier in the day and he looked guilty as hell. How could he have been so stupid? Their questions pissed him off, which only made him look guiltier. So he messed up with the fire, he still had options. He could hire someone to make sure Abi and Kelly had a fatal accident. He'd learned one thing about that; there wasn't a lack of guys willing to do a woman in, but an infant was another subject.

He didn't want to take the chance of hiring someone to kill them. There was always that chance it could be traced back to him. There was a better way. He could stalk her; make her nervous, neurotic, and even suicidal. If she didn't do herself in, she'd be in a position to be admitted to an institution or proved unfit to be a mother. Then, he'd get Kelly taken away from her, his goal accomplished. If she committed suicide, he couldn't be charged with her murder, and he'd have custody to do what he wanted to with the kid. Hell, he might even sell her and make a profit. Either way he'd win.

There seemed something satisfying in sending a doctor like her to the edge. He'd have to find a way to get Chyna out of the picture, though. She was one nosey, meddling, even dangerous broad. Yes, he'd concentrate on taking care of Chyna, before paving Abi's road to the nut house.

Chyna glanced across the table at John. "What do you think? I know you want me to stay out of Abi's life, but I can't."

"You really want to know what I think? You never listen to what I have to say, so why should I bother saying it?"

"You're being a jerk."

"That's because you've been extremely meddlesome lately. You should consider for one moment that if Abi and Trevor do make up, you might be castrated from their lives."

"It's crossed my mind. But I don't think they'll ever reconcile. Abi's too smart for that. She admitted the marriage is over. I believe Trevor is trying to kill Abi and Kelly. Call it instinct, call it sisterly love, call it anything you want! I don't trust him any further than I would a fly on shit."

"Great analogy. I have to agree, I have similar feelings, maybe not as strong as yours, but I wouldn't put anything past Trevor. Saying that makes me worry about you."

"Me? Why would you worry about me?"

"Think, Chyna! You think that worthless piece of shit is trying to kill your sister and her baby. What makes you think he wouldn't be capable of trying to get even with you, too. You have given her advice, supported her decision to—"

"We!"

"Okay, we have given her advice and have supported her decision to leave him. You haven't exactly been coy with your feelings toward him. I have to be in Texas for a good month, maybe longer. Maybe you should come with me."

"Yeh, right. While you search for structural damage on building after building, what am I suppose to do? Besides, I can't leave Abi here by herself. Not now, especially when the fire looks like it incriminates Trevor. He's up to something."

"If he is, let the police decide what it is. You have to learn to let Abi take care of her own life. She is trained in how to handle relationships, give her a chance to do just that."

"Just because she has training, well, I think it makes it worse. She doesn't want to face certain things, because someone in her position should know better."

"Give her space, that's all I'm saying. I guess it's better if you stay here, but you keep a distance. You have no right to decide what Abi should or shouldn't do. It's her life. She screws it up, that's her choice. Not yours! You listening?"

"You don't have to be so harsh. I love Abi and I want to protect her."

"Stay out of it. Maybe you should use some of that energy on me, after all, I'm going to be gone a whole month."

Chyna glanced at John, knowing what he meant. She really wasn't in the mood and hoped he'd been too busy packing to think of it. "You leave in less than an hour. Are you done packing?" He quickly glanced at his watch.

"Glad you reminded me. I need to change clothes and get going. Guess it'll have to keep, eh?"

She smiled, hoping he didn't notice the relief she felt. "When you get back, maybe we should discuss taking a vacation."

"About all the time I'll have is discussing one. I'll be so far behind. I'll have to set up teams to do the work that I'm inspecting. Maybe you should plan a trip to get away."

"Maybe I'll do just that." She turned her back to him, unsure what to feel. "You change clothes and I'll put your suitcases in the car. You sure you don't want me to drop you off at the airport?"

"No need. I don't like the airport scene. Goodbyes—"

"I know, should be done at home not in front of the general public." She didn't wait for a response. She grabbed both suitcases and headed out of the bedroom.

"That's my girl."

Chyna rolled her eyes upward and grit her teeth. She hated it when he made comments like that. What was more irritating—he knew it. He was leaving for a month and all he could do was make petty comments. She opened the car door, tossed both suitcases in, and then slammed it shut. This thing with Abi was making her uptight. It most likely had nothing to do with John, he just happened to be the recipient of her foul mood.

"Did I say something to anger you?"

Chyna jumped. "No, I'm sorry, John. This thing with Abi is the problem. You take care of yourself. I'll miss you."

Revenge

"You stay out of Abi's business while I'm gone. Maybe you should concentrate on taking that vacation. You have been uptight lately."

Chyna felt like giving him a piece of her mind. Since he was leaving she clenched her teeth together.

"I'd better get going."

She moved toward him, gave him a quick hug, then stepped back. She realized they were in the driveway and he held back. "Be careful in those buildings, don't take any unnecessary chances."

"You know me, safety first. I'll call you some evenings, no promises since I'm sure there'll be many late nights working."

"If I'm not home try me over at Abi's house."

"If you're not home, I'll try the next night."

His comment annoyed her more than she cared to admit. She watched him slide into the company car, hook his safety belt, then back out of the driveway. He was adjusting the rear-view mirror as he drove away. She realized he didn't even give her a second glance. She didn't want to admit it hurt her feelings; most likely John had a lot on his mind. Sometimes she wondered if he ever gave her a second thought once he left the house.

Chapter Six

Thinking about Chyna's comments angered Abi, since they were making sense. Why did her sister hate Trevor so much? She always had a strong dislike for him and he knew it. Chyna didn't dislike too many people. She'd always bragged she had a dog's instinct about people, sensing the good or the bad.

The phone played the Last of the Mohicans theme song. Abi reached across the table, snatching up the blue cell. "Hello?"

She waited for a response, but none came. She could tell someone was on the other end, she could hear breathing. "Hello," she said in a louder, almost irritated tone. She slammed it back into the cradle. It was annoying when people couldn't just admit they'd dialed a wrong number.

The doorbell rang. Abi jumped, then reluctantly shuffled across the room. She peeked through the window and saw a handsome man holding a badge toward her. She opened the door, leaving the chain connected. "Yes?"

"Mrs. Trevor Madden?"

"Yes, I'm Abi Madden."

"I'm Detective Sandler. I have a few questions for you, concerning the fire at your hotel room. May I come in, please?"

"Yes. Chyna told me you'd be stopping by." She unlocked and opened the door. "Come in." The man collided with the wind chime as he stepped inside. "Sorry about that, I should move it further inside or put it in a corner."

"I find it rather awakening. I can see it being useful in surprising a burglar in the dead of the night."

Abi couldn't help laughing. It'd been a long time since she'd even felt like laughing. How odd this stranger should make her realize that. "You've got a point. Come on in. Would you like coffee, pop or water?"

"A glass of water would be great. Thank you."

Abi led Detective Sandler into the kitchen. "Have a chair." She pulled a chair slightly out as she passed by. "So, what kind of questions do you have for me, Detective Sandler?"

"It's Miles, Ma'am."

"Okay, Miles it is, if you'll call me anything but Ma'am!" His laugh came deep, warm and explosive.

"You're much too beautiful to be labeled Ma'am, anyway. Abi it is."

She paused to glance at him. Was he really this easy to like, or was she so vulnerable right now that any man who paid her a compliment would seem desirable?

Placing two glasses of water on the table, she sat across from him. "Fire away." She hadn't expected another of his laughs so soon.

"I'm sorry. It's just your comment...fire away. It struck me—"

"Oh, I didn't realize. The fire..." She smiled and let the sentence fade.

"I understand your husband...uh ex-husband..."

She noticed he stared at her while he stumbled through the confusing part of her marital status. "Husband...soon to be ex-husband."

"I'm sorry." He cleared his throat, then continued. "Didn't you just have a baby?"

"Yes, but we've had our share of problems."

"How bad are the problems? I know it seems none of my business, but it could have something to do with the intentional fire, that could have killed both you and your daughter."

"You certain it was intentional?"

"Certain."

"Trevor and I have been separated for some time."

"Some time?"

Abi pressed her palms across her cheeks and closed her eyes. "We dated for five years and got married. We decided to get pregnant right away and eight months later he decided he needed space and time to think. He moved me into a hotel and promised to take us home after Kelly was born. That didn't happen, so I'm in the process of pulling my life back together with Kelly." She wiped at a single tear and took a deep breath. "Now you know all there is to know about me and were afraid to ask."

"Got more than I bargained for. You've held nothing back, I hope."

"No. You know everything, except—"

"Except?"

"I have to decide if joint custody would be best for Kelly. Of course the final decision isn't in my hands."

"He asked you to give him joint custody?"

"He is her father. I would hope we could be civilized acquaintances, rather than enemies."

"A little Freudian work there, Doctor Madden?"

"Oh, I didn't know you knew...I mean it's no secret, but you know I do counseling?"

"I'm a detective, Mrs. Madden. I wasn't snooping, it's my job."

"Oh, I didn't mean to insinuate, I just find it embarrassing to be in this predicament. I counsel couples with troubled relationships. Seems I'm not doing so hot with my own. So much has happened since we got married. I refuse to be hurt by Trevor again. I'd like to say I want to save my marriage, but I don't. I want to be married; I just don't want to be married to Trevor."

"Dang, Doctor Madden, I can't say I blame you much. Under these circumstances, I wouldn't suggest you make any efforts to reconcile until we prove who rigged that fire."

"Are you really suggesting you believe Trevor did it? I know we've had differences—"

"Lady—"

"Abi."

"Abi, differences wouldn't begin to explain how Trevor has treated you. I've been in this business for ten years. I've never heard of a man putting his nearly nine-month pregnant wife in a hotel. I'm a man and it sticks in my craw. It's cold. It's calculated. I'm sorry, Ma'...Abi, but my advice is steer clear until we get a handle on it. I'm serious."

"I appreciate you're candor, Miles. Might I add, you're starting to sound like my sister, Chyna. There's no love lost between the two of them."

"Nice, level-headed gal. She cares about you and Kelly. She said—"

"What exactly did she say?"

"Not near enough, that much I can tell. I think she said something to the effect, 'my sister wants you forming your own opinions. So, I'll keep my mouth shut.' Something like that."

Abi couldn't help laughing.

"I know Chyna, that wasn't an easy accomplishment," he added, chuckling under his breath.

Suppressing another laugh, Abi relaxed. "You're right there. Chyna is a love. She gives one hundred percent and doesn't stop at much. Sometimes I wish she'd concentrate on her life, instead of mine. But, I couldn't do it without her."

"Do what?"

"Survive. Keep myself from falling apart."

"I think you're one courageous woman. You've been through hell and back again, and you still aren't complaining."

"It wouldn't help if I did complain. I have to be strong for Kelly. I have to get myself together and prove I'm capable of taking care of her without Trevor's help."

"I have no doubt you'll be able to do whatever you set out to do."

Detective Sandler seemed the kindest man Abi had ever met. His warm voice held a sincerity that calmed her fragile nerves. She liked him. That bothered her some. "Trevor may be a lot of things, but a murderer? I don't think so."

"Many people have died with that thought in mind. One never really knows. It's my job to protect you if I can."

"From what exactly?"

"As I mentioned before, someone set that fire deliberately. There is only one conclusion to make from that fact. Someone wants you and your baby dead."

"You could be mistaken."

"No. I wish I could be mistaken, but the fire was rigged. Is there anyone else that you know of, who might want you and Kelly dead?"

She gave Miles Sandler a strained expression. "I've given it some thought. I have thought of a couple clients who were pretty angry, but none dangerous enough to

warrant misplaced anger at me." She grabbed the water pitcher and filled both their glasses before looking at him again. His deep brown eyes had warmth that she hadn't expected. "What happens now?" She realized her voice seemed almost a whisper.

"We'll check around to see if anyone remembers seeing Trevor near your hotel room the day of the fire. We'll check to see who might have bought any of the items needed to rig the fire. There are things we can do, and we'll do them."

Abi considered telling Miles of Trevor's visit, but decided against it. "What can I do?"

"Be alert. Don't take any chances. Don't go anywhere alone. Don't give this crazy a chance to lure you out somewhere alone, and that includes Trevor Madden."

"I think you're wrong about him. He isn't perfect, I can vouch for that, but he's not..." Tears surfaced and her throat choked off with emotion. Embarrassed, she rushed to the sink, putting her back to Detective Sandler.

"I'm sorry."

She held still as Miles walked up behind her, then placed his warm palm on her shoulder. There was comfort in the simple gesture. "I've made such a mess of my life. Some great doctor, huh?"

"You're being hard on yourself. Believe me, most people could say that their life was a mess at one time or another. We'll catch whoever it is."

She swallowed hard and wiped at her cheeks with both palms. She turned around to find Miles extremely close. "Any more questions?"

"I think you've answered most of them."

She wondered why he didn't back away from her. Silence settled around them. The sink pressed against her back. "You can ask me anything." She took in the manly Aspen cologne, one of her favorites. She held still as he stepped back and returned to his chair at the table. He drank the remainder of his water, then reached over and poured himself another. She almost wished he hadn't moved away from her.

"I was wondering if—"

The phone rang out shrill and loud. Abi jumped, then hesitated.

"Aren't you going to answer it?"

"Would you?" He reached for the phone without hesitating.

"Hello? Hello? Is anyone there? Who did you want to talk to?"

By his expression, Abi felt certain it was her hard breathing caller. He hung up. "No one, right?"

"This happen often?"

"It started after the fire." She sat back at the table, took a small sip of water, then looked over at Miles. "The first couple of times I thought nothing of it. Just before you came, I received call three. Unnerving isn't it?"

"Damn scary if you ask me."

"I agree."

"We'll put a tap on your phone. Is there anything else unusual that's happened after the fire?"

Abi thought for a moment and then shook her head. "I'm uptight enough, I sure don't need more."

"I agree with you there. You'll call me if anything unusual happens, right?"

"Yes, I will. It's reassuring to know I can call you. I've been feeling kind of alone here." She wondered if she should have confided that bit of information. She had Chyna. As much as Abi wanted to share all her feelings with her sister, sometimes it was best not to tell everything.

"Whatever you share, I'll keep in strict confidence. You realize that, don't you?"

She hadn't considered otherwise. She merely nodded. "You think, if Trevor is behind this, he'll try again?" It was a dumb question and she knew the answer.

"I hate to scare you, but sometimes those who use to love us can be the deadliest of enemies. They know us too well. I guess you could say they know what buttons to push. You can be sure, if it's Trevor, he'll be even harder to catch than if it were some stranger. Whatever seems out of place or scares you, call me immediately, no matter what time of day or night. Promise me?"

Abi remained silent while he wrote his personal number on a business card, then extend it toward her. She took it. "I promise, and thank you. It makes me feel better. Your wife is a lucky woman, Miles."

"Not married. Close, but no cigar."

Abi didn't miss the sudden glassy expression on his face. "Your choice or hers?"

"Hers. I wasn't everything she wanted."

"I find that hard to believe." Abi didn't mean to blurt that out. She usually thought her words over carefully. He was easy to be around and she could tell they were going to be friends. "I think she was a fool. I wish Trevor had been half as kind as you've already been to me."

"What exactly went wrong between you and Trevor, if you don't mind my asking?"

She drew her brows together. "Wrong? Well, actually not much went right. But the biggest problem we had was that my unborn baby was a girl, and Trevor wanted a boy."

"You're kidding, right?"

"No. I should have seen through this, I have training, I have the tools to be objective. Instead, I wore blinders."

"The man was a fool."

Abi looked down at her glass and wiped moisture from it with her thumb. "We are legally separated. I've been back to the ranch once since Kelly was born. I haven't even told Chyna that."

"Family reunion or something?"

It seemed odd to be talking to this stranger as though he had been a life-long friend. He seemed genuinely interested and understanding. Dare she trust him? Abi wasn't in the habit of sharing her life trauma with just anyone. She paused and looked at Miles. He calmly leaned back in his chair and pulled his large hand through his carrot-top hair. She nearly gasped. "You have red hair."

"It's not all that unusual, not like purple or green."

Abi laughed, enjoying the sensation. "I somehow hadn't noticed before. It's the same color as my daughters."

"Kelly is a red-head? Well, now I know I'm going to like her. Where is she by-the-way?"

"With her...father."

"Why would you let him take her?"

"I asked myself that when he came to get her."

"Then why did you?"

"My attorney has advised me to let him see Kelly, It will look better to the court if I'm not trying to keep her from him. I guess Trevor is planning to get the courts to decree he has a right to be with her. He has a right to bond and be a part of her life. He may have the right, but no one is looking at what it might be doing to Kelly. I'd let him have shared visitation rights if I thought it was best for her, but I'm not sure it is."

"Would you really?"

"I would if I felt it would make it better for her. But I don't believe Trevor wants her. I don't believe he wants to even be her father. It looks good to his family and of course it impresses the new women in his life. Such a devoted father and caring person."

"The more I hear, the more I'm realizing how big a jerk Trevor Madden is." He took a sip of water. "You never finished your story about the time you went back to the ranch."

Abi had hoped he'd forgotten she'd mentioned it. She paused, thinking how to tell him without sounding like a complete fool. "I decided we needed to talk. The best thing would be a night of uninterrupted conversation. We needed to be honest with each other. We needed to decide what we wanted from each other. And, we needed to face whether there was any love left."

"What was Trevor's reaction to that?"

"He laughed. Said he didn't give a shit either way. I asked him why, then, was he filing for custody of Kelly. He said he knew I was against it, and he got a real charge out of upsetting the Doc. He added that he'd deny saying it, so I didn't need to share it with anyone."

"The bastard! Real cocky about his business, isn't he?"

"Kelly and I left and I haven't said many civil words to him since. It might seem childish and even immature, but I need time to adjust. When he comes to get Kelly, I put on a good front that none of his antics bother me. I know it irritates him. He tries so hard to upset me, but I refuse to let it show."

"I'm sure that's not easy, but maybe he'll get tired of the game and leave you alone after the trial."

"That's what I'm hoping. Kelly's doctor thinks the only reason he says he wants her is to make me miserable. He said the pattern is once the court makes a decision, many of these devoted fathers falter in their visitation rights. Eventually the time comes when they stop coming all together. That's the day I'm looking forward to."

"What makes you think he isn't behind all this?"

"It's my experience that this isn't enough to make him get that desperate. If I had left him, threatened his control, maybe. But that's not how it happened. He's angry he didn't get his son, yes. That's his loss. Honestly, I despise him. I don't want to hate, it's wrong, but if I could hate, I think I'd hate him. I've forgiven him, but I can't seem to

forget. Yet, I keep reminding myself that Kelly deserves to have a father in her life. I wasn't the perfect wife. Maybe the split between us was my fault. You see how hard it is? Even a woman in my position has trouble sorting it all out."

"You think just because you're a counselor you shouldn't have personal problems? That's like saying I'm a detective, therefore, I shouldn't have a family member get in trouble with the law. Doesn't work that way. No woman deserves the shit this man has put you through. He's controlling and manipulative. You have to break from him, for your sake and Kelly's. He'll make your lives miserable if you don't." He grew silent, then sighed. "I apologize. I have no right to tell you what to do. You don't even know me. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. You've only said what I know to be true in my heart and in my mind. I shouldn't have unloaded on you like this."

"Unload all you want. I really don't mind."

She noticed him glancing at his watch. "I'm sorry, I've kept you here much too long."

"Not a problem, I don't mind. You'll let me know if the phone calls continue, right? If anything else develops, I want to know. Keep my card handy. Both office and home are on it. Anytime, I'm serious, day or night. You get scared or he or something spooks you, call me."

"I think we're being paranoid. Trevor has no reason to want Kelly, or me, dead. We'll soon be divorced and I'm certain he won't need to give me a thing, because I'm capable of providing for both of us without his help."

"It may not be Trevor. But remember someone is trying to kill you and your daughter. Don't think they're not."

"I'll be careful and watchful. I'm not going to let this control my life. I'm just not. Whoever it is will have to realize I'm not crawling into a hole."

"When is the hearing?"

"In three weeks. I wish it were over."

"Does Trevor have a life insurance policy on you and Kelly?"

"What?"

"A life insurance policy?"

Abi's mouth went dry. If she and Kelly had died in that fire, Trevor would have benefited. "Yes, I guess we do."

"And?"

"And he'd be rid of us and a million dollars richer today." She hated the sound of that. "Could he hate us that much?"

"Oh, hate has nothing to do with it. Was he, or is he, having any financial difficulties?"

"You have to know ranching. It's either feast or famine. The past five years haven't been kind to farmers and ranchers. Things have been pretty touch-and-go for a couple of years now. I think they, the family, is surviving, but I don't think they're rolling in the dough like in the past."

"Sounds like motive to me."

"You can't be sure. We just can't accuse a man of setting a fire because he's had a few bad years in business."

"It's been known to happen. You're defending him, why?"

"Because I try not to be accusatory." She didn't want to admit it frightened her. She had been looking for a why for some time, now maybe they had figured it out. A shiver raked her body. She glanced around the barren room, it lacked the warmth of her grandmother's kitchen.

"I ask questions and find answers. Sometimes I have to ask the hard questions, the questions no one else wants to ask. I'll check into the policy. You try not to think about all this. Why don't you take Kelly out of town to see family or friends? You should get out of this house."

She watched him glance at the corner of still full boxes. "I just bought this place and we moved everything in here the day of the hotel fire. I haven't had the time to get everything unpacked. When Kelly and I are here, I'd rather spend time with her."

"Keep hoping you won't have to unpack them? Maybe if you do, it will seem more permanent than you want it to be?"

She marveled at his perceptiveness. "Maybe at one time I felt that way. Setting up my new office took Chyna and me the whole weekend. Unpacking is a lot of work."

"That it is. Well, Abi, I have to be going. Remember the offer to call me night and day is genuine. It doesn't matter how small. Don't wait for a big event to keep me posted. Even the slightest thing can be a clue."

"Thank you, Miles. You're a nice man. I never meant to burden you with my problems. I do thank you for listening. Somehow it's helped me." She stood and extended her hand.

"Glad to be of assistance, ma'am...Abi."

He stood, towering above her. He took her hand and shook, gentle, yet firm. He placed his left palm over the back of hers, and sandwiched her hand in his. "I'm here for you."

Abi swallowed. Why did this stranger have such an affect on her? She smiled and realized it wasn't forced, as most had been these days. "Thank you, Miles. Whether you believe it or not, talking with you this morning has helped me. I don't feel so alone."

"You aren't."

He finally let go of her hand. The warmth of his smile echoed in his voice. Why hadn't she met a man like this before Trevor? "Thank you," she managed to whisper. She led the way to the door, then opened it. He continued outside, nodding as he passed her.

Miles walked to his red Dodge Ram, then turned and faced her. "When does Kelly get home?"

"I pick her up at the Village around three."

"How about I pick you both up here around five and we'll do Chinese? You like Chinese?"

"I love Chinese, but I don't—"

"It's not a date. I don't want to make you uncomfortable, but, I hate eating alone all the time. It'd do you good to get out of this house, too. It might be good for both of us, heck, all three of us!"

A smile found its way through the mask of uncertainty. "All right, only if it's not a date. Friends, then?" She hoped he didn't notice the flush of heat that raced across her cheeks.

"Friends."

She watched him get into his truck, wave, and head down the street. Her mood seemed suddenly buoyant. It'd been a long time since she had something to look forward to.

Chapter Seven

From a distance Chyna watched Trevor leave the implement store and adjust the packages he carried. Perspiration formed on her upper lip, her stomach clenched tight. Panic like she'd never known before welled in her throat.

Lord, she was planning on killing her brother-in-law. It went against every principal she'd held dear. Yet, she couldn't let him destroy Abi and Kelly. Abi may not think Trevor was dangerous, but Chyna had no doubts.

Once Abi heard that Trevor had been killed in a hit-and-run, she'd know immediately, it wasn't an accident. Chyna braced herself for possibly losing her sister's love. Would Abi be forgiving or would this destroy their relationship for life? Either way, Chyna didn't feel she had a choice. She had to destroy Trevor before he killed Abi and Kelly.

Chyna revved the engine, then swung out into the street toward Trevor. Her heart pounded hard against her breast. Closer...closer...closer...she clamped her eyes closed, then immediately opened them. Gripping the wheel tight, she pulled it hard to the right, and slammed on the brakes. She couldn't do it.

Breathing hard, Chyna glanced down the street. Trevor Madden didn't lay struck down in the street. Instead, he walked through the doorway of Sally's Flowers.

A rush of relief filled her. There had to be a less frightening way to kill the jerk. She'd never try this one again. Her muscles ached from the stress of it. A horn beeped behind her, Chyna jumped, then realized she had been sitting at a dead stop in the street. She pressed the gas pedal, and sped away.

Abi tossed the sixth dress on the bed and searched her closet for another. She finally decided on a pair of black jeans and a soft beige sweater. It wasn't a date, therefore, she knew it shouldn't matter. A flicker of apprehension coursed through her. "What am I doing, Kelly?" she asked her infant.

Kelly turned her head at the sound of her mother's voice and cooed. "You think so, do you? Well, maybe you won't like him. If that's the case, I give you my permission to

vomit all over him. You understand?" Abi giggled at the string of non-coherent sounds her daughter answered with.

The doorbell rang and excited to see Miles, Abi rushed to open it. "Hello!" she called out.

"You sound in a good mood for a change."

She stood staring at Trevor. "What are you doing here?" Abi gave him a hostile glare.

"Expecting someone else? Can't wait until the divorce is over? Not as true and pure as you want people to think, are you?"

"Trevor, just say what you want and leave." Blood pounded against her temple.

"I forgot to find out a time for my next parental visit with Kelly."

"You could have simply called." Her breathing quickened, her cheeks burned hot. She hadn't talked to Trevor this harsh before. She noticed his hesitation before answering.

"Sunday the family is getting together and I'd like Kelly to spend the day with us."

"Absolutely not! How can you be so selfish? Do I need to remind you that Kelly is nursing. A full day away from me is unthinkable!" Alarm and anger rippled along her spine.

"It's you who's selfish. She's my daughter, too. I'll give her a bottle."

Abi released a breath of air in disgust. "She doesn't like the bottle and you know it. Kelly didn't do well with your visit today. It's not in her best interest to go with you, Trevor." Abi thought of what Miles had said earlier in the day. Her stomach knotted and she stiffened under Trevor's hostile glare.

"Your professional opinion? How much is that worth?"

"I'm not playing your mind game, Trevor. We have nothing personal left to discuss, other than the welfare of our daughter. You may take her for three hours on Sunday. If that's not good enough, then don't bother coming at all."

"You can't ever compromise, can you?"

Shifting her weight, she leaned against the door. "Trevor, I seem to be the only one compromising. You're so caught up in your demanding world, you wouldn't recognize a compromise if it were shoved in your face. I'm going to do what's best for Kelly. I don't care about how it affects you or your family." She could feel her throat closing up.

"One of these days, maybe I won't bring her back to you. You ever think of that?" A sudden thin chill hung on the edge of his words. He grabbed her upper arm.

Abi pulled from his tight grip. She rigidly held her tears in check. "Bear in mind, kidnapping is a felony. Don't believe for one minute I won't press charges, because I'm telling you right now, I will."

"You've been talking with that sister of yours again, haven't you? She ought to keep her nose in her own business instead of ours. Someone ought to teach her a lesson."

"What do you mean by that, Trevor? If anyone should be taught a lesson, it ought to be you." She threw the words at him like stones.

"Well, you just don't seem the same to me, Abi. If it's not Chyna filling your head with this attitude, who is it?"

"It's me."

Abi glanced up to find Miles Sandler glaring down at Trevor. "Miles!"

"Oh, Miles is it! Well, Detective Sandler to the rescue, once again. Doing some off-duty mingling? I'll bet she gave you one damn heartbreaking story. You feel sorry for her? Been there, done that. She's good at it. I'll bet she could hook any man by the trauma in her life. But you like trauma, don't you, Miles?"

"Listen, Madden, you can't come over here harassing Abi. Until a court hearing, it might be best you don't see Abi or Kelly."

"Yeh, well what would you know about that?"

"I know more than you think. I've also checked into the nice little insurance policy you have on your wife and daughter."

Abi listened, stunned to find the two men in verbal debate.

"It's none of your business." Trevor shouted.

"That's where you're wrong. I'm convinced you had everything to do with the fire at Abi's hotel room. I'm also convinced you've been calling her and hanging up."

"Bullshit! Prove it!"

"I will."

"I'll be at the Village around one on Sunday, see that you bring Kelly."

Abi realized Trevor was speaking to her. Not answering, she merely nodded. He turned on his heels and stomped toward the old Ford ranch truck. She stood motionless in the doorway.

"You handled that well."

Abi looked up to find Miles standing close, his hands deep into his pockets. "I'm shaking like a rattler's tail."

"Hope you're not as deadly."

Taking a deep breath and slowly releasing it, she smiled. The turbulence that arrived with Trevor dissipated when he left, like the calm after a tornado. "I find it hard to be civil to that man. I look at him and wonder how I could have ever loved him. I can't begin to tell you how many times I've heard similar comments from clients of mine. Somehow it holds new meaning now. This has been an eye opener for me. It's given me insight why they feared love wasn't worth the risk, because the pain was too great. Something I didn't understand before."

"I can't say as I blame you for feeling that way. I don't like him much myself."

"I didn't know you knew Trevor." She turned and walked into the house without waiting for a reply.

"Let's just say our paths have crossed a time or two."

"Why didn't you tell me? Before, I mean?" She tried to disguise her annoyance. She set the baby monitor down on the table and turned to face Miles.

"I didn't feel a need to. He was a cocky kid and still is. He isn't fooling any of us, and I hope he isn't fooling you. Why was he here anyway?"

"I'm not sure. He said it was to extend his visitation time with Kelly on Sunday. He could have done that by phone. I think there was more to it." She went to the sink and reached under it for a box of kitty food. After filling a small bowl and adding some

milk, she headed out the back door. "I'll be just a minute. We have a kitty to—" Abi dropped the dish and let out a whimpering, "No!"

She welcomed Miles comforting and supportive hands on her shoulders.. Tears quickly slid the length of her cheeks. "Who would kill a little kitty?" She knelt down and observed the dead ball of fur.

"Someone snapped its neck. It's a warning, Abi. Trevor must have done this before he showed up at your front door."

"No. I don't think he could have done this. It'd take someone really sick to kill a kitten. Fluffy was born the same day as Kelly." A sob escaped Abi's composure. "I'm sorry, I know it seems silly to cry over an animal, but, she's just a baby—"

"There's no need to apologize. It's a warning!"

Abi looked up at Miles, who now sat on the ground next to her. "What's a warning?"

"She's a baby. He's threatening... I think Kelly—"

Abi jumped to her feet and bolted back into the house. Taking the stairs, two-at-a-time, she reached her bedroom in record time. She rushed to her sleeping daughter, content in her car carrier in the middle of her bed. The baby monitor still in place. Abi released a sigh of relief like none before.

"What... God, don't tell me he's done something to her!"

Abi stood, frozen in place. "She's sleeping, but look," she pointed toward a white fuzzy stuffed toy kitty tucked into the front loop of the carrier.

"It wasn't here before? Could he have given it to her during their visit today and you didn't notice?"

Shaking her head, she reached down and picked up the toy, the head fell off and Abi dropped it with a high-pitched squeal.

"That bastard!" Miles growled.

Abi shook as fearful images built in her mind. "He's warning me. I either agree to his terms, or he'll kill Kelly. That's what he's saying, isn't he?" She breathed in shallow, quick gasps. Shaking, she didn't resist the strong arms that wrapped around her from the back and held her tight.

"I'm so sorry Trevor is putting you through this. I know we don't know each other very well, and I'm hoping that will change in time, but believe me, Abi, no matter what happens, I'll see this bastard in jail."

"I don't want to see him in jail. I just want him to leave us alone." His forearm muscles harden across her arms.

"I want to see him in jail. I won't do anything until I have solid proof, but believe me, if Trevor Madden is doing this to you, he's going to pay!"

Abi believed him. She voiced an inner prayer to God for sending Miles Sandler to her rescue. She definitely needed a friend and rescuing.

Trevor slammed his fist into the dashboard. "God-damned detective! Thinks he's so damn smart. Well, I'll show him."

Revenge

Tipping the beer bottle up, Trevor drained it, then tossed it out the window. It smashed into small pieces and he smiled. "That's what I'm gonna do with you, Doc, right after I put that sister of yours in her place. Who knows, maybe I'll be so clever I'll make it look like that new boyfriend of yours did it. Wouldn't that be something?"

With a twist of the wrist, Trevor opened a fresh cold beer. He was going to hang a good one on tonight, then find himself some filly to hump. He really didn't care who.

Starting tomorrow, he'd concentrate on how he was going to make Chyna Brown pay for meddling. He smiled to himself, it would be something violent, something she'd live through for a while, know the truth, but wouldn't be able to tell anyone. He'd make sure she knew it was him.... that would be the beauty of it.

Trevor smiled, then stepped on the gas.

Chyna curled up on her bed. She couldn't get over the fact she'd tried to kill Trevor. She might have done it, too, if her conscience hadn't taken over. She just couldn't kill someone, even if that someone was Trevor Madden.

There had to be a better way to make him pay. Killing him wouldn't make him suffer. There wasn't anyone she could turn to for help.

The phone rang, Chyna jumped. She grabbed the phone, knowing John would be on the other line. "Hi honey. How's it going?"

"I know what you tried to do today."

Chyna bolted upright. "What did you say?"

"I know what you tried to do today. Next time keep your eyes open."

A hot flush enveloped her body. "I think you must be mistaken. Who is this?" She held her breath as silence answered.

"Maybe you ought to hire someone to do it right? Did Abi ask...naw, she wouldn't do that, would she. You might give her a call and ask how little Fluffy is doing. Damn thing scratched me, and it paid. Can you imagine what I'll have to do to you, to make you pay?"

"Trevor, you jerk. I didn't try to run you over today, just wanted you to know I could have. Leave Abi alone and stop making her life miserable, or you might find you're suddenly accident prone."

"Oooo, I'm really scared. This isn't a game, Chyna. You could get hurt...or even dead."

"Why don't you crawl back under your rock? I've had enough conversation with you." Chyna slammed the phone down, then clutched her legs up to her chest and hugged them. She couldn't control the spastic trembling within her.

The phone rang, Chyna screamed as though a volcano erupted. She glanced at the caller ID and reached for it. "Hi, John."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing really. I watched a dumb scary movie and you know how they affect me." She felt grateful he couldn't see the fear she felt.

"You know better than that. Anything new with your sister?"

If only he knew, Chyna thought. "No, not really. She's through with their relationship, said she's barely talking to him."

"It's about time. I'd even like to get my hands on that idiot. Give her space, Chyna. Don't—"

"I know, don't meddle. I'll try to keep my distance." She grit her teeth, hating it when he tried to tell her what to do.

"Now don't get all bent out of shape, I know you don't like being told what to do. Well, Abi might not either. Just be a listener."

Chyna wanted to scream at him, but let it roll. "I'll give it my best. How's it going there?" she asked, wishing she could tell him about Trevor's call.

"It's worse than any of us imagined. That tornado did things I've never seen before. Good thing you didn't come, you wouldn't enjoy seeing all this destruction."

Chyna thought about Trevor, and a shiver shook her body. "Abi and Trevor's divorce hearing is in three weeks. Things should be relatively calm by the time you get back here."

"Sounds like I'm getting the best of this situation. I hate family squabbling."

Chyna grit her teeth, and drew in a slow breath to keep calm. "I think we need to have a talk when you get back. Maybe we should think about having a family."

"What the hell are you talking about? Family? Chyna, I don't know what's gotten into you, but we agreed when we got married that we didn't want kids. That hasn't changed, so forget it."

She noticed his voice rose in volume as he spoke. "Kelly is the sweetest thing. I didn't realize it could be so special. It started me thinking...it makes me feel...I just thought we'd talk about it."

"We just did."

"That's not very fair, John," her voice choked off.

"What's not fair is you bringing this nonsense up on the phone. I'm working my tail off here and I don't need this kind of shit to upset me. I need to keep my mind clear. I'll call you tomorrow night. Be over this by then."

"Do you realize how cold that sounds? Just think about it, please." She became increasingly uneasy by the stillness. "Well?" she prodded.

"There's nothing to think about. You understand?"

"No, I don't understand. I should be able to talk to you about this without feeling I've somehow let you down."

"This conversation is tiring. I'll call tomorrow, if I have time. You be good."

"You know me," she answered, wondering what he'd say if she told him what she'd nearly done to Trevor. The dial tone told her that John had hung up without even saying goodbye.

She stared at the phone until she heard the operator say, "If you'd like to make a call..." Chyna pushed the off button, then speed-dial one. She impatiently waited while the phone rang. She listened as someone picked up the phone, yet no one spoke into the receiver. She waited a few seconds.

"Hello, Abi, are you there?"

"Oh, Chyna, I'm glad you called."

"What's wrong? Was Trevor there tonight?"

Abi thought of her conversation with him and a vision of little Fluffy came to mind. "It was awful, Chyna. Someone twisted Fluffy's head off and Miles thinks it was Trevor. If I'm honest, I think it might be him, too."

"He did what to Fluffy?" she asked, afraid she'd heard right.

"Someone broke her little neck. It was awful. Miles said it's a warning. Said it means I'd better not fight Trevor, or the same will happen to Kelly."

"Geez Louise!"

"Chyna, I'm getting scared."

"Me, too. This is getting serious. Is Detective Sandler helping much?"

"Yes, and I'm glad he came. He's a good listener and I think he cares what happens to Kelly and me. Trevor didn't seem too impressed with him though."

"When did you see them together?" She asked, puzzled by Abi's comment.

"When Miles came to pick Kelly and me up for dinner, Trevor happened to be here. They had words. I think Trevor was really peeved. It felt good for a change."

Chyna smiled. "Oh, so the handsome detective isn't wasting any time. Dinner, eh?"

"Don't be silly. We both need a friend. He's easy to talk to."

"This sounds promising."

"Don't be ridiculous, Chyna. I'm not even divorced yet."

"Sweety, the key word there is 'yet'." Teasing Abi helped Chyna relax. "I'm just giving you shit."

"As usual. Do you think Trevor would do that to Fluffy?"

"He wouldn't bat an eyelash. He called me tonight and said either I stay out of your business or the same thing will happen to me." Chyna hadn't meant to tell Abi that, it just came blurting out. The tears that followed were more of a release, than fear.

"My Lord. He admitted killing Fluffy? I'm so sorry, Chyna. This is all my fault."

"What in blazes are you talking about? I'm the one who is always bashing Trevor. He knows that. His actions are his fault, Abi. When are you going to stop blaming yourself for every fool-hearty thing that man does?"

"I won't let him hurt you or Kelly." Abi stated with conviction. "I just can't. Miles thinks he can get a restraining order, then Trevor won't be taking Kelly for visits either, at least not until after our court hearing."

Chyna felt good about the news. "That's a great idea. I worry about him having Kelly, too. I don't want to aggravate him, so I'll steer clear of your place for a few days. He can't stop me from calling, so don't think I'll disappear."

"Chyna, I'm scared. How can things be this wrong? I should be handling this whole thing differently. It just doesn't seem to be real. Trevor isn't predictable. I think I may have underestimated his anger. If that's true, he may be transferring all his anger toward Kelly and me."

"What kind of anger? I don't understand," Chyna said, lying across her bed.

"He has a hard time living up to his father's expectations of him. I'm not sure, but he fears not having his mother's love and his father's approval. They lord that ranch over his head, like a carrot dangling in front of a rabbit. It'd be a hard place to be."

"That doesn't excuse what he's been doing. You're not making excuses for him, are you?" Chyna asked, wishing Abi would be less defensive of Trevor.

"Nothing excuses him for breaking a kitty's neck. It does tell me that he's escalating in his anger. It's not a good sign, that's for sure."

"Don't worry, things will work out. Remember you have me on your side," Chyna stated with a light, humorous tone.

"Thank you for reminding me. It'll be okay, I just needed to hear that from you."

"Well, I'm going to bed, I suggest you do the same. Why don't you have a nasty dream about your Detective Miles, at least it would take your mind off Trevor." Chyna smiled to herself, knowing the reaction she'd be getting from her younger sister.

"You're horrible. The way your mind works, sometimes I worry about you, Chyna."

"Yeh, but I'll bet it made you smile. Come on, be honest, you liked it anyway, didn't you?"

"Okay, I'll only admit that."

Chyna smiled at the girlish giggle that followed. "See, your big sister always knows best. You keep that in mind. I'll give ya a call in the morning. Abi—"

"Yes?"

"If you need me, anytime, or just need someone to talk to, you know you can call me, right?"

"Right. Thanks Chyna. I love you."

"I love you, too. Sleep well and remember to dream."

Chyna placed the receiver down, then stared at it. Was Trevor going to hurt Abi and Kelly like he had Fluffy? She jumped out of bed and pulled on jeans and a sweatshirt. It would be a cold day in hell before she'd give him the chance.

What would be best? She asked herself. Watch him from his place, then follow, or keep an eye on Abi's apartment? Chyna had no experience in this kind of thing. She laced her tennies and headed for the door.

She'd take John's old blue Subaru, less noticeable than her new VW. Her heart pounded in her chest. Trevor Madden was going to find out that all women weren't as easily intimidated as he thought. He underestimated his soon to be ex sister-in-law.

Chapter Eight

Abi said her prayers, and had a serious talk with God. After asking him to protect Kelly and Chyna, thoughts of Fluffy's limp body came to mind and made her shudder.

Kelly slept peacefully next to Abi. "What is your daddy thinking? Maybe we should pack up and go someplace where no one knows where we are until the court hearing?" Maybe Miles was right. Would that work? Chyna would be safe and so would Kelly.

Sliding down and curling around Kelly, Abi closed her eyes. It didn't take long to imagine Miles sitting across from her, listening. She liked his smile and deep, vibrant voice. She liked his dark smoky eyes that held an ocean of warmth.

The doorbell rang and Abi jolted. Kelly cried immediately.

"Mama's sorry, baby. Did I wake you up?" Abi scooped up her daughter. She nestled in her mother's arms and closed her eyes. Abi placed Kelly back onto the bed and bordered her with pillows.

The doorbell beckoned once more and Abi hurried downstairs. She looked through the peephole and saw no one. Leaving the chain connected, she eased the door open and looked around...no one. She started closing the door, then noticed a small box on the top step.

She unhooked the chain and stepped quickly outside, grabbed the package, then slammed the door shut and locked it in nearly one motion.

The box wasn't more than four by four and was wrapped in brown paper. Should she open it or hand it over to the police? She walked to the kitchen and placed it on the table. After getting a glass of water she glanced down at the business card Miles had given her.

A quick look at the clock told her it was nearly three in the morning. Maybe she should just open it. What if it's a small bomb? Abi rolled her eyes at her indecision. "Don't be a fool, call Miles." She whispered to herself.

Calmly, she picked up the phone and dialed. After several rings she was ready to hang up when a soft, groggy moan made her hesitate.

"Hello."

"Miles? It's Abi, Abi Madden. I'm sorry to be calling this early, but...well someone rang my doorbell and there wasn't anyone there. But you see I found this box on my

doorstep. I didn't know if I should open it or call the police. Then I thought of you and well, I thought maybe you could tell me—"

"Whoa, slow down, Abi. I think I got the gist of this. Don't touch the package until I get there. You understand? Don't shake it, smell it, tip it. Just leave it where it is."

"I already picked it up and put it on the table. Nothing happened. You think it could—"

"I'll be right there."

Abi heard the click before she could say goodbye. He sounded concerned and nervous. Had she done the right thing by calling him? She went back upstairs to check on Kelly. The angel slept without a care in the world. "Mama will take care of you," she whispered, then placed a soft kiss on Kelly's cheek.

Abi flipped the on-switch of the baby monitor and went back downstairs to wait for Miles arrival. She'd considered slipping on sweats, but didn't want to be caught upstairs dressing when he arrived, so she'd grabbed a pink velour house robe and decided it would have to do.

Pacing, Abi was afraid to move in front of the windows. She pulled all the blinds and drapes, leaving only the light in the kitchen on.

Hearing a car pull into the drive, she quickly drew back the drape and peaked out of the front room window. Miles ran to the front door, holding the leash of a big black dog. Without waiting for the door bell or his knock, she opened the door..

Miles rushed in, closed the door and bolted it before looking at her.

"You brought your dog?"

"Not exactly. This is Jack. My neighbor is a fire investigator and he and Jack work together on arson and explosives. You might say I borrowed my buddy here to help us with that package."

"I'm impressed." She noticed he'd pulled on sweats, it seemed different than his suit and tie. "The package is in the kitchen."

"Are you and Kelly all right?"

"Yes. Kelly is sleeping and I'm uneasy. I'll feel better when I know that package isn't lethal."

"I can't blame you there. Let's go have a look."

Abi followed Miles and Jack to the kitchen. Jack wagged his tail and sniffed at the small box, then moved around the room. He scratched at the back door and Miles opened it for him.

"What's he doing?" Abi asked, surprised the dog would want out.

"He's got the scent for something," Miles answered, quickly being pulled outside by Jack's leash. "What you got, boy?" Miles asked.

Abi watched from a short distance with the baby monitor in hand. Jack ran straight to the tool shed and wildly scratched on the door.

"Is it locked?" Miles shouted to her.

She nodded, then hurried back to the house and reached around the back door to retrieve a set of keys. She tossed them to Miles, keeping a fair distance from them.

Something seemed strange about this whole ordeal. She heard Kelly babble in her sleep, then settle back down. Miles unlocked the door. Jack barked and wined incessantly, upset about what he'd uncovered.

"What is it?" Abi whispered, trying not to wake any of the neighbors.

"I'll be damned! Would you look at that."

"What? What am I looking at?" Abi asked, then came to an abrupt stop, her heart jumping in her chest.

"The whole place is rigged with explosives. I think that little package you received in the mail is the trigger. Get Kelly and I'll call the bomb squad."

Abi ran like never before. She reached the back door, then paused to listen to Miles yelling at her. "What?" she called out to him.

"I said, don't slam the doors and walk carefully by the package. I don't know what amount of motion could set it off. Now go!"

Perspiration formed on her upper lip as she brought the screen door closed with barely a tap. She moved past the kitchen table with care, yet with urgency. Taking the stairs two at a time, she reached her bedroom, clutching the baby monitor in her left hand.

She glanced at the bed and her breath solidified in her throat. She tried to scream but no sound came, only a low, disbelieving moan.

Tossing the pillows in every direction, Abi resorted to checking under the bed, in case Kelly had rolled off. She grasped at nothing. She searched, then rushed from the room, past the kitchen table and out the back door, letting it slam behind her. It sounded like a gun blast in the silent morning hours.

"I said don't slam...what is it? Abi, talk to me."

Tears rolled down her face and she struggled to speak, but everything seemed jumbled. In the distance she heard Jack bark once. She looked up at Miles and allowed him to pull her into his chest.

"Where's Kelly?"

"He's got her! My Lord, Kelly isn't in my bed. She's gone!" Tears blinded her eyes and choked her voice. Deep sobs racked her insides.

"She can't be...of course, this was all a distraction and I fell right for it! Shit! We'll find Kelly. I promise you, Abi. I won't let anything happen to her."

"What if he...I can't even say it." She heard her voice, stifled and unnatural.

"Don't. We'll find her and she'll be just fine."

Jack barked once again in the distance. Abi pulled back from Miles' comfort and whispered, "I pray you're right."

"I wonder why Jack is barking now. I don't work that much with dogs. Maybe he wants back in the car."

Sirens got closer and louder. Soon the whole neighborhood would know what happened. It seemed impossible that Kelly was gone. "I promised to protect her. I promised no harm would come to her. If anything—"

"Don't put yourself through this. You had the baby monitor in your hand. I saw it. This isn't your fault."

A fire truck pulled into the alley behind the storage shed. Another emergency vehicle arrived, then an ambulance. Men ran about in what appeared more helter skelter than anything. Several men entered the storage shed, then ran back to their vehicle. "It's a real one, fellas," one of the men shouted.

Miles walked up to one of the men, then pointed toward the house. Both men walked up to Abi before she realized it.

"Sorry you have to experience this, Ma'am. We understand your daughter has been kidnapped, too. We'll do our best to keep the crime scene evidence intact. May I enter your house to secure the box?"

Abi nodded.

"I would prefer that you and Detective Miles here go to the front of the house. We'll disarm this baby, and send it to the lab for fingerprinting."

Abi flinched at the word *baby*. Everything seemed to move in slow-motion. She felt numb. This couldn't be happening. The nightmare seemed to go on forever. Trying to concentrate, she struggled to clear the fog that rolled into her mind.

"Come, Abi, we'll wait out front."

She allowed him to guide her by the arm. It didn't seem real. "Maybe Trevor took Kelly and I'll never see her again."

"I doubt that. Maybe if he was a city fella with no real ties, that might be a possibility. But Trevor's a rancher. He helps his father on the family ranch, a ranch that will be his some day. I can't see him tossing in the towel and moving, just to get a daughter he never wanted in the first place."

"I suppose you're right." She hoped so.

As Abi followed Miles to the front of the house, she noticed Jack sat by her car, he barked once again, his tail firm and tense. "You think there's a bomb planted in my car, too?"

"Stay back."

"No, Miles, wait for the bomb squad to come, they're almost here." She watched as he moved closer, ignoring her comment.

"What did you find, Jack? Is the car rigged, too?"

It seemed unbearable to watch Miles move closer and closer to her car. Jack jumped, excited, barking. He'd acted the same way when he found the explosives in the storage shed.

"You'd better come here, Abi. I think Jack is telling you something."

"What are you talking about?" she asked, moving toward her car, apprehensive and stiff with fear. She paused when Miles opened the passenger door. A soft whimper reached her senses and Abi sprang into action.

"Kelly!" she screamed, picking up her daughter and cradling her in the crook of her arms. A cry of relief broke from Abi's lips. Tears flooded down her cheek, releasing with relief.

Chyna's head bobbed to her chest, waking her with a start. Exhaustion devoured her body. She shook off the heaviness and sat up, grabbing the binoculars from the passenger seat. She focused the lens in time to see Trevor's vehicle pull into his garage, it sent her pulse spinning.

He'd left and come back. She hadn't been awake to even follow him. This wasn't going to be easy. She spotted a light go on in the doublewide trailer. She focused the binoculars on the living room window and realized Trevor had a phone pressed to his ear and was staring straight at her.

The revelation shook her to the core. Did he know she sat watching him? He wasn't a man to cross. She reached for the car keys wavering, trying to decide what to do next.

She'd go home, get some sleep and figure things out when she had a clear head. Chyna turned the key. Without thinking, she pulled the binoculars back into view, for one last look at a man she despised. The lights were off. She moved the binoculars and realized the garage door had gone back up.

Did he see her, and now was headed her way to...? To scare her? To hurt her? To threaten her? None of them would surprise Chyna. She could easily move out from her camouflage of trees and disappear down the road before he got there. She could remain still and find out for sure if he saw her. She could have patience and follow him, wherever that led.

Chyna wondered if this decision rated right up there with the time she shaved her head for starving children.

She didn't have to wait long for an answer. Trevor sped his truck right past her hiding place. He seemed hell-bent for leather someplace.

So, he hadn't seen her after all. It seemed impossible to shake off the feeling of fear and tension the surveillance caused her. She clenched the steering wheel and pulled onto the road. A good distance ahead she could see the taillights of Trevor's truck.

"Where are you going this early in the morning?" Chyna asked, glancing at the vehicle clock, shocked to find it was nearly three-thirty in the morning.

Glancing at her speedometer she cringed to think she'd had to race sixty-miles-per-hour over gravel roads to keep from losing the jerk. She'd have lost Trevor's trail had she taken her new VW. Nothing would have made her drive that fast on dirt roads, taking the chance of getting even a single rock chip on her baby.

Reaching the outskirts of Great Falls, Chyna wondered what she'd do if the light turned red and she'd have to pull up behind Trevor. Sneaking closer to the light it immediately turned green and she released a sigh of relief.

After several turns she didn't need to wonder where Trevor was headed. He was going to Abi's new house. She held back, no longer needing to keep him in view. Several blocks away from Abi's place, Chyna pulled close to the curb. She'd spotted Trevor's truck a block ahead.

Binoculars lifted, she watched him observing Abi's place through his own binoculars. He was shaking his head, obviously unhappy about something. Chyna moved her binoculars toward Abi's house.

Firemen, policemen, and others were coming and going. Panic filled her. She noticed Trevor had pulled out from his parking spot and had turned left before Abi's block. She stepped on the gas, barely missing the parked car in front of her. Abi needed her.

"You'll have to remain back, Ma'am."

Chyna realized a burly policeman was talking to her. "I'm Abi Madden's sister. I'm sure she'd want me to be with her."

"No one goes in or out. You wait here and we'll check on the whereabouts of your sister."

"But—"

"Ma'am, there's nothing you can do in there."

"Did he kill them?" she asked, before realizing it.

"Who? Did he kill who? Who do you mean? Do you know what's happened here? Ma'am, I believe we'd like to talk with you some. Come with me."

Chyna wanted to run in the opposite direction. She couldn't, not until she found out what happened to Abi and Kelly. "Is my sister and niece all right?" She realized her voice quivered.

"No one was killed, if that's what you're asking. Some fool set the storage shed to blow sky-high."

"Blow as in explosive blow?"

"Yes, ma'am, that's exactly what I mean."

You've got to be kidding. Were there any witnesses? Did anyone, by chance, see an old, faded, black Ford truck?" Chyna followed the policeman into Abi's living room.

"Sit there," he motioned toward the couch. "I'll get someone to talk to you."

Chyna looked around her sister's living room. It angered her to see boxes still piled in the corner. A picture of Abi with Kelly became the only ornament on a glass coffee table. She had all new furniture, since Trevor claimed all the contents in the trailer were his. Chyna liked what Abi had done with the place. A nice set of matching glass end tables, accented with mauve lamps with gold trim. The beige and mauve paisley sectional, with matching solid mauve recliners really had a woman's touch to them. In fact, the whole place was fresh, cheerful and very much Abi. This was going to be a nice switch for her, and a good way to start new.

"Ma'am? I'm Detective Trent. I understand you're Mrs. Madden's sister. I have some questions for you."

"Don't know if I'll be much help, but I'll give it a try. What's been going on here? Are Abi and Kelly okay?" Detective Trent sat on the recliner and leaned back. He appeared too comfortable for Chyna's notion.

"They're fine. You mentioned something about a black Ford? An older couple up the street came home this morning around twelve-thirty, said they nearly hit an old, rickety truck as it was backing out of Mrs. Madden's driveway. They didn't think much of it, since the driver was her husband."

"That's just it. I mean, he's not supposed to be around her place when she's not here. They're separated. Why are the police here?"

"No one told you?"

"Told me what?"

"Your sister received a package. She called Detective Sandler, and thank God she did. The storage shed was rigged to blow big time. Someone also took the little girl out of her mother's bed and placed the child in Mrs. Madden's car. We think it was a warning. It's one hell-of-a scare tactic to make Mrs. Madden aware that she, and her daughter, aren't safe."

"Trevor Madden did this?"

"We have no proof. If we find his fingerprints around the house, well, he has been here numerous times, they belong here."

"How convenient for him." Chyna was tired and frustrated. "Where are Abi and Kelly?"

"Detective Sandler took them to the precinct to fill out a complaint and give a statement."

"I should go and see if she needs me."

"She seemed to be handling things rather well, considering all she's been through. I think the lady is a friend of Detective Sandler."

"Actually he's a friend of mine. He's been assigned to help Abi after the fire at her motel."

"Right. What prompted you to come to your sister's house at this time of morning?"

Chyna closed her eyes and leaned her head against the back of the couch. She'd gotten so little sleep outside Trevor's house and now this. Shit, she only wanted to go home and get some sleep.

"Well?"

She opened her eyes and stared at Detective Trent. He really didn't fit into what she thought a detective would look like. He maybe cleared five feet eight and although he was trim, she could see the muscles bulge beneath his shirt. He looked more like a boxer. He had compelling blue eyes. His face, nicely bronzed by wind and sun, sported the shadow of a beard.

"Well?" he repeated.

"Well what?"

"It's almost four in the morning. You don't usually check on your sister this time of morning, do you?"

"No. I don't like nor trust Trevor Madden. I had a bad feeling about him last night, so I decided to...I staked out his house."

"You what?"

"You heard me. But I fell asleep. When I woke, around three-thirty this morning, I saw him driving into his garage. I watched him through binoculars. The first thing he did was make a phone call, then a few minutes after that he got back in his truck. I followed him. He parked a block away from Abi's house, up the street," she said, pointing. "He sat there watching the house through his binoculars."

"You sure it was him?"

"Of course I'm sure. I parked a block behind him." She could tell Detective Trent looked impressed with her story.

"Then what?"

"He looked ticked and drove away. That's when I realized what a commotion was happening over here."

"You're positive the man you observed watching Mrs. Madden's house was Trevor Madden?"

"Positive."

"You're free to leave, Mrs. Brown. Give your name and number to one of the officers outside and I'll get back to you."

Detective Trent rose quickly out of the chair and hurry out the front door. She hoped that meant he had enough information to arrest Trevor. She'd love to be present, just to see the look on his face, when the cops put handcuffs on him.

She bolted from the couch and dug in her purse for an address card. "Here," she said, handing the card to an officer. "In case Detective Trent needs to call me." She didn't wait for an answer, she nearly ran to her car. She was going to watch Trevor Madden get arrested.

Chapter Nine

Abi felt the stress of the endless night and early morning hours. Kelly nursed beneath her sweatshirt, the gesture gave her comfort. She closed her eyes, the fear of losing her daughter returned. With a moan of distress, she opened her eyes afraid to relive the feelings of loss and failure all over again.

"Everything is going to be all right."

At the sound of Miles' voice, she lifted her head to find his back to her. She quickly checked and felt relieved to find Kelly sleeping. After placing the infant on the couch and adjusting her clothes back into place, she said, "Why don't you come and sit with us?"

"Thank you," he said, then cleared his throat.

She noticed he glanced her way, then quickly sat in the recliner across from her.

"I've been thinking. Now you don't have to answer me right away. You might even decide it's impossible, but hear me out." He entwined his fingers as though in prayer.

"What is it, Miles?"

"I don't think you and Kelly are safe no matter how much police protection you get. I think you'd have to agree with that."

Abi nodded, but remained silent.

"Our people will do their best to find out who rigged that bomb. They'll do everything they can to keep an eye on you two. But, if this guy is gutsy enough to do what he's done to this point, I don't think it's smart to go back to your place. I think it makes you both sitting ducks."

She had to agree with him. "It's occurred to me. I was thinking of taking Kelly away. I'm not sure where, but we'd be gone for only three weeks, then we'd come back for the hearing."

"My thoughts exactly, except, well, I have months of vacation built up, and I just never seem to have time or want to take time away from my job. I have a cabin in Canada. It's private and isolated. Whoever this nut is—"

"It's Trevor. I didn't want to think so before, but I'm certain of it now."

"I happen to agree with you. But he's clever and hasn't made any mistakes yet. We can't arrest him without cause."

"The system protects the criminal and forgets about the victim. I feel defenseless against him. He comes and goes, makes sure I know it, and I can't do a thing about it." She struggled to keep her voice from quivering.

"I understand how you feel. We have limitations, yet do the best job we can. Sometimes we know it's not enough. Right now is one of those times. Let me take you and Kelly to my cabin. No one will have to know, that way Trevor can't harass anyone into giving him the information."

"What about you? Won't people put two-and-two together?"

"Detective Scott Trent is taking the case over. I asked him to, which allows me to take a much needed vacation. That's all anyone needs to know."

"You own a cabin in Canada on a detective's pay?"

"What can I say, I don't have a woman spending my money." His smile lit up his whole face, making him more handsome than before.

"Cute," she said, feeling stupid. "You sure you want to do this? Who knows about this cabin?"

"Actually, everyone who knows me, since I always go there when I really want to get away."

"I don't want to put you in danger, too."

"There's no reason for anyone to suspect you're with me."

"I feel silly. Maybe I'm being paranoid. Maybe—"

"One look at the tool shed proves you're not being paranoid. Finding your daughter moved from the bedroom to the car is not being paranoid. That's damn awful. If Trevor is responsible, he's gone way over the edge this time."

"What do you mean, this time?"

"I've had a few tangos with your husband in the past."

She reached over and placed her palm on Mile's arm. "He's my soon to be ex-husband, please bear that in mind. I'll accept your offer under one condition."

"What's that?"

"We have to tell Chyna. She'd worry herself sick if I just disappeared."

"That's impossible. I know Chyna and I know how she'd react if she found you missing. I also know how she'd react if she knew the truth and was pretending to be shocked. It just wouldn't be believable. No offense, I like Chyna, but I can't imagine her keeping this a secret. She isn't capable of keeping still. It's not her fault, it's just the way she is."

Abi knew Miles was right. Chyna could be tenacious if she had to be. If she knew they were safe in Canada, she'd make a show of concern, but it would be transparent. Chyna didn't make a good liar. "You're right, of course. When do we leave?"

"Now."

"What? I need clothes, baby things, and a plan. I can't just leave the house unattended—"

"That's exactly what we have to do. Who ever planned a sudden disappearance? We leave this moment and no one sees us packing. No one sees us stocking up on baby

diapers. No one will suspect a thing, because we haven't given any reason to. Does this make sense to you?"

She could see his reasoning. It seemed so out of character for her to up and leave, without planning, without telling anyone. "Maybe I should take some time to think about this. I have Kelly to think of."

"Yes you do. Where do you think Kelly will be most safe? Here, or in Canada where no one knows where she is?"

Abi shrugged to hide her confusion. "I'm sure you're right, it just seems so drastic. Maybe we could take Chyna with us." Time ticked away as Miles sat staring back at her.

"The three of us have a better chance of not being noticed. May I remind you, Chyna does make a scene! She's a bubbly talk to anyone and everyone, piece of positive attitude. People like her and they remember her. Something we don't want."

What did she know about Miles Sandler? He was a detective with the Police Department, and he and Chyna were friends. Abi realized that was all she needed to know. "Okay. For Kelly's sake, I'll go with you." Once she'd decided, Abi felt a sudden rush of relief.

"I want you to take Kelly and leave as though you're done with your statement. I'll finish up the paperwork and meet you in my car."

"Won't someone see me?"

"The parking lot is for policemen's vehicles only. It's usually deserted. Keep down if you see any movement, and we'll be fine."

"You have the car key?" she asked, looking around to see if anyone watched them. He extended his hand to her and she placed her palm against his. She instantly felt the key press into her skin. "Thank you, Detective Sandler," she said, rising from her seat and speaking a fraction louder.

"If anything happens at all, call Detective Trent. He'll be handling the case while I'm on vacation."

She gave Miles a knowing smile, then rose from her chair, pulled Kelly closer to her chest, and walked from the police station. It didn't seem possible that she was doing this. She always thought things out, maybe too long. She always made a plan and stuck to it. What would it be like to spend three weeks at a cabin with Miles Sandler? Abi smiled to herself.

Trevor tossed and turned, unable to sleep. He was exhausted, yet he couldn't sleep with the anger that ate away at him. That bitch! She'd called Miles to the rescue. They should have set off the trigger.

With disgust, Trevor adjusted his pillow once again. He'd done all that work and planning. And, he'd taken particular care to make the blast an unforgettable one.

One thing he knew for sure, Abi would have shit her pants. He wished he could have seen the look on her face when she saw all those explosives. Better yet, when she noticed Kelly wasn't in bed!

He laughed, knowing it was a sick game. Knowing most men wouldn't go through this much effort to make a point. But, Trevor wasn't going to let Abi go on with her life like nothing happened...like they never existed.

He'd always had the feeling he wasn't good enough for her. Big-shot therapist. He was just a rancher. She was a fucking train wreck when he met her, on the rebound from some asshole she'd just broken up with. He just happened to be there to pick up the pieces.

Well, now he'd create the pieces. She'd pay for her deceit. She kept saying she'd do anything to keep their marriage together, to make it work. Liar. She should have given him a son.

His father had warned him long ago, a girl child drained the pocketbook, the hormones, and the sanity of a man. They were useless when born and only good for one thing when they grew up. Trevor could see the logic in that.

At first, it seemed a way to get even with Abi, now he realized he enjoyed scaring her. The planning excited him.

Miles grabbed the phone after the first ring. "Hello?"

"Miles? Trent here. You won't believe what we found in Mrs. Madden's basement."

"More explosives?" Miles asked, suddenly awake.

"How about the makings for those explosives we found in the shed?"

"I'm on vacation, why you calling me? Are you saying the—"

"That's exactly what I'm saying. It appears Mrs. Madden wants it to look like someone is trying to kill her. Maybe she needs the attention or she wants her husband discredited so she gets full custody of the kid. But, there's no doubt about it. We lifted several prints off the supplies, they belong to Abi Madden."

"Why wouldn't she get rid of the evidence? Were they hidden? Were they traced to a store so we can ID the purchaser?"

"That's the funny thing. The receipt was actually found in the garbage. We went to the hardware store and showed them Abi's picture. The guy said she looked a lot like Mrs. Madden, but something wasn't quite the same."

"Think Trevor Madden hired some woman to buy the stuff disguised as Abi?" Miles didn't believe for a second that Abi Madden had anything to do with the explosives. He'd been there and felt her fear.

"Well, I suppose that's possible. What about the finger prints?"

"What items had her fingerprints on them?"

"Electrical tape had a good set and how about a needle nose pliers for another. Let's see, a flashlight and now I see what you mean. Pretty common items mixed in with the not so common explosives. We know that Madden was seen backing out of the driveway yesterday and yes he's high on the suspect list. But his fingerprints were nowhere in that basement. Started us thinking maybe she was—"

"What did Mrs. Madden have to say about it? I hope you didn't arrest the poor woman." Miles smiled to himself, glad he thought of it.

"Matter-of-fact that's another reason I'm calling. It's concerning Mrs. Madden. We haven't been able to locate her since she came into the station. She isn't at her house. Her sister hasn't heard from her and well, it seems she's missing. Kinda throws a monkey wrench into our theory she's making all this happen."

"Are you trying to tell me that you've lost Mrs. Madden? I've been gone half a day. Have you called her friends or checked with other relatives?"

"Of course we're in the process of doing that. But, like I said, no one has seen her since she left the station yesterday."

"She left before me. I had my bags packed so I left right after my paperwork was done. You sure she isn't at her house? You check inside or just ring the doorbell? Maybe she took some sleeping pills, well, maybe not with a baby."

"We checked the place over. Sister said it doesn't look like she packed a thing. Not even toothbrush and baby stuff."

"I don't have a clue, Trent. You want me to cancel my vacation and come back?" Miles held his breath.

"Naw, just thought I'd give you a call and see if you had any ideas. One more thing, I don't know if this means anything—"

"Out with it, Scott."

"Well, no one seems to know where Trevor Madden is either."

"What?" Miles sat up, glanced at the bed with a sleeping Abi and Kelly. He turned his back to them.

"Well, I went to his place to question him, after I left Abi's house, this morning. No one has seen him, including his folks. I'm wondering, do you think the jerk kidnapped his wife and daughter? I can't ignore the fact she might be in danger and she hasn't been lying."

"You check with Captain Warrett?" Miles wasn't worried about Abi and Kelly, but he had great concerns if Trevor had been following her, then continued to follow them.

"He suggested I call you. He's here right now, you want to talk to him?"

"Sure, put him on." Miles wondered how much to say. Was the phone tapped? Was this a trick to make him confess he had taken Abi and Kelly to keep them safe? He hadn't broken the law, but he was interfering with an on-going investigation.

"Sandler, sorry to interrupt your vacation. Knew you were interested in the case. Actually thought you were interested in the woman. We're at a loss here. I have an inkling you're in this deeper than usual. Can't imagine you taking a vacation with an open case, especially one you started. I usually have to force you to take a vacation. It seems strange you hadn't mentioned it until yesterday."

"Your point being?"

"Struck me as being a bit odd, that's all. Thought you might know something the rest of us poor slobs here don't. Am I right?"

Miles thought for a moment, then decided if he didn't come clean soon, it could mean his badge. "I was planning on calling you to see how the case was coming along, but not

at one in the morning. I'm exhausted from driving all day. You'd better tell your team to go home and get some sleep. I don't have any great break-through information to share." The hesitation on the other end beamed like a flashing light.

"You do need a vacation, don't you Sandler."

"What I need right now is some sleep. Tell you what, I'll give this thing some thought and I'll give you a call sometime in the morning." There seemed to be some shuffling and whispering in the background. Miles waited impatiently.

"Sounds good, how about ten?"

"It's a plan. Now let me get some sleep." Miles placed the receiver down, then gave another glance at the girls. He felt protective, even though he really didn't know them that well or long.

So, Trevor seemed to have disappeared, too. Miles didn't like the way things were going.

Chyna pulled Abi and Trevor's wedding picture out of her purse once again, then placed it in front of the gas attendant. "You see this woman any time today or even tonight?" she asked, watching the young man's expression.

"Nope."

"She would have had a red-headed little girl with her. You sure?"

"Positive. But I seen him."

Chyna nearly choked when the young man pointed to the groom.

"Geez Louise, you sure?"

"Yup. He was real agitated and asked if a white mini-van with Montana license plates stopped here. Shit, you have any idea how many white mini-vans go through here? I don't really look at the cars or trucks much. I watch the till and take in the money. It's not like the old days when you had to pump the gas, too."

"I know what you mean. Did he ask you anything else? Anything?" Chyna held still while the pimple-faced teenager seemed to search his memory.

"Said he was following his wife up north, but he had a flat tire and now he's trying to catch up with her. Seems strange now that I think about it."

"Do you remember how long ago that was?" Chyna asked, grabbing a bottle of water from a nearby cooler.

"Must be about two hours or so. Yup, that sure does seem odd. Why you looking for the lady?"

"She's my sister. We were suppose to meet up, missed our connection."

"Seems like your family didn't plan this trip too well, huh?"

Chyna felt like laughing. If only he knew how true that statement was. "Thanks for your help." She rushed out the door and ran back to her car. Damn good thing she decided to follow Trevor. What were the odds she'd spot him speeding out of town? Damn Trevor drove like a maniac. But two hours ahead of her seemed impossible. But

Revenge

then for the past hour she had been stopping at every stinking gas station along the way. Maybe she should just turn around and go home.

Abi might have run, considering all that had happened lately. Chyna wouldn't blame her. So, did that mean Trevor wasn't running from the police but after Abi? Could he have been watching her, waiting for his next opportunity to...to what? Scare or even kill her and Kelly?

Should she call the police? And tell them what? No, she'd catch up with Trevor. What if he had Abi and Kelly already? She shuddered, stepped on the gas, then flipped on the windshield wipers. This was going to be a long night.

Chapter Ten

Abi woke with a start. She hesitated, taking a few minutes to remember where she was and why. She looked down at her sleeping child and felt a surge of relief. She wondered how many women went through such drastic means to protect their child.

She'd often heard of battered women. She had great empathy for them, but never would have thought of herself in those terms. Weren't stalking, attempted kidnapping, and the occasional bomb threat a form of being battered?

She thought about Trevor when they'd first started dating. He'd seemed so kind and giving. He was nothing like Frank, who was a too handsome lawyer who did everything to impress people. He'd done his best to keep their relationship a secret, especially from his friends and family. What married man had a fling, then announced it to the world? She should have guessed, and she did, much too late.

But she loved Frank, or thought she had. He'd changed her simple looks to a glamour style, from her makeup to the way she dressed. She even gave up beer, now preferring fine wines. He often claimed she was what he made her. He never realized how much that hurt.

But Trevor had never tried to change her. He seemed to think she was special just the way she was. They'd had so many happy memories together.

At the time, she recalled thinking his ex-wife was a monster. Trevor was the perfect father and a fine man. She ignored his drinking, his womanizing, and even his foul language when he tried to irritate her. She believed that would all change after they got married. If anyone should have known better, she should have.

"First rule, you don't marry a man thinking you're going to change him," she told Kelly. "How could I have been such a fool?" she added.

"Fool about what?"

Startled, Abi glanced up to find Miles standing over her, staring back with warm grey eyes. "Oh, I didn't hear you come over. I almost forgot I wasn't alone."

"You changed the subject. You think you were foolish to run, don't you?"

She saw the hurt in his expression and realized her comment didn't help matters. "I was thinking about my ex, not you, when I asked how I could have been such a fool." She didn't move when he sat on the edge of the bed near her.

Revenge

"Oh. We got a phone call last night, or should I say early this morning. I wasn't going to tell you this, but you have a right to know what's going on."

"Thank you for your candor. Most people think they're being kind to spare the bad news. I like the truth up front." She watched him glance over her blanketed form. It made her feel hot, as though he'd touched every inch of her. A flush of heat raced into her cheeks, he quickly looked away. "Who called?"

"Captain Warrett told me you're not the only one missing, so is Trevor."

She sat up, alarm filling her. "You think he's following us?"

"I'm not sure. They think he kidnapped you and Kelly. I almost told Captain Warrett I have you, but, something didn't feel right. There must have been quite a few people listening in, almost like he was warning me not to talk. I'm going out to a pay phone now and give him a call at his house. In the meantime, you and Kelly stay put. Take your shower and get ready to leave. Need anything?"

Abi stared at him, listening, yet almost not hearing a thing since Miles said Trevor was missing, too. "What if he finds us?"

"He'll have to go through me first. I don't go down easy."

She smiled, thinking it was macho, but not conceited. She reached up and placed her palm on his arm. "I don't want you getting yourself killed over my problems. Maybe you should leave us here, then wherever we go, you won't have an idea what happened to us. No one would ever know you helped us this far."

"Don't be ridiculous. Not for one minute would I consider leaving you two here. Now, get yourself ready. I'll pick up something for us to eat, then come get you two in about a half-hour. You have enough diapers and whatever you need for Kelly?"

She wondered where Miles had been before she married Trevor. Did all the great guys show up after you've made a disaster of your life? Miles moved his palm across the back of her neck and gave it a slight squeeze. She remained still.

"Things are going to be okay. I'll see to it that not only will Trevor pay for what he's tried to do to you, he'll never get parental rights to Kelly in this lifetime."

"I only hope you're right. I've been praying Trevor never gets a chance to hold Kelly in his arms again. I know it's wrong, but I can't help myself. One would think a woman my age would have it more together."

"I think you have it together, Abi. You're one really well put together woman, and don't you forget it."

Trevor sipped hot coffee, annoyed he'd burned the roof of his mouth on the first gulp. Nothing seemed to go right. She'd say it was because he had a negative attitude. What the shit did that have to do with it?

He hated her using her psych tricks to make him think differently. Her positive feedback, as she called it. Where did she get off thinking he needed to change?

The corner came up faster than he'd expected. His mind not necessarily on his driving, the car swerved onto the gravel edging. Slamming on the breaks, he turned the

steering wheel hard. It locked in place. The truck skidded sideways down a grassy embankment. Tensing, Trevor gripped the wheel, pumping the brakes. If the truck started rolling down, he'd be mincemeat at the bottom of the ravine. He barely caught a glimpse of the tree that halted his decent.

Trevor had no clue how far he'd slid down the steep edge, and he feared even more the uncertain distance to the bottom. He unhooked his seat belt, then quickly refastened it. "Shit!" he shouted.

He couldn't see a thing. Reaching over he opened the glove compartment, searching inside for a flashlight. The car inched forward and he quickly sat back to balance the vehicle. He'd have to stay still until someone found him.

One more damn thing he could thank Abi for. What was he thinking when he married her? He knew. He wanted a son. He had to have a son, and soon. What if his folks died in a car accident? What if one had a stroke and the other died before he got a chance to give them an heir, a male heir? He didn't have much time. He had to have a son or lose everything.

He still couldn't understand why they were willing to erase him from their lives. No inheritance if no son! What kind of bullshit was that? He'd earned the right to own The Lazy M. He'd spent his whole life on that ranch. He always would.

He'd read the folk's will. They'd give the ranch, the money, the gun collection, and even the investment plans to him if he had a son to inherit it. If not, then all would go to his sister, Diane, who had a son. In order for her to inherit, her son would have to change his name to Madden. What ever possessed them to think that one up?

Trevor decided long ago, he wasn't going to let them do this to him. Diane hadn't worked one hour on the Lazy M and she wasn't getting one cent it earned. She'd have a fatal accident before he'd let that happen.

Miles picked up a bag of diapers, some Wuther's Originals, Egg McMuffins, and then the girls. He'd been driving for more than an hour. Abi and Kelly slept quietly.

He picked up his cell phone and dialed Captain Warrett's home number for the third time.

"Yeh? Warrett here."

"Hi, it's me."

"Hi, kid. How's my favorite son?"

Miles didn't miss the hint. "I'm your only son."

"Like I said, my favorite son. How's that wife of yours and my granddaughter? Taking care of them?"

"They're as safe as if they were with you. I couldn't be happier."

"My phone's been acting up. Why don't you call me back on my cell?"

"Sure, I can hardly hear you." Miles waited a few moments, took in a deep breath, then dialed Captain Warrett's private number. He answered on the first ring. Miles could hear a radio blaring in the background and water from a shower. "FBI?"

Revenge

"I'm not sure what's going on around here. People are disappearing like Loch Ness."

"Who has disappeared now?" Miles asked, afraid to hear the answer.

"Abi Madden's sister, Chyna Brown, hasn't been seen for over a day. Don't have a clue where she went any more than we do Trevor Madden. I'm not worried about Abi and Kelly, but you ever pull a stunt like this one again, I'll have your badge on my desk, you hear me?"

Miles released a rush of air. "Yeah, I hear you. I know my actions were drastic, but I didn't feel I had a choice. If Abi and Kelly had spent one more night in Montana, I don't think they'd have survived."

"I think you're right. What the Sam hell is going on? There has to be more to this than just an angry husband."

"I happen to agree with you, I just haven't figured it out yet. I don't think Abi has a clue, either."

"How soon before you reach the cabin?"

Miles rounded a corner, then slammed on the breaks. "Damn it, that was close!"

"What's wrong? Miles, what happened?"

He glanced at an unharmed mother and daughter, and a surge of relief filled him. "I just missed colliding with a deer. I know better than to drive fast in this area. I nearly got us all killed."

"You didn't, that's what matters. Listen, Sandler, I'm going to do some digging. In the meantime, drive safe and call me when you get to the cabin."

"How'd you know where I was going? I didn't tell anyone." Miles shifted gears, then reset the cruise control.

"Everyone knows when you do manage to take some time off you always spend it at your cabin. Figured you wanted privacy and a low profile. Cabin would be the best choice."

"That transparent, huh? Figured that's what everyone would think, and that's why I did what I usually do. Nothing different means nothing suspicious." He glanced at a sleeping Abi, then lowered his voice. "No one has guessed I'm not alone, right?" Miles asked.

"Don't let it worry you. Trevor Madden has no way of knowing where you are, where you are going, or that you have his wife and daughter in protective custody."

"I'm assuming my vacation has been cancelled."

"You've assumed right."

"I think you ought to dig deeper. I think there's something here we're not seeing. Why would a man be determined to kill off his soon-to-be ex-wife and daughter?"

"We can't be certain Madden did that. We don't have any proof. It could be someone else and Madden has been trying to save her. He seemed genuinely concerned when that fire could have killed them both."

"You're kidding, right?"

"Well, what about all the evidence we found in her basement? You aren't seeing this clearly, Sandler. Don't let this get personal or you might get yourself killed."

"You think she started that fire in her motel room? That she attempted to blow-up her own storage shed, then kept the incriminating evidence in her basement? What part of these scenarios seem out of place to you? Do you know many people capable of blowing up a shed like that? Hell, I sure don't. I couldn't and I'll bet the house you couldn't either. So what the hell makes you think Abi Madden could?" Miles stepped on the gas and passed a semi doing eighty-five. He glanced over at a pale-faced Abi, then decreased the speed with a sense of embarrassment. He'd forgotten she was there and privy to the entire conversation. He hoped he hadn't said anything stupid.

"Stranger things have been known to happen. Don't discount it just because she's a woman."

"A beautiful woman," Miles corrected, then glanced at Abi. She stared back, her blue eyes cloudy, blonde hair whirling around her face, looking almost angelic.

"Keep it professional, Sandler. Get back to me."

Miles wasn't sure what to say as he placed the phone into the jack. He felt Abi's searching stare burn into his face. He wondered how much he should tell her. "They know you and Kelly are with me. I'm officially off vacation."

"You think Trevor found out about your cabin?"

"I don't see how, unless he has a connection at the station. That's very unlikely. I'd say he wouldn't suspect you're with me, but after the other night, who knows. I should have been more careful. Trevor isn't a fool, no matter how much of a jerk I think he is. I won't underestimate him a second time."

"What else did you find out?"

Miles hesitated. "I guess...I wouldn't worry. I'm sure it means nothing."

"I thought you didn't like beating around the bush, as the dumb cliché goes."

"Only when I don't want to say something," he admitted. "Chyna say anything about going—"

"Chyna is missing, too?"

"Well, not exactly missing. No one has seen her for a day. But, knowing Chyna, and I do, she could be on her own witch-hunt. No one keeps that gal down." Out of the corner of his eye, Miles watched Abi. A slow, knowing smile eased across her face. She looked years younger. He suddenly realized she didn't smile much and that seemed a shame.

"Maybe she decided to go with John, after all. I don't think she would though. You think—"

"Don't start. She's resourceful and I'm sure she's better off than we are." He gave Abi a sideways glance. Her nose was straight, short and charming. She was slender, reed-like, and even willowy, not usually the type of figure that attracted him. But, in Abi's case, he found it extremely feminine, right down to her hips that tapered into long straight legs. She did excite him.

He pulled his attention back to his driving. He wondered how they hadn't landed in the ditch for the lack of attention it received.

"You don't think Chyna followed us, do you? I wouldn't put it past her. She's been acting strange the last couple of days. I know she worries about me. Sometimes I even

wish she'd keep her nose in her own business. Then again, if it hadn't been for her, I think I would have lost my grip by now."

"You're stronger than you let people think, Abi. You've handle all this better than most, I can vouch for that." He watched her wrinkle her nose and give her head a slight shake.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence. I needed it. Up to this point I've made a fine mess of things. I married the wrong man. I failed in my marriage. I almost got my daughter killed in a fire. I'd better quit before I scare myself."

"Hard on yourself, aren't you? As I see it, only one of those statements is true." He watched her think his comment over.

"Which one?"

"You married the wrong man."

"I failed in my marriage, too?"

"Your marriage failed, not you. It takes two to make it work. I've seen Trevor in action, I can't imagine any woman being married to the likes of him."

"After what I've been through, believe me, I can't either."

"It'll be over before you know it. The department will find proof, and it'll all be over."

"So the police think I set my own shed up to blow? Do they think I put my own infant in my car, too? This is absolutely ridiculous! I'm angry, and hurt, and frustrated, and I could go on, but the fact is, as much as I dislike Trevor, I couldn't have done either of those things just to frame him."

Miles reached over and placed his palm on the back of her head. Her hair felt silky beneath his fingertips. "I don't believe you concocted this whole thing to make Trevor look bad in the eyes of the law. I was there, remember? They'll get some leads and uncover the truth. We'll just have to be patient." He reluctantly returned his hand back to the steering wheel. Miles wondered what Abi had seen in Trevor to start with. She had strong family convictions and the man was the devil himself.

Chapter Eleven

Chyna had made some good decisions, and some bad. This one rated at the top of stupid, yet she couldn't help herself. She'd always followed her intuition and it tuned-in strong these days. Something was terribly wrong with Abi. Chyna couldn't ignore the foreboding vibes she'd been receiving.

Two hours behind Trevor. Was there much chance of catching up to him? He could turn down any of the adjoining roads off the main highway, she'd never know it. Yet, he could stop to eat or sleep and she'd spot his truck. What were the odds of that happening? She didn't want to think about it. Why didn't she just turn around and head back to Great Falls?

The fact that Abi and Kelly seemed to have disappeared kept her racing after Trevor. When she first started following him, there didn't appear to be any passengers in his truck. Had he killed them already? Was he on his way to dispose of their bodies? Maybe he hadn't killed them, yet, and their only chance of surviving was with her? Chyna shook as fearful images built in her mind.

She pressed on the gas pedal, alert to sharp corners and oncoming traffic. It had been a long day, with an even longer night ahead of her. She worried about the lack of sleep and no one to keep her awake.

It rained harder with each passing mile. At times the rain drove down in sheets, making the going slow and even more nerve wracking.

Although her thoughts were on Abi and the recent developments, she found herself glancing at the ditch, hoping she wouldn't find what would appear to be a body rolled in a carpet, or black bag, or..."Damn it, Chyna! Stop it this minute!" she yelled at herself.

"Oh, no," she added, starring at what appeared to be lights, car lights, shining at an awkward angle. She slowed to a crawl and pulled off to the side of the road. Her windshield wipers snapped a warning against the cold windy elements outside.

Chyna hesitated, wondering if she should stop. Least she could do is check it out and call for help. It was the Montana thing to do. She couldn't very well leave someone who'd driven off the road, what if, she decided not to think about it.

She searched under the seat and quickly retrieved her trusty red umbrella. Fumbling though the glove compartment she felt the cold metal of a flashlight beneath her fingertips. She pressed the soft button and light flooded the car. Relief filled her. Something had gone right.

This wasn't going to be pleasant. She set the emergency brake, then bolted from the car. Wind blasted her from all directions, then quickly turned the umbrella inside out and tore it from her hands without mercy.

"Damn," she muttered under her breath, then immediately thought of Abi scolding her for getting out of her car in the first place. Chyna hurried to the edge of the road, then squinted to see down the embankment. She moved the flashlight across the black void, then paused. She could see a truck, Lord, it teetered against a tree.

"Hello!" she shouted, wondering if there was anyone still in the vehicle. "Hello!" she repeated, wondering if the pouring rain and whirling wind drowned out her voice.

Unfortunately, she decided she had to go down there. She could leave, but what if someone was in that truck, hurt or dying? That quick and disturbing thought gave her pause, what if Abi and Kelly were down there?

A cold shiver moved over Chyna. Maybe that truck didn't get down there by accident. It was too dark to see if it was Trevor's truck. She hurried over the edge, sliding on the seat of her jeans. Grabbing at shrubs and large rocks, she skidded to a stop near the teetering vehicle.

"Well, if it ain't big sister to the rescue?"

Chyna wiped the rain from her face. She stared at no one other than Trevor Madden. "Where's Abi and Kelly?" she asked, making no move toward him.

"Now how the hell would I know that? You see her sitting next to me?"

"Maybe you have her and Kelly in the back of your truck?"

"What the shit you talking about? Why would I do that?"

Chyna wouldn't put anything past him, but this time she actually believed she read surprise in his expression. "Geez Louise, Trevor, you tell me."

"You've never liked me, shit, I don't care. I may be angry enough with Abi to plant a few jokes and do a little scaring, but I'm not the idiot that's trying to kill her. You'll have to figure that one out without me."

"I'm supposed to believe you? I don't think so. You're a cheater and a liar. You've hurt my sister one too many times, so don't expect me to fall all over myself to help you here. Actually I can't imagine this happening to a more deserving person."

"Listen you sick—"

"Watch the language, Trevor." The cold rain seeped through Chyna's jacket and jeans. "I'm getting soaked. I'm sure someone will come along to help you, sooner or later. It's not going to be me."

"You can't just leave...us here."

Her nerves tensed immediately. "Us? You said...are they tied up and stuffed behind you in the king-cab? I don't want a cock and bull story. I want the truth. Now!"

"You're nothing like Abi, are you? She would have helped me, no matter what I've done. But you, you, Chyna, are so cool and in control."

"Cut the bullshit, Trevor. Where are Abi and Kelly?"

"You help me out of this damn teetering truck and I'll take you to them."

"I don't believe you. I'm going to move in closer and I want you to back off so I can see inside. If they're in there, you'd better hope they're alive."

"I'm telling you they aren't in this truck."

"Good, then back off and don't try anything." She watched him lean back, holding his hands up so she could see them. She wanted to go look, yet her feet felt bolted to the ground.

"Go ahead, look."

She moved closer to the vehicle, keeping her gaze glued to Trevor, her jaw tightened. She realized the back end of the truck teetered almost in mid-air. She stretched on tiptoes and glanced over the contents of the king-cab area. She immediately realized there was nothing, no bodies dead or alive. A flush of relief washed over her like the descending rain.

"Where are they?"

"Her fancy new boyfriend has them."

Chyna took an abrupt step toward Trevor. "Who exactly is that?" she asked.

"You know big stud detective, all muscles, no brains Miles."

"Miles Sandler is twice the man you'll ever be."

"You would think that, wouldn't you Chyna. Well, guess what? Everyone thinks I took Abi and Kelly, and guess what? A damn policeman took them. They'd charge me with kidnapping, but you can be sure Sandler won't be charged with anything."

"Of course not, since Abi wouldn't have willingly gone with you. If she went with Miles, then I'm sure—"

"Well, she ain't divorced from me yet. I can get her on adultery and get the kid. Bet she never thought of that."

"Trevor, you don't want Kelly. You haven't from the moment she was a wiggling fetus. Why the interest now?" Chyna looked over the balancing truck and for once thought how perfect it would be if, if, God decided, this poor excuse of a man didn't deserve to continue his life on earth.

"Because it upsets Abi. Can't think of a better reason. She made promises to me and she broke them. Now it's her time to suffer."

"You're a jerk. You've made Abi suffer more than you'll ever know. I'll tell you one thing. You'll never find a woman to love you more than she did. Abi was willing to do anything to make your marriage work." Chyna had had enough chitchat with Trevor and she was getting more soaked with each passing minute. He could be charming, when he wanted to be, but she wasn't fooled thinking he didn't have a reason for it. She wiped her face on the sleeve of her jacket, a futile gesture.

"Help me out of here, Chyna. You might wish me dead, but I don't think you're capable of sending me crashing down this embankment, any more than you were capable of running me over with your car."

"Think you know me, don't you, Trevor? You don't. I'm not Abi. I'd push that vehicle in a second, but my behavior would disappoint Abi. See I don't give diddly squat to

what happens to you. I'd prefer you did go crashing on down. Wish I could give that truck a little push." She didn't miss the slight worry that seemed to creep into his expression. She also noticed his lips thinned with anger.

"You want to stand there in the rain, fine," he said, leaning back against the seat. "I'll wait—"

Chyna gasped as the truck teetered and moaned as it rubbed against the tree bark. Cold rain whipped around her legs with renewed strength. "Winds picking up, certainly isn't helping your situation, is it?" She considered leaving him there. Somehow she felt Abi's disappointment in her.

"Damn it, Chyna. Get your ass over here and give me a hand."

"Seems to me you could ask nicely. After all, I'll be saving your life. It's something that goes against every grain in my body. Ask nice." She watched his nostrils flare, it somehow gave her satisfaction.

"Please, Chyna, would you help me out of here?"

"Now that wasn't so hard, was it?" she asked while looking the situation over with interest. "I'm going to lean on the back bumper that should stabilize it enough for you to dive out. I won't be able to hold it long, so you'd better get out dang quick." She reached up and opened the driver's side door, causing the truck to skid slightly forward.

"What the hell you doing?"

"You can't exactly jump out of a closed door, now can you?" Her mind registered seeing a gun on the floorboard, and she hesitated.

"Now!" he shouted.

Chyna pressed on the bumper, holding the truck as stable as she could. She watched Trevor dive from the vehicle, landing on his stomach. She stood away from the bumper, and took several steps toward Trevor, then realized he'd already gotten to his feet. He somehow seemed threatening. Her instincts warned her to run. Three quick steps and she felt his tight grip around her waist. "Let me go, Trevor!"

"My dear, Chyna, you have no idea how glad I am you're here. You should have sent me crashing down. I won't hesitate to do the same for you!"

"What? Geez Louise, you wouldn't! Trevor, you bastard, I just saved your life." She struggled to get free from his grip, but the more she struggled, the tighter he wrapped his arms around her.

"I owe you for trying to run me down. I owe you for spying on me. I owe you for always pointing out what an asshole I am to Abi. We've never liked each other, and never will."

"That's no reason to kill me. It certainly won't make me like you any more!"

"Cute. I have a new plan, Chyna, just thought you'd like to know. I'm going to find Abi and Kelly and bring them back to the ranch. We'll get rid of the girl, adoption is better than dead."

"How could you? She's your daughter!" Chyna glanced around, hoping to find something, anything that might distract him enough to let her go. His grip tightened. "Get your hands off me, Trevor."

"Sure."

She found herself being tossed through the air. Chyna landed hard. The shock of discovery hit her full force when Trevor slammed the truck door shut. "I'll get you for this," she shouted at him through the open window.

"See you in hell!"

She pulled herself upright in time to see him push the front fender of the truck. She dived for the door, but momentum sent her hard against the front window. Her forehead ached and the sound of cracking glass filled her with fear.

She turned and glared through the open driver's side window and found herself shrinking from the cold gray, almost lifeless eyes that stared back at her. She hated the smirk on Trevor's face. Scraping sounds of metal against tree bark caused her to cringe. The vehicle slid from the tree, and began a downward slide.

She swore she heard Trevor laugh. She couldn't see anything but a black abyss. The vehicle picked up speed as it continued to skim the grassy embankment. She found herself suddenly tossed to the roof. The truck rolled, slamming her head against the dashboard, jamming her shoulder. A stabbing pain tore at her leg. "God, help me," she cried out loud. "I'll do whatever it takes, but please don't let me die. I have to be there for Abi and Kelly."

The vehicle slid to a stop. Chyna drew in a breath. In her foggy state something or someone warned her to concentrate, to be aware. She drew in a breath and smelled gasoline. A new fear gripped her senses.

Chyna tried to scream but no sound came, only a low, disbelieving moan escaped her lips.

"God, don't let me burn alive! Abi...Kelly..." She whispered. "I'm so sorry...."

Abi bolted upright in the passenger seat. Fear filled her. A chill, that something horrible had just happened.

"Are you okay?"

She glanced over at Miles and nodded. "It must have been a dream. Seems I'm plagued with them these days. I should call them nightmares, especially when Trevor's in them. I'm sorry, that sounded mean. I didn't—"

"No need to apologize. I understand completely."

She didn't doubt he did. Kelly tugged at her shirt and she slid her daughter under her oversized sweater to nurse. "This time, it really wasn't a dream or nightmare. I had a feeling, a premonition, that something awful has happened to Chyna."

"I don't think she'd let anything happen to her. We've been friends for years and I've never seen anyone get the best of her yet."

"How'd you two meet?" she asked, hoping to take her mind off the uneasiness that had seeped into her conscious.

"College. We hung with the same crowd and became instant friends."

"Did you guys date?" she asked, hoping not.

"Naw, we've always been more like buddies or brother and sister. I can't explain it. We just understood each other. It's been good for us both all these years."

"I have to admit, I'm glad, I mean, that you two are friends." She felt like a teenage blubbering fool. She adjusted Kelly to her other breast, and relaxed against the car seat. She glanced over to find him watching her. "What?"

"I think us guys miss out on something very special. We never get to feel a baby move inside. We don't get to share the closeness of nursing."

She noticed he quickly glanced away. "I'll remind you of that comment next time she bites me." Abi laughed softly, attempting to ease his embarrassment and hers as well. He laughed, deep and natural.

"Are you getting hungry?"

"Sure. You must be exhausted. Maybe we should stop for the night?"

"I was thinking the same thing. We'll get something to eat first. Let's stop at Maw's Kitchen, great food and the place is fun, too. It looks like my grandmother's kitchen. Mitzie is a hoot, a seventy-year-old going on seventeen."

"She sounds delightful." Abi struggled to submerge a yawn.

"Tell you what, I'll go in and order and we'll eat at the hotel. How's that sound?"

She couldn't believe Miles had realized how tired she truly was. Trevor would have given her a thrashing for being in a funk, as he always put it. "Thanks, Miles. I shouldn't be this tired, you've done all the driving." The monotonous motion of the windshield wipers made her drowsy.

Miles pulled into the lighted lot, then in front of Maw's Kitchen. "This whole thing has been upsetting and straining, you have every right to be exhausted. I'll be right back."

Abi smiled. She watched him run across the parking space to the door of the restaurant. He shook off his wet jacket and wiped his feet before entering.

She wished, no she didn't wish. Trevor seemed like such a nice guy at the beginning, too. He was considerate and made it seem like she was the love of his life. By the time she realized he had a drinking problem, she'd made her commitment. By the time she realized he felt it was his right to go out with the guys any night he wanted, come home whenever he wanted to, or not come home at all, she'd given herself to him. They'd become one in the eyes of God, that was something she couldn't easily dismiss.

Abi looked down at her sleeping daughter. "I'd never be able to get rid of you. Mommy will always be here for you." She kissed Kelly's cheek, then leaned her head back. Life was nothing like she expected.

Thoughts of Chyna filtered through her mind. Abi couldn't shake the feeling something terrible had happened to her sister.

Chapter Twelve

It seemed almost impossible to stop laughing. Trevor couldn't help himself. The look on Chyna's face...when the truck started skidding downward...damn, that was well worth the effort. He'd planned on letting her know he'd done her in. It couldn't have worked out better.

Drenched, he finally pulled himself together and made his way up the embankment. Chyna's car waited for him. An oncoming truck slowed down, then stopped just as it reached him.

"Having car trouble?"

Trevor shook his head. "Naw, call of nature. No sooner got out of eyesight from the road and the clouds opened up. Just my luck." The man laughed. "Thanks for stopping."

"You're welcome."

Trevor clenched his teeth. Of all the damn luck! He didn't need a witness. Would the man remember their conversation when Chyna's accident was broadcast on the news? Trevor wondered if his face was memorable enough for a by-passer to recognize in a line-up. It was raining and damn dark. "Shit," he mumbled, then rushed to Chyna's car.

There was another problem he hadn't considered at the time. He had Chyna's car. And Chyna was crumpled at the bottom of a ravine in his vehicle. How on earth was he going to explain that one? Everyone knew how she felt about him and vice versa.

He could say she stopped to help him, which she did. She could have fallen back into his truck while helping him out. Then he'd have to report the accident. Yes, he'd report the accident at the first town. It would take more time, but at least he wouldn't be...shit...would it look like an accident? He had no other choice.

He'd wasted a good two hours teetering on that tree and getting things straight with Chyna. And he'd probably lose at least half a day after reporting Chyna's accident. He didn't have a clue where Abi and Sandler were. He had a good idea they were going to Canada, just by the direction they'd been heading.

Suddenly a plan formulated in his mind, one that excited him. Maybe he didn't have to kill her and the kid. He would convince Abi that Canada would be a great place to give their marriage another try?

He wouldn't let Miles have Abi. She kept saying she'd do anything to make their marriage work. Well, he'd kiss her ass if he had to, but he'd sweet talk her back to him. She'd send Miles packing, and that was just the icing on the cake. He'd call his father and let him know they were back together and planning on having that son in no time. Kelly could easily have an accident before the boy was born. Damn if that didn't make perfect sense. Why didn't he think of it sooner?

Trevor passed a camper-trailer, barely making it back into his lane before a semi whizzed past him. The trucker gave an over-extended blare of his horn. Annoyed, Trevor returned the gesture, knowing it only drew attention. He couldn't help it. He hated anyone pointing a disapproving finger at him.

That's what Abi had done. She somehow had it in her head that he was wrong for wanting a son. She'd use that twisted mumbo jumbo and made him feel stupid and low. Well, he'd show her how right he was. Once he got the ranch in his name, hell, he didn't give a shit what happened to Abi. This plan certainly was faster than finding another stupid woman to give him a son. Besides, it would give him a chance to get even with Abi. He'd call the attorney and stop the divorce papers.

No one was keeping him from getting the ranch...and his big plans for it. He'd convince her to send Sandler packing. She was still his wife by law.

If he had to, he'd threaten to sell the kid. She'd see the light real quick. Heck, they'd have their second honeymoon in Canada, who would know the difference? He'd have her impregnated before they got back to the ranch. His folks would like that.

Trevor hummed to the radio, suddenly things were making sense. He had a plan and things were looking up. He'd have his son before the year was out.

He drove like a mad man, in a hurry to get the Chyna thing over with. The sooner he was done with the police, the sooner he could go after Abi. It took balls to pull up to the police station. Trevor ran inside, putting on a good show. "I need help," he shouted. "Please, someone, help me."

"What can we do for you young fella?"

Trevor glanced at a bulky late forties uniformed policeman. "I had an accident. I mean, I got out, but Chyna went down with my truck. You've got to help me. She could be alive."

"Hold on there. You said an accident? Where exactly?"

"About ten miles south. My truck slid down an embankment and Chyna stopped to help. She pulled me out and lost her footing. I watched her fall back and land inside my truck, then it went sliding down. I couldn't do anything to help her. You've got to try."

"Call it in, Margie. Come with me. I'm Officer Wildung. What's your name?"

"Trevor Madden. Chyna is my sister-in-law. I can't tell you how shocked I was when she showed up to help me. Didn't get a chance to ask her why she was there, either."

"Give me the keys to your car."

Trevor handed them over.

"Willie, follow us in Mr. Madden's vehicle," Officer Wildung said, tossing the keys. He unlocked his vehicle, then flipped the unlock switch. "Where you headed?"

Trevor slid into the policeman's car and fastened the seat belt, all the while wondering how to answer. "I'm going to Canada, meet my wife and daughter up there. We're gonna do some fishing and get away from it all."

"You don't know why your sister-in-law was headed this way?"

"Nope. Not a clue."

"Were you two meeting up here for some hanky-panky?"

Trevor couldn't help laughing. "You wouldn't ask that question if you knew Chyna. She and I aren't exactly buddies. I was grateful for her help, though. I'd be down that ravine if she hadn't come by." It appeared Officer Wildung believed his story. It wasn't all a lie. "My wife might have invited Chyna to come up and join us for a few days. Sisters are like that."

Miles sat in a booth by a window, so he could keep an eye on the girls. He noticed Abi had leaned her head back against the seat and appeared to be sleeping.

He couldn't help feeling disdain for the way Trevor treated her. She deserved nothing but respect. She had a shyness that he found refreshing in these times of bolder, aggressive women.

Miles turned his father's ring around his finger. He liked how the blue sapphire looked under fluorescent lights. He stared at it, trying to remember his father before going off to Viet Nam. If only he'd lived, things might have been different. Once his mother remarried, Miles had few fond memories of his parents. His mother took the brunt of things, still did. His dad was the stubborn, old-fashioned way of thinking type, and that didn't help matters. Of course, he was a step-dad, which explained why they argued and disagreed on just about everything.

"What's going on in that mind of yours? You look so serious."

Miles glanced up, surprised to find Abi sliding into the booth across from him.

"You looked so lonesome in here, thought we might give you some company."

He smiled at her. "I didn't want you to bother. I'm sure you're exhausted." She adjusted the baby carrier on the seat, then leaned back. "You want to eat here?"

"Sure. Kelly is sleeping and..."

The color drain from her face. He turned to see what had caused the alarming reaction. The TV flashed a picture of her and Kelly with possible kidnapping broadcast in large letters. A second set of pictures posted Trevor and Chyna across the screen.

"Now don't jump to conclusions. I told you—"

"They're saying Trevor kidnapped us. Why do they think he also...he may be a lot of things, Miles, but I don't think he would hurt Chyna."

"I think they're just unsure where she is, and since Trevor has suddenly disappeared, well, they think it's possible there's a connection."

"What connection?"

"Well, she is your sister."

"So?"

"Calm down, Abi—"

"Don't tell me to calm down. I realize this craziness is entirely my fault. You don't need to be involved, but please, don't tell me to calm down. We're talking about my sister now. I don't give a flying leap about Trevor, but Chyna is another subject."

"Does she have a cell phone?" He watched her expression lighten slightly.

"Yes. Why didn't I think of that?"

He handed Abi his phone and watched her dial without hesitation. Her expression changed with each ring.

"Hello?"

"Hello. Is that you, Trevor?" Abi's voice betrayed her surprise.

Miles nearly choked. He hadn't expected this. "Give it to me," he whispered. She shook her head and waved off his outstretched hand.

"Is Chyna there? Why are you answering her phone?"

Miles grew impatient hearing only Abi's side of the conversation.

"What do you mean? What kind of accident? Where the blazes are you? What do you mean, where am I?"

Miles shook his head vehemently. He watched her mouth tighten as she looked over at him. He felt like telling her to hang up, but he didn't.

"It's not important where I am or where I'm going. I want to know about Chyna. What have you done?"

The line of her mouth tightened a fraction more. Her lids dropped over her eyes, he knew the news wasn't good.

"What? My heavens! Trevor, is she okay? What do you mean, you don't know? Didn't you go down and check her or see if you could help her? I'm not accusing, but it just seems, if you have a cell phone why didn't you call from there?"

Miles didn't miss the exasperation in her voice. Something was terribly wrong.

"You just left her there? I guess you weren't thinking. Yeh, right, you couldn't see a phone sitting between the seats. I'm supposed to believe that?"

Miles tensed. Damn Trevor Madden.

"So exactly where did this happen?"

Extending his hand, Miles again motioned for Abi to hand him the phone. It annoyed him when she shook her head and gripped it against her ear.

"What? Repeat that, I don't think I heard you right."

"What?" Miles whispered. He waited while she pressed her fingers over the small speaker on the phone.

"Chyna has had an accident and he won't tell me where, unless I agree to meet him at the site."

Miles shook his head. "Tell him you're calling the police with the information. You won't meet him because you're afraid of him. It won't look good for him if he doesn't report the accident right away."

"Trevor, you listen to me. I'm not going to meet you. Too much has happened and I don't trust you. I'm not even sure I believe Chyna has had an accident—I'm not finished. I'm calling it in. If she's hurt—"

"What do you mean? Trevor, my Lord, it can't be. How could it happen? I don't see how that could happen. You're damn right, I don't believe you."

Tears welled in Abi's eyes, a single tear trailed down her cheek. He had waited as long as he could. He extended his hand, palm up, hoping she'd relinquish the phone to him. Surprised, she handed it over. He quickly brought the receiver to his ear, grasping her fingers in his free hand.

"I'm telling you, there was no way I could have gone down that ravine to check on her. It was raining and slippery."

"Did you try, or was it convenient to look the other way?" Miles asked, aware of the immediate pause.

"So, I'm right. She did run off with you, just like the whore she is."

Miles grit his teeth, determined not to play into Trevor's mind game. "Abi isn't a whore. She didn't run off with me. I have her in protective custody. Protection from you, if you must know."

"Like hell. I'm her husband. You don't have a right to take her or my kid anywhere."

"I'm not going to discuss this with you. Where is Chyna?"

"I'm not going to discuss that with you. Put Abi back on or I'm going to hang up, then you'll never know where she is."

Miles stiffened as though Trevor had struck him. "Listen to me, you low-life, piece of shit. I'm calling the highway patrol. They'll find Chyna if she's had some kind of accident. You better hope she's alive, because if she isn't, I'll dog you until you're either behind bars or dead. I truly don't care which."

"Expect me to be scared of you? You kidnapped my wife and daughter, we'll see who is going behind bars or ends up dead."

Miles glanced at Abi. Her stare drilled into him. He somehow didn't seem to be getting any further than she had. "Trevor, if you're smart, which I'm not sure is possible, you'll tell the emergency team where Chyna's accident happened. You don't, they'll know you caused it. If she's dead, I promise to God, you're going to pay. I'll see you're up on charges for murder, leaving the site of an accident, and every little damn charge I can come up with."

"Don't give me your police double-talk. It wasn't my fault Chyna fell back into my truck. I'm telling you, I tried to reach her but the damn vehicle slid down so fast. She fell against the window and the momentum, well, there was nothing I could do."

"Why do I have a hard time believing you, Madden? Call it in and I might—"

"Put Abi back on."

"No, I'm not putting Abi back on." Miles pushed the off button and slammed the phone on the table. "He's the most irritating, annoying, piece of shit. He pushes my buttons." The phone rang and both he and Abi jumped.

Miles grabbed it before she had a chance. "So help me, Trevor, make that call before—"

"What's going on? Have you been talking to Trevor Madden?"

Immediately recognizing Captain Warrett's voice, Miles leaned back against the booth. "Something's wrong, Captain. Abi called her sister's cell phone and Trevor answered. Said Chyna had an accident and—"

"What kind of accident? Where?"

"That's just it. He tried luring Abi to the accident site by promising to tell her. I have a feeling something awful has happened. We're at Maw's Kitchen. I'm guessing he must be within a couple hours of us, since our phone reception was pretty clear."

"I'll call the Police station in that area, maybe they know something. He was probably jerking your chain."

"Thanks, Captain. Hope you're right. We'll keep heading toward our destination. Would you let us know when you find out what's going on?"

"Will do."

Miles stared at Abi. The silence seemed deafening. He could only imagine what was going through her mind. "You and Chyna are close, aren't you?" He knew they were, but he couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Yes. Always have been. She's a bit protective, but she's always been there for me. She has the big sister syndrome down really well."

He smiled and rubbed the top of her hand with his thumb. "I'm sorry all this is happening. You do realize Trevor could have been bluffing, just to get you to come to him."

"What if he wasn't bluffing? He did answer Chyna's phone. He's in her car, that much is certain."

"You're right, of course. That doesn't mean Chyna had an accident. It doesn't make sense that she'd have an accident in his truck. I think he was luring you in."

"I hope you're right. If anything has happened to her...I should make sure. What if she—"

"Don't, Abi. You can put yourself through hell, but it won't change a thing. Trevor wants you to worry, to make you suffer wondering what's happened to her. Don't do it, don't play his sick game."

"But, if I ignore his warning—"

"I don't want to hear another word until we're certain what has or hasn't happened. Captain Warrett will see that every inch of the highway between here and Great Falls is searched. He can do more than we could begin to. I won't let Trevor play me for a fool, like he has, you." Miles paused, her reaction told him he'd hurt her.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean it like that. I mean, I don't think you're a fool. Trevor is good at getting what he wants. He's a manipulator." Miles paused to sandwich her hand between his. He relaxed when she didn't pull back. "I don't know if what he said about Chyna is true, but one thing is for sure, he wasn't happy he didn't get his way."

"His way?"

Miles realized her confusion and understood that in her state of exhaustion, and now concern for her sister, that things were cascading down on her like an avalanche. "He wanted you to go running to him. He wants total control of your life. He'll do anything

to get that." Miles released her hand, and leaned back while the waitress placed a couple sacks of food on the table. She handed him the bill.

"Ya want to eat here, I could put everything on plates. Wouldn't be no bother."

"Thanks, Tessie, but I think we'll just head out." He handed her a couple twenty dollar bills and the ticket. "Keep the change. See you sometime soon."

"Bye, Miles. Mom said to tell you she gave ya some dessert on the house."

He smiled. "Tell your grandma, if it's her blueberry pie, I'll make sure I give her a hug next time I'm in."

"It's blueberry pie. You can give me that hug right now."

Miles chuckled, stood, and gave Tessie a big squeeze. "If you were ten years older I'd make you my wife!"

"What makes you think I'd even be interested? I've got me a real nice boyfriend."

"So, you've replaced me already? You're breaking my heart." He watched her blush and loved the sound of her giggle.

"Are they your wife and baby?"

Miles ruffled her hair, then glanced over at Abi and Kelly. "I wish," he said in a low, soft voice that surprised even him. He hadn't meant to say that, and he felt awkward standing there. "Catch you next time, Tessie girl." Miles picked up the bags, then reached over and lifted the car seat with a sleeping Kelly nestled inside.

"Give me one of those," Abi said, grabbing the largest bag.

He answered by following her. She held the door open and he whispered, "Thanks." Rain pelted down as he hurried to the car and placed the baby carrier in the back seat. "I don't think she got very wet," he said, snapping the seat belt in place.

"I think she's sleeping so soundly she didn't even notice."

Miles waited for Abi to grab her seat belt before closing her door. He ran around the car, then realized he liked the feeling of a baby and a wife. A flood of memories came crashing down on him. He didn't want to think about it. Miles slid into the driver's seat and quickly closed the door.

He glanced over at Abi and studied her thoughtfully for a moment. She was disturbing in every way. Did he see an expression that pleaded for friendship, or more?

He didn't trust his voice, so he merely squeezed her folded hands in his palm, then quickly released them and started the car.

They needed food and sleep, and maybe just a little companionship. She was vulnerable and hurting, he wouldn't even consider taking advantage of her.

With each passing hour he found himself becoming more attracted to Abi Madden. He liked her and that somehow scared him.

Chapter Thirteen

Stabbing pain gripped both her legs, traveling the length of them. How could she feel cold and yet hot?

"Help! Anyone out there?" she yelled, her voice projected barely above a whisper.

She saw nothing, engulfed in a frightening black world that swallowed her whole. Rain splattered against the metal roof and a horrifying creak told her the truck threatened to crash down.

The pungent odor of gasoline filled her nostrils and Chyna struggled to register the seriousness of her situation. She had to get out of the vehicle before it caught fire. Yet, an overwhelming heaviness sucked the energy from her limbs.

She lifted her head and found the effort too much. It quickly occurred to her that she wasn't going to crawl out of the wreckage by herself.

So, did this mean Trevor was going to win? The thought angered her more than her situation. Abi and Kelly needed help.

Anger and a drive for survival convinced Chyna she wasn't going to let Trevor win, at least not without a fight. She'd get herself out of his damn truck and she'd go back and haunt the sucker, just like he did Abi. Taking a deep breath, she dug her elbows into the ground and pulled herself forward. The effort rewarded her a few inches from the death trap. As though someone had grabbed her by the armpits and pulled her forward, Chyna managed to get through the open space that had once been a truck window. Inch by inch, Chyna increased the distance between her and the now burning vehicle.

Wet rocks, thorny shrubbery, and pine needles dug into the soft tissue of the underside of her arms. She didn't question how she managed to gain distance, but accepted the strength and help that brought her closer and closer to an indenture in a rock. A fair distance from the blazing vehicle she collapsed into the rock haven, out of the cold and drizzling rain.

She imagined someone held her in warm, protective arms. A feeling of peace settled over her. She no longer felt afraid as the whirling darkness enveloped her.

The acrid scent of a campfire roused Chyna. Wood snapped and crackled and she felt the heat it offered. Her head ached and her entire body felt swollen and bruised.

In a weak attempt, she groggily gazed through slightly opened eyes. A burning fire took shape. The effort became nearly unbearable. Both her legs stabbed with shocking pain, her arms pricked as though a thousand needles stabbed them, and her ears rang in a shrill, piercing pitch that made it hard to think.

Slowly she became aware she wasn't alone. Panic and fear filled her. Was it Trevor? Maybe Big Foot did exist and was helping her. She would have laughed at the thought, had it not been so painful to even consider laughing. Of course she wasn't alone, someone had made the fire. Who? It certainly wasn't her.

Images of Trevor pushing her into his teetering truck filled her with renewed fear. She recalled the vehicle sliding, then rolling down the steep incline. She smelled gasoline. "I have to get out. Abi and Kelly need me! I won't let you get away with this, Trevor..." Her heart pounded, increasing the throbbing in her head.

"Take it easy, you are safe now."

She heard the deep voice, but couldn't see anyone. Was God talking to her? "It hurts so much," she managed to whisper, her throat raspy and dry from the smoke.

"Swallow."

Droplets of water rolled onto her tongue, then a steady stream. Chyna couldn't seem to get enough. When the liquid stopped flowing down her throat, she wanted more.

Determined to see who was helping her, Chyna opened her eyes and shuddered from the stabbing pain it caused. The agonizing effort revealed a large man. He had long gray braids ornamented with eagle feathers and beads. He wore a neck choker made of white bones, something she'd seen in pictures of handsome, tan warriors of long ago.

Although it had to be a dream, it bestowed a comforting affect on her. She relaxed and watched him through half-opened eyes. The scent of burning sage-blossom somehow seemed so familiar.

His chanting became as soothing as the rain pelted just outside the rock overhang. The old man stretched her arm out over his crossed legs, underside up. He poured a warm mixture over her skin and suddenly the piercing pain that had been, was no more. He meticulously removed thorns and pine needles that had imbedded into her soft flesh.

Chyna wanted to keep watching him, but dizziness overcame her senses. She allowed her eyes to close, but continued to listen to his soft singing, drawing on the comfort it offered.

In the distance Chyna heard the melodic song of a meadowlark. She cherished the sound, knowing all would be well if she could listen to the gurgling thrill of her favorite bird. It told her she would survive the night. *Meadowlarks don't sing at night, do they?* She wanted to ask, but just couldn't find the strength. Her muddled mind couldn't think straight. She only hoped Abi was listening to the same flute-like notes.

Abi stepped out of the shower, amazed at how good it felt. She didn't want to put the soiled t-shirt and jeans back on, but she owned nothing that hadn't been worn the past two days.

Having filled the sink with hot water, she rinsed both socks and undies, wringing them between a towel, then placing them over the shower rod.

Having procrastinated as long as she dared, Abi slid into a hotel robe, then quietly opened the bathroom door. She paused in the doorway. The stream of light revealed a sleeping Miles. Kelly stretched across his chest, held secure by his long draping arms. It looked natural.

A stabbing sadness filled her. Why wouldn't Trevor want to share such a beautiful moment with his daughter?

Abi reached around the corner and flipped the bathroom switch off. In the dark she tiptoed to the bed, dropped the robe, and then eased under the blankets. It felt incredibly clean and welcome. She closed her eyes, knowing Miles was besides her, holding her child, and nothing was going to happen while he protected them.

Abi became aware of an overwhelming feeling, it drew her down a path. She watched a truck explode into flames and heard a soft whimpering. Abi moved closer to the accident, searching through the crumpled heap of burning metal, struggling to see if anyone had been trapped.

It appeared empty. Abi moved beyond the wreckage. She heard chanting and saw a body lying on the ground in front of a fire. She inched closer and closer, then stopped. Chyna lay unmoving. Her face appeared pale and puffy. Her arms were wrapped in white cloth.

A lump rose in Abi's throat. "Chyna?" she whispered, dropping to her knees. "Did Trevor do this to you?"

"The white man evil."

Startled, Abi shot a glance across the campfire. She gasped, staring at the old man standing. "Did you help my sister?" Abi stood and faced him.

"Time comes to protect our relatives. I am great-great grandfather. This place I lived many suns ago. A time when humans were one with Father Sky and Mother Earth."

"What are you saying?"

"Your sister prayed for help. I answer prayer."

"You're her guardian angel?"

"I tell you sister lives. Know she still in danger. Know you and daughter still in danger. Things not always as seem to be."

Abi stared at the weathered Indian man. "What's your name?"

"I am Akatsis. It mean rain-roper or as napi-kwan say, rainbow."

"You're my great-great grandfather? I didn't know I had Indian blood. What tribe or—"

"You are Blackfoot."

Abi stared at the old Indian. His dark eyes were serenely compelling. She didn't know what to say. Akatsis waved a feather fan, sending aromatic incense toward her.

No, it wasn't incense. It was a horrible smell...not like a camp fire, but that of natural gas and—

"Abi, wake up!"

She woke with a start, coughing as gas hit her lungs. "What...what's that smell from?" She sat and clutched the blankets to her chin. She noticed Miles held Kelly in his arms.

"I think the line for the natural gas is leaking. My God, it's rolling in from under the bathroom door. We've got to get out of here."

She grabbed the robe from the floor and slipped into it, suddenly aware she'd brazenly flashed him from the waist up. There wasn't time to be shy. "My clothes are in the bathroom," she stated, carefully sliding out from the covers.

"Nothing we can do about that now, come on, let's get out of here!"

She slipped on her boots and jacket, then followed Miles without hesitation. He snapped Kelly into her baby seat in the back. Shaking, she slammed the passenger door shut and snapped the seatbelt in place. "How do you think this happened? I hear the fire trucks and police coming already. Do you think the doer called it in?"

"I'm not sticking around to find out."

"Won't that look suspicious?"

"No. The owner, Mr. Anderson, knows me and how to get a hold of me if it's necessary."

"You seem to know just about everyone on the way to your cabin."

"Been coming this way for years. I need to eat and sleep and I have a tendency to frequent the same places and enjoy the company of friends."

It all seemed so convenient. Abi felt uneasy with Miles for the first time. She recalled her father often telling her, "If it seems too good to be true, often times it is."

"Penny for your thoughts, Abi."

"I'm thinking, I wouldn't put it past Trevor to move Kelly from the house to my car to show he can do what he wants, when he wants. I wouldn't even be surprised he set up that elaborate bomb in my storage shed just to scare me, but—"

"But what?"

"I'm not sure he would try to kill me. I mean, he wants to make my life miserable. He wants to control me. But how would it benefit him to have me dead?" Abi waited in silence for an answer.

"There isn't always an answer. Men like Trevor can't accept losing control. He doesn't want you, but he doesn't want anyone else to have you. He wants to make you suffer, because he believes you've failed him and are making him suffer. You should be embarrassed, because you've embarrassed him. You don't have a right to be happy, because you've taken his happiness away. I think you get the picture. It's certainly not a healthy, normal reaction to divorce, but it's also not an uncommon one." He paused, then added, "And there is the insurance."

"We share a daughter and I'm sure the court isn't going to give me total custody. Trevor will always be there, making sure he can point out everything I'm doing wrong. I'm sure I can handle whatever crap he dishes out. But, I just don't want him to play his

games with Kelly and hurt her. I want him out of my life, but he is Kelly's father." She knew how dreadful that sounded, but it was the truth.

"I understand how you feel."

"You do?"

"I've worked on many cases where the man or woman of a divorce get their wires crossed, feel it's a personal attack and next thing you know they've got a score to settle. Pretty much just like this one, except Trevor is a bit extreme. Not all husbands or ex-husbands cross the line, but we're here to serve and protect when they do."

"What insurance?"

"What?"

Abi hesitated, then asked again. "What insurance?"

"You really don't know?"

"Of course not. Are you going to tell me?" Did she even want to know?.

"Trevor is beneficiary of a two million dollar life insurance policy, on both you and Kelly."

"He gets four million dollars if we die? I don't believe it! I never knew. When? I mean, wouldn't I know this? Good Lord, this means, he could, he would want us dead." This information was like a low blow, knocking the wind out of her.

The early morning cast a soft light across Miles' handsome features. A shadow of whiskers covered his face. Abi hadn't noticed the dimple that appeared in his right cheek, giving him a touch of boyish charm. "Have you ever been married?" A play of emotions washed across his face. She hoped conversation would help the miles pass by. She longed to stretch her legs on solid ground.

"No, I've never married. Lana and I were together for two years."

She waited while he paused, anxious to hear more. Wanting to know him better. "You don't have to tell me if you don't want to."

"Nothing I'm ashamed of exactly. She fell out of love with me and into love with someone else. Nothing I could do about it."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to pry."

"Over with for years."

"What happened? I mean, I can't imagine her not wanting you." A flood of heat rushed up her neck and spread across her cheeks. Like a school girl she felt brazen and flirtatious. He slid his palm over her hand and gently squeezed. She held still, not wanting it to end.

"Thank you, Abi. It's been a long time since I've wanted to feel...feel desirable to a woman. I find you a very sexy, well put-together woman. I won't take advantage of you, so please don't start worrying I'm coming on to you."

Abi smiled. A gentleman through-and-through. "I'm not worried," she added, realizing her tone sounded slightly husky. She hoped he hadn't noticed.

"Lana was nothing like you. I mean, she was beautiful too, but she was outgoing and flashy. She loved attention and especially the kind of attention a man could give her. She needed to feel appealing, whether to a friend or mere stranger. She seemed motivated by compliments and admiration."

"I know the type. I think they're insecure and incapable of commitment."

"You're right there. She wanted marriage, but also freedom. When we found out she was pregnant, I asked her to marry me."

"What happened?"

"She told me no. The baby wasn't mine. I felt betrayed and angry. I loved her unconditionally, and still offered to marry her. She turned me down."

"Did she marry the father of her baby, then?" Abi hated prodding, but she couldn't help wondering.

"He wouldn't marry her."

"Why?"

"He wanted nothing to do with her. She was heartbroken. Destroyed. There wasn't a thing I could do to ease her pain. I still would have taken her back. I was hurt, but I didn't want her cast out alone, either. I believed I still loved her."

What did she do?" His jaw clenched and his eyes narrowed slightly.

"She went to a butcher to abort the baby."

"How sad for her and the baby. What happened?"

"She called me, crying, and definitely in pain. She told me what she'd done. She was ashamed and pleaded with me to forgive her. I did. She bled to death before I could get her to a hospital."

Abi observed a single tear slid down his cheek. She looked straight ahead at the road, not wanting to embarrass him by noticing. Out of the corner of her eye, she watched him wipe the moisture away. "What about the father?" Her tone urged him to continue.

"He didn't care. It was all a game to him. I've had nothing to do with him since."

Abi realized Miles was a complex man, not easy to know intimately. "You knew him?"

"He was my step-brother."

Chapter Fourteen

Gritting his teeth, Trevor toyed with the idea of telling the police that Detective Miles Sandler had kidnapped both Abi and Kelly. He knew it wouldn't do any good, cops stuck together.

As told, he continued to wait in Chyna's car. At least he was out of that damn police car. Trevor hated waiting. He hated the suspicious looks the rescue team kept projecting his way.

His conversation with Abi and Miles haunted him. Trevor knew he'd handled it badly. If he'd planned on reconciling with Abi, he'd done a piss-poor job of smoothing things out between them.

Trevor picked up Chyna's car phone and dialed. It rang at least six times before he pushed the off button. He then dialed a cell number, letting it ring again and again. Just as he was ready to hang up he heard a sleepy, "Hello?"

"Kathy? Trevor here."

"What on earth are you calling me this early for? Where have you been? You realize the cops have been here questioning me about you? You didn't kidnap Abi and Kelly, did you? And did you know Chyna was missing, too? I'm downright sick of the questions being fired at me. This phone rings from sun-up to sun-down—"

"Catch a breath! I was wondering if you could do me a favor. I'm—"

"Favor? You want a favor from me? You must be pretty desperate."

"You going to give me shit, or listen?"

"I wasn't giving you shit. I was...what is it you want, Trevor?"

"I need your silence about my threats and scaring you when we first split."

"You've got to be kidding. Why? What have you done? You haven't hurt Abi or that baby, have you? I won't stand by and keep you from jail if you've hurt them, I don't care what you threaten to do to me."

"I've done nothing, but I'm not sure the police are going to believe that. I just want to make sure they don't get their wires crossed and electrocute me in the process."

"There's something you're not telling me. Besides, after all we've been through, why would I do you a favor?"

"It wasn't all bad between us. We have a daughter. We have a history. I'm not asking for the moon, I just want a little support here." He hated having to ask Kathy for anything, but he did have leverage where she was concerned. "I'll stay out of your life, I'll leave you alone after this, no more surprises. Just cooperate with me."

"Okay, Trevor. But, if I find out you've hurt either of them, the deal is off."

"I agree. I just want you to keep quiet. You know what I mean. Cross me and you won't like the consequences."

"Don't threaten me, Trevor. I truly loved you at one time, and we have a beautiful daughter together. You made me think you even wanted to get back together, before you met Abi. Boom, she was in your life, and once again I was out. I'm over it. I'll do this for you, but remember one thing: you cross the line and hurt someone, I won't stay silent. I won't be an accessory and go to jail for you. I'll tell everything. You hearing me?"

"Don't push your luck, Kathy. I made your life a living hell once, I'm capable of doing it again. You want to watch over your shoulder and wonder if you're going to live or die, just try me." He slammed the phone down. She wouldn't dare cross him.

Exhaustion set in. Trevor fought to keep his lids from crashing down. Yesterday had been a long day, and an even longer night. In ways he wished he hadn't reported Chyna's accident, yet, he couldn't have justified it if he hadn't. He shouldn't have answered that call from Abi. He shouldn't have had that conversation with Miles. Trevor realized he'd made some mistakes, they worried him.

Things were getting complicated. He'd done some stupid things the past few weeks, too. He only hoped there was no way of tracing them back to him.

Damn Miles for showing up and interfering. Trevor had no doubt he had pushed Abi close to the breaking point. She'd have agreed to just about anything. Now he had to change all his perfectly laid plans and reconcile with the whore. Trevor slammed the steering wheel with the palm of his hands. Miles had a way of sticking his nose in where it didn't belong.

"Mr. Madden?"

Startled, Trevor looked up to find a county sheriff standing outside his car window. Trevor rolled it down, then looked up at him. "Yes, Sir, what can I do for you?"

"Would you mind stepping out of the car please. Keep your hands in plain sight. Please don't reach into any of your pockets."

Trevor was too unnerved by the sheriff's suggestion to offer any objection. "Am I under arrest?"

"No, Mr. Madden. I just have a few questions for you."

"Then why the damn scare?" He was restless and irritable.

"I'm sorry, sir, that wasn't my intent. I was wondering why Mrs. Brown happened to be in the neighborhood, so to speak."

"I already told someone else. I don't know why she was following me. Maybe she wasn't. Might have been a coincidence she happened this way, she recognized my truck, and stopped to help. I truly don't know."

"You said she helped you out of your teetering vehicle, then she took a step back, lost her footing and fell back into the truck, sending it down. I'm having trouble with that."

"You think I'd lie about something like that? Shit, I told you what happened. It might seem strange or unusual, but that's what happened. I'd give anything for it to have been me, instead of her." Trevor struggled to offer the sheriff an expression of primitive grief over Chyna's ordeal.

"I'm sure you would, Mr. Madden."

"Is she going to be okay? I mean, she will live, right?" He held his breath. Chyna had better be dead. He swallowed with difficulty.

"They don't know yet. From what I can tell, no one could have lived through an accident like that. Shame. Real shame. She might have been alive when the vehicle started on fire. I'm afraid she may have suffered a great deal. Makes me sick."

Trevor gave an anxious little cough. He didn't want to hear the particulars on Chyna's death. He hadn't expected it to disturb him. He became increasingly uneasy under the sheriff's scrutiny. "I'm exhausted. Maybe I should go get some sleep. I could stop by the police station after I've eaten and rested. You think that's possible?"

"I guess there's not much you can accomplish here. It's a shame you don't feel inclined to wait and make sure she hasn't survived. We have your statement, your address and phone number. Keep in mind, we may have some more questions for you later on. This your sister-in-law's car?"

"Yes, it's Chyna's car. Is there a reason I can't take it?"

"I'd like you to either wait in my car," he said, pointing to a gray vehicle with flashing blue and red lights, "or stand outside while a team checks her vehicle out. Procedure, merely procedure."

It didn't sit right with Trevor. His pulse jumped and his composure faltered. Keep your head, he told himself. "I'll wait by that tree," he said, pointing off to the right. At least the rain had let up. He pulled out a cigarette and struck a match. The wind snuffed it out. He hoped they'd find Chyna the same way.

Miles turned down Cottonwood Lane, relieved. It'd been a long, extremely long drive. There were times he didn't think they were going to make it.

He hadn't heard from Captain Warrett all day. It worried him. Had they found Chyna? Was she alive? Had they arrested Trevor?

Miles had to admit something didn't sit just right with Trevor's situation. No doubt he was guilty of some of the threats against Abi and Kelly, but which ones?

Abi had a point when she asked what Trevor would gain by her death. He seemed to enjoy the threatening, the scaring, and the power of the game. But, was the man capable of murder?

Insurance money or not, Miles wasn't convinced Trevor could kill someone. "But, what do I know?" he asked, barely above a whisper. Miles brought his vehicle to a stop, threw it into park and turned off the ignition with a sense of relief.

He glanced over at Abi, pleased she appeared to be sleeping peacefully. He worried about her.

She intrigued him. It seemed he couldn't get enough of looking at her. When she smiled it tipped the corners of her mouth, then lit up her entire face. Her blue eyes were full of life, pain, and unquenchable warmth. He found it hard to take his eyes off her full lips, they begged to be kissed. He wanted to be the one to taste them, feel them against his own, to hold her and protect her. The thought of Trevor touching her made Miles sick.

Did he want Abi to fall in love with him? Would the fear of losing her be too great a price to pay? Yet, when he watched Abi Madden sleep, he wanted her more than any woman he'd ever wanted.

In an attempt not to alarm her, he gently shook her shoulder. "Abi, we're here." She roused from her sleepy state, he found it sexy as hell. She smiled, stretched slightly, then leaned back against the seat. The house robe slid slightly off one shoulder revealing a soft pale breast. It rose and fell with each breath. He wanted to cover her, knowing her embarrassment if she realized the exposure, yet he couldn't deprive himself of the joy just looking brought him. His breathing increased.

His body ached for her. She opened her eyes, and he bolted back against the door. He hoped she hadn't read the lust that had gripped him.

Grasping the v-neck of the house robe, he pulled the material together and shook her gently, hoping it appeared he was still trying to wake her. If she saw through his facade, she didn't show it.

"We're finally here. I hate waking you." A soft smile spread across her face. He wanted her even more.

"You must be exhausted. I'm sorry to have put you through this. Maybe some day I'll be able to make it up to you."

Miles returned her smile. Leaning slightly forward he lifted a strand of hair from her cheek. "I'm just doing my job."

"You might want to believe that, but I think you're doing more than that. I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't come to my rescue."

"You'd have handled it. But, I'm glad I could be of help." He needed to put some distance between them, but he didn't move. Her closeness intoxicated him. Still groggy from sleep, there was a sensual air about her.

She placed her palm on his cheek.

Almost afraid to breathe, he held still.

"You're a very handsome man, Miles Sandler. Lana was a very foolish woman. I wish I had met you before I'd ever known Trevor Madden."

He froze as she stretched up and moved her lips lightly across his. He wanted to grab her into his arms and kiss her from the depths of his soul. But he allowed her to kiss him, keeping his lips soft and receiving.

"You're a very beautiful woman. But, you're also extremely vulnerable right now."

"Kiss me, Miles. Let me know how it feels, just once."

Miles found it hard to still his breathing. He held her face between his palms. Slowly he lowered his head until his lips touched hers, caressing her mouth more than kissing it. She responded, soft and warm. Raising his mouth from hers, he gazed into her eyes. "I've been wanting to do that since the moment I met you, Abi Madden."

"I've been...I wanted...I'm still married. It's sinful. It's wrong."

He showered kisses around her lips and along her jaw. "Tell me it feels wrong." He captured her lips in his, lingering, savoring every moment. She didn't pull back. She didn't hesitate. She eagerly responded. She tasted sweeter, softer and more exciting than any women he'd ever kissed. Miles wanted Abi. With that thought, he pulled back.

"I'm sorry if I was out of line. I won't let it happen again." He rushed out of the car before she had a chance to answer. What the hell was he thinking? He had a job to do, and it didn't include seducing the woman he was protecting. Angry, he jerked open the back door and unhooked the safety belt fastening Kelly's car seat. All his anger slipped away when he looked at the sweet babe asleep. He lifted the carrier, then moved around the vehicle and opened Abi's door. She stepped out, turned and faced him. He watched her, excited by her closeness.

"You weren't out of line. I asked you to kiss me. I could have stopped you, but I didn't. So don't blame yourself, if any one is out of line, it's me."

He stood staring at her, feeling like a foolish schoolboy. "I liked it. I'm not sorry. Hopefully you aren't either."

"Not in the least," she said, giving him a soft smile.

Miles extended his palm and smiled. She placed her hand trustingly in his. He led the way to the cabin. It suddenly occurred to him he'd never brought a woman here before.

The porch light was off. He always left it on. A quick turn of the key and flip of the light switch explained it. He stood frozen.

"What happened?"

Miles didn't answer. He glanced from the shredded pillow cushions to the slashed paintings. "This isn't a robbery."

"How can you tell?"

"Everything is shattered, slashed, broken or destroyed. If a perp came to steal, he'd be more interested in stealing. He wouldn't have taken time to trash the place and not with such anger and fury."

"You think this has anything to do with me?" Her voice quivered.

He set the carrier on the floor and gathered Abi into his arms, holding her snugly. "I don't know what this means. It could be a message to either one of us. Could have nothing to do with your ex-husband."

"Soon to be ex-husband," she corrected.

"I stand corrected." Miles released his hold on her. He somehow didn't like being reminded Abi wasn't divorced yet. What happened to his rule about never getting involved with a married woman? He didn't want to admit he was involved with this one. Now that he'd tasted her warm, inviting kisses he wanted more.

Chapter Fifteen

Chyna couldn't help wondering how she was going to help Abi when she couldn't even help herself. The pain in her legs came and went and she didn't have the nerve to look at them, almost afraid they weren't there.

Early morning had arrived and she heard men shouting and sirens blaring. A glance toward the campfire told her it had burned out some time ago. The old Indian no longer watched over her.

Rising up on her forearms caused stabbing pain to rip through her. Wincing, she dropped back down to the ground. A million needles poked the tender skin of her arms.

Soon they would find her, of that she was certain. Chyna studied the top of the ravine, realizing many men moved about; several repelled the steep incline..

A silhouette of a single man leaning against a tree caught her attention. She couldn't really see him, yet she knew who it was. Trevor Madden.

"I see a body!"

Chyna realized he meant her and tensed. He was a policeman and she nearly cried when he approached.

She closed her eyes and held incredibly still.

"Are you alright, ma'am? Ma'am?"

She waited until he lowered his face near hers before she whispered, "Don't let them know I'm alive. Make them believe I'm burned to a crisp."

"What?"

"Tell them I'm dead!" she whispered. "Make them believe I'm dead or I will be in a short time."

"I found her! Over here. No need to rush, she's dead. Burned to a crisp."

"Lord, how did she manage to crawl this far?"

Chyna heard another man ask. She struggled to breathe without movement. The officer placed his jacket over her face, the weight of it nearly choked her.

"I don't know. Must have been in excruciating pain. Johnson, get a stretcher and body bag down here."

"Damn, I was hoping she made it."

"Weren't we all."

Chyna listened to the men and wished they'd hurry with their task. The material slid off her face and she grimaced.

"Hell...she—"

"Johnson, open that body bag and I'll help lift her over. Be gentle, we don't want the coroner blaming us for any bruises."

"But, I saw—"

"Johnson, cooperate here. Keep your mouth shut and help me. I don't like this any more than you."

She nearly cried out when they lifted her. Pain gripped both her legs, causing nausea, then a whirl of darkness. She didn't fight it.

Chyna had no idea how long she'd been unconscious. Where was she? Good Lord, hopefully not in a cadaver drawer at the morgue. Maybe it had all been a bad dream. Pain filtered up her left leg. It had all been real.

With fear and caution, she inched her lids slightly open, paused, then glanced around the dark room, pausing on a halogen pole lamp that cast shadows on the ceiling. She wasn't in a hospital room and it definitely wasn't the morgue. Relief filled her, grateful it was neither.

"Finally awake?"

Chyna jumped, then glanced at the end of the bed and made out the figure, recognizing him. "You listened to me. I didn't think you would."

"When I see a suspicious accident, a woman in pretty bad shape, and she asks to be pronounced dead, I listen."

"Thank you."

"I'm Officer Harry Lindquin. I have a long list of questions for you, young lady. Think you're up to answering at least some of them?"

"Would you answer one for me first?" Chyna asked, fighting the grogginess that gripped her.

"Sure, fire away."

She liked Officer Lindquin, and forced a slight smile. "Are my legs okay? I mean, will I walk again?" She watched him adjust the blankets around her. Maybe she didn't want to know the truth.

"Doctor Willard said you're going to be just fine."

"You don't have to lie to me, I would rather know the truth." She grabbed the edge of the blanket and tossing it off her legs. Pressing up gingerly on her elbow, she stared down at her body.

"It's not as bad as it looks. You did a hell-of-a job make-shifting those casts. I can't imagine doing that myself. It's damn clever. Mud, pine needles, sticks, made a fine set of casts. In your condition, it must have taken all night."

"I . . ." she almost told him about the old Indian, then decided not only wouldn't he believe her, but she'd sound somewhat hallucinogenic. "What exactly did the doctor say?"

"Said you're one strong woman. Both of your legs are broken, each has a clean break and your casts are so well made, it would do more damage to replace them."

"How could he know they're both broken without X-rays?" she asked, suspicions growing.

"Can't blame you for asking, you were out when we took X-rays, but we did take them. You want to see the breaks for yourself?" He crossed the room and produced several black plastic sheets.

"Care to have a look?" he asked.

"Maybe later. What else did Doctor Willard find?"

"You have one broken and a couple of bruised ribs. Both your arms are healing nicely, but he could only imagine the amount of pain it must have been to pull all the pine needles from your own flesh. You also have a slight concussion, that's why you have a headache."

"Is that all?" she asked, liking the warm chuckle from Officer Lindquin. "Where am I?"

"Believe it or not, you're at my apartment. We, Johnson and I, took you to the morgue, then went back after dark and brought you here. Only the two of us, and our captain of course, know the truth. The rest of the world believes you died in that accident."

"Was Trevor Madden the one who called my accident in?" She leaned back against the pillow. Officer Lindquin pulled her blankets back in place. He gently adjusted her pillow, then looked over her bandaged arms before pulling the covers over them.

"Are you in any pain?"

"Only the pain of not knowing if Trevor Madden suspects I'm still alive."

"Then I'm right, he has something to do with your accident, or should I say, more than he's telling."

"What exactly did he tell you?" Chyna asked, suddenly exhausted.

"He told us how you came upon his accident, stopped, and pulled him out of his teetering vehicle."

"That much is true. What did he tell you happened next?" She licked her dry lips.

"Would you like something to drink?"

She nodded slightly, causing her headache to worsen. He gently inched her head up slightly with the palm of his hand. The moment he adjusted the straw to her lips, she drew in the cool, heavenly drink. Water never tasted better.

"Madden said the momentum of your helping him, sent you reeling backward. He also said you fell back into his vehicle, which in turn sent the truck rolling down the embankment."

"How like him. Finish his story, please, Officer Lindquin."

"It's Harry."

Revenge

She closed her eyes for a moment, then quickly opened them. He'd pulled up a chair next to her bed. "Okay, Harry, what then?"

"Said he wanted to go down and make sure you were okay, but it was too steep. He thought he could help you more by calling for help. When he was getting into your car, he said he heard a dreadful explosion and he rushed back to the embankment edge, everything blazed in flames."

"I'm sure he enjoyed that. He said he'd get even with me one day. It wasn't an accident. You know that, don't you, Harry?" She closed her eyes again.

"Yes, Chyna. You get some rest and don't worry about a thing. I won't let anything happen to you. You hear me?"

She heard him, nodded slightly, then allowed her mind to slip into a painless abyss.

Abi nursed Kelly while Miles moved around the cabin, setting things right, throwing broken glass and shredded pillows into large garbage bags.

"Would you like me to fix us something to eat? Doesn't look like anything is disturbed in the kitchen."

"I noticed that. Matter-of-fact, I think we might have surprised the perp?"

"What?"

"Well, this room is a shambles, and so is the hall leading to the kitchen. But, it's like suddenly the destruction stops. Maybe we got here before the intruder expected and he had to flee."

"My Lord, you think so?"

"I should have thought of that right away. I was more worried about you and Kelly to even consider it. Now I'm convinced of it. Stay put while I check out the loft."

"The loft?" She scanned around the upper area bordered by an intricate wood railing. Miles climbed the spiral staircase. "Well?"

"Everything is fine up here," he shouted from the railing.

"We spoke with Trevor on the phone, there's no way he got here ahead of us, could he?"

"He called from Chyna's cell phone. He could have been anywhere with service. Hell, he doesn't know I have this cabin. Then again, it's not exactly a secret. We drove pretty fast and steady. I don't think he could have beat us here," Miles said, descending quickly.

A strange feeling waved over her. "He's hired someone to follow me."

"Maybe he has a partner. Who else would benefit from your demise or disappearance?"

"I thought he was just trying to scare me, make my life miserable. Stalk me, make me feel like I'm losing my grip. I'm still not convinced he wants me dead." Miles leaned against the door jam and rubbed his chin between his index finger and thumb.

"There's more to it than that."

The phone rang and she jumped. Miles hesitated before picking it up on the third ring.

"Yeah? Captain Warrett, glad you called. Things have been interesting this way."

Abi listened, tensing, trying to fill in the missing words on the other end of the line.

"Someone was here at the cabin, did some major damage to the living room. Think we interrupted the intruder and he skidaddled when we arrived. I think it was a warning and not a robbery. What about Chyna?"

Immediately Abi tensed. "What about Chyna?" she asked, hushing when Miles held up his hand.

"No! I don't know how I'm going to...I don't think coming back will solve anything. They have Madden in custody? What do you mean? We're staying put. The hearing is in less than three weeks. It seems unlikely Trevor Madden would want his wife dead just to avoid a divorce. There's something not right here."

Abi listened to the one-sided conversation, but only one sentence concerned her. What about Chyna. She had an uneasy feeling and it wasn't going away.

"Keep me informed and if something more happens here, you'll be the first to know."

Miles hung up and gave her a hesitant look. Sadness passed over his features and she knew the news wasn't going to be good. "What about Chyna?" He walked toward her. She held her breath and gave no resistance when he lifted Kelly from her arms. Silently he placed her sleeping form into the car seat.

"I wish it...I'm not good at this kind of thing, Abi. I usually pass...this isn't my expertise." He sat next to her.

"What kind of thing, Miles?"

"Abi, you've been through so much these past few days—"

"Cut to the chase. No sugar coating. No beating around the bush. No setting me up for a softer fall. I want the truth, Miles. What has happened to Chyna?" She sat erect on the couch, her fingers locked in her lap. She allowed Miles to encompass her hands in his.

"Chyna is dead."

"What?" Abi swallowed hard. Her heart squeezed in anguish as she realized what he'd actually said. "You told me not to worry. You said I was being...I should have gone to her. I let her down." The swell of pain was beyond tears. She tore her hands from his.

"Abi, I'm so sorry."

"No! You told me everything was going to be okay. You said I was imagining things. You lied to me!" She half screamed, half cried out her accusations. A flash of wild grief rippled through her.

"I'm so sorry."

She leaned toward him and pounded on his chest with her fists. "I should have gone to her," she said, her voice strained with agony, her heart breaking. "I failed her when she needed me most."

"No you didn't. Abi, you couldn't have done anything for her. She stopped to help Trevor—"

"What?" Warning spasms of alarm erupted within her. "When he called, he said she had an accident. He did this to her, didn't he?" she asked, allowing Miles to pull her against his chest. She couldn't stop the tears that rolled freely down her cheeks.

"Captain Warrett said they can't prove anything right now."

"Prove anything!" She chewed on her lower lip and stole a look at Miles. "You think Trevor did this, too?" She watched his face close, as if guarding a secret.

"I think he...is guilty as sin. So does the entire investigation team, but they have to prove it."

"Chyna was trying to protect me." Tears blinded her eyes and choked her voice. "This is all my fault." She wept aloud, rocking back and forth. He held her tight in his arms. She didn't want Miles to ever let her go.

"It's not your fault, Abi. If it's the last thing I do, I'll see Trevor pays for what he did to Chyna."

"What...how did she die?" Her voice broke miserably.

"You don't want to know. It's not important to know—"

"Don't patronize me, Miles." She paused to swallow the lump that lingered in her throat. "Tell me."

"Trevor told the police his truck slid off the road and down an embankment, a single tree stopped it, but the truck precariously teetered against it. Chyna helped Trevor out of the truck, then lost her balance and fell back into it herself. The momentum caused the vehicle to roll down the steep embankment and burst into flames. Chyna was caught in the wreckage. The entire team believes he would have had to push or toss her back into the truck for his story to ring true. Maybe with computer projection they can prove Trevor's story wrong."

"Oh, no!" she cried, anguish escaping from her lips. "She burned to death, how horrible. How...oh, God, it's wrong. It should have been me." Deep sobs racked her insides. Tears burst like a broken faucet. She glanced up at Miles and realized tears flowed down his face as well.

She allowed him to hold her while she cried out her loss, her anguish, and her guilt. She had no idea how long they sat on the couch, crying together, clinging to each other. Exhausted, she closed her eyes, hoping when she opened them it would all have been a horrible nightmare.

Chapter Sixteen

Trevor kept the lights in his trailer off. Things weren't going as he'd planned. Everything was turning to shit. The police made him return home, that pissed him off. Damn Chyna, even dead she still got in his way.

It was also Abi's fault. Abi and Miles, damn him! Trevor had had her in the palm of his hands. She was skittish, unsure, miserable, and even paranoid. He'd had her where he wanted her.

People were starting to talk about her behavior. In three weeks, when they went to court, he could have taken Kelly away from her. That would have fixed her good. Kids have accidents all the time. It wouldn't have taken him long to think of something.

For the first time in months, confusion filled him. He couldn't accept Abi being happy, especially with Sandler. She'd betrayed him.

He'd follow through and make Abi pay. But right now he needed to find her and make her believe he still loved her. He'd ask her to give their marriage another try. That's what she'd been wanting.

He wouldn't look guilty if he and Abi were back together. He'd even show some interest in Kelly. Abi would like that. He'd wait until he controlled her before doing anything about the girl. Maybe in six months he could arrange for the kid to be kidnapped. Abi wouldn't be the wiser. She'd be pregnant by then. He could do this. He'd have that son, he'd have the ranch, and his worries would be over. Things were going to work out. He just had to be patient.

A loud, echoing knock on the door nearly made him choke. He glanced at the clock by his bed and realized it was already ten in the morning. He hadn't slept, had he?

Shuffling across the room, pulling his robe on, Trevor inched to the door. Another series of knocking annoyed him. "All right, I'm coming. Christ! Can't a man get some sleep?"

"Open up, Trevor. It's me."

"Kathy?" he asked, opening the door. What in Sam's—"

"Hush. We've got to talk."

He couldn't have been more surprised. She looked almost pretty. Her cheeks were flushed and her smile was forced. "What's wrong? If it's the kid, I told you, don't bother me with her. I pay child support and you do the parenting. Simple."

"Shut up for a minute, would you?" Kathy pushed past him.

He hadn't seen her so domineering before. "What's up?"

"I heard about Chyna on the news. They said the accident appeared to be under suspicious circumstances. They mentioned you were there. She died in your truck and you drove away in her car. Did you kill Chyna?"

Trevor drew in a deep breath, took several strides toward Kathy, then grabbed a handful of hair behind her head. He lowered his face within inches of hers.

She pressed her lips to his, forceful and demanding.

He responded out of sheer lust. He savagely returned her kisses, forcing her lips open with his thrusting tongue. He found it exciting the way she responded, leaving his mouth burning with fire.

He pressed himself against her, and she met his actions with her own. Moving, sliding against him. He found her aggressive behavior exciting and arousing.

"Don't ask for something you're not willing to accept."

"We didn't have problems in the bedroom, Trevor. I miss your love-making."

"You want something more than—" he gasped as she boldly moved her palm beneath his robe. He dropped to the carpeted floor, she matched his urgency with her own lustful needs.

He reached for her sweater, pulling at it, struggling to get it over her head. She drew back, he stared at her, breathing heavy. "Come to me, baby."

"Tell me something, are you divorcing Abi?"

"What? Let's talk later," he said, grabbing her breast, pulling her toward him. "Come on, Kathy. I've got a hard on for you and you're not teasing me, then backing out." He would have tried force, but Kathy wasn't a little thing, like Abi. Kathy was tall, strong, and more than capable of handling him. She had him straddled to the floor, she sat on his stomach, holding his arms to the carpet, and he realized he was at her mercy. The thought excited him.

"Are you divorcing Abi?"

"Why should you care? You and I are history."

"But you want me, don't you?"

At this moment, yes he did. In an hour, it was doubtful. He still found Kathy's aggressiveness exciting. He'd found Abi's passiveness almost boring at times. But her fear excited him.

"Well?"

He almost laughed, realizing he'd been silent, comparing his wives abilities in bed. "I miss your...your eagerness. I'd be a fool not to."

"So you want me?"

"Hell, yes I want you, Kathy. Now quit fooling around and let's get this over with."

"Now you sound like your old self. How do you think that makes me feel?"

"What the shit are you talking about? You came here. I didn't ask you. You almost threw me on the floor and attacked me. Now you're messin' with the feeling nonsense." He struggled to grab her behind the head and force a kiss, but she held firm, keeping his arms spread-eagle.

"You're in a bit of a spot these days, don't you think? Did you send Chyna to a fiery grave, Trevor? Do you remember what I said about hurting someone? Shame on you. Didn't you wonder if anyone was watching?"

"What the shit you talking about? Someone watching me?"

"Yes, like in witness?"

"Meaning?"

"You can be so dense, can't you, Trevor? Are you sure no one was watching while you picked poor, little Chyna up and flung her into your teetering truck? If she fell backward, think about it, she'd have hit the outside of the vehicle, she wouldn't have fallen into it. You really don't think the police fell for your story, do you?"

"What's this all about, Kathy? I thought you came to—"

"Don't flatter yourself. If I wanted sex, I don't need you for that. I just wanted to know that I could still get you all worked up. Guess I can."

"This is bullshit. What the hell do you want?"

"You have stalked me, made my life miserable, made my family and friends think I was a love-sick, paranoid little bitch. It's still hanging over me. You moved on. But I have to live with what you did to me."

"Ancient history. Your point?" Trevor found himself getting angrier with Kathy by the minute. He didn't appreciate her attack, unless she was putting out. Now he found her position degrading, and he didn't like it one bit.

"Trevor, you surprise me. You forget I know you. I know what you're capable of. Sweet Abi hasn't learned that yet, has she?"

"I'm tiring of this. Get off me!"

"Not yet, love. I have your attention. What's it worth to you?"

He glared at his ex-wife. "You're pushing your luck, Kathy. Let me up and leave before I really get mad. You don't want to make me mad, do you?" He glared at her, anger singed the corners of his control.

"Let's go back to our discussion about witnesses."

"You really want me to believe you were there watching? Unlikely."

"Why? What makes you so sure?"

"You're just saying that to make me admit something I'm not even guilty of."

"You do sound so innocent."

"I am innocent."

"Trevor, if there's one thing you're not, it's innocent. Now I might have been there watching you, I might not have been. But what do you think the cops will believe?"

"You're threatening me? I think you're forgetting who you're dealing with."

"I'm not foolish enough to forget. But think about this, if something were to happen to me, it might not seem coincidental. Your wife's sister dies. Your ex-wife is injured or found dead. I believe I see evidence pointing to you. Don't you?"

"What exactly are you trying to do, Kathy?"

"I want you to realize I have you right where I want you. If you interfere in my life ever again, I'll turn against you so fast, you'll be serving time in prison."

"Something big must be happening that you think you need to threaten me." He watched an unwelcome blush creep into her cheeks. He'd struck some chord. He just wasn't sure which one.

"I'm getting married."

"What? I told you what would happen if you humiliated me by remarrying. I won't stand for it. You had a choice. Divorce, keep your kid and never remarry, or me and no kid. I expect you to—"

"Shut-up, Trevor. I'm sick of your threats and ultimatums. For the first time, I'm not afraid of you."

He struggled to flip her off him. Her weight sucked the air from his lungs. "Get off me!"

"Stay put, you know I'm stronger than you. It's funny, I've always hated being a stocky woman, but right now I couldn't be happier about it."

"Get this over with. I'm sick of arguing with you." Once she released him, he was going to beat the shit out of her. He wasn't going to let her get away with this humiliation, the threats, the...he paused, realizing she had the upper hand. He couldn't hurt her or she'd go to the police.

"I'm going to marry Terry and you're not going to have any objections. You'll keep your threats to yourself. You'll divorce Abi and have nothing to do with Kelly. You'll never see Ambur again. If you think I'm bluffing, try me."

"Alright, I believe you. I didn't kill Chyna. You think you want to blackmail me, fine. I wouldn't be so cocky as to think I won't get even with you. You know I will."

"Don't threaten me, Trevor. Not ever again. It won't bother me in the least to step forward and be an eye-witness. Just so you don't get too many ideas, I'll let you in on a little secret."

"What secret. What the shit you talking about now?" He realized how much he hated Kathy. She was going to pay.

"I have a tape in a safe place. If something happens to me, Ambur or Terry, or even Abi and Kelly, guess what?"

He hated the smirk that washed over Kathy's face. "What tape?"

"I've got your attention, don't I?"

"Quit your gloating. You'll regret this conversation some day, I guarantee it!"

"Tape, Trevor, you're losing focus of what's important here. I have a tape of you picking Chyna up and tossing her into your truck! You put your face, as close as you dared, to the front window, so she could see how happy you were, just before the truck slid down the embankment."

"I don't believe you."

"Do you remember a truck slowing down and asking you if you needed help? Sure you do, just when you were ready to get into Chyna's car. You mentioned something about the call of nature and the sky opened up on you. Just your luck."

A cold knot formed in Trevor's stomach. She hadn't been lying. "You won't get away with this."

"What makes you think that, Trevor? I already have. Just know this, I learned to stalk from a master. I have a copy of the tape with instructions in a safe place. Anything suspicious happens to any of us, you try blackmailing me or any of us to get the tape back, any kind of shit, and be sure that tape will be broadcast on national television. I'm not without connections, as you've aptly put to me so many times."

"You're making a grave mistake, Kathy. I know some people that would snuff you and your Terry out without any questions asked. Accidents do happen."

"Then make sure they don't. That tape would air the same day as our demise. Kinda a catch-twenty-two."

"I'm supposed to believe this?"

"I don't give two hoots what you believe, Trevor. Just know one thing. You put your filthy hands on my daughter ever again, I'll see you pay."

"What's that suppose to mean? She's my daughter and I have rights."

"Not any more. Your choice."

"It'll take more than the threat of a tape to keep you safe, Kathy. When you least expect it, I'll get even. If you told Abi or gave her the tape, you're putting her life in danger, too."

"Don't be ridiculous, I've never had anything to do with Abi. But I want them protected from you."

"Protection from what? You must have some kind of agreement with them."

"Abi knows nothing. But there are others I have talked to. Your new associates are, shall we say, on the seedy side. There are a few guys you've shaken hands with on that video, too. Men I think the police would find interesting enough to investigate. Would you like to guess what else?"

"I'm sick of your games, Kathy. Get off me and stop this shit." Her expression had a coldness to it, one that said she'd kill him on the spot if she could.

"I have you and Ambur on that tape." She watched his expression evolve from shocked to angry.

"What the hell you talking about now?"

"Your touching game is what the shit I'm talking about. You ever touch her again I'll see you rot in jail. Same goes for Kelly."

"You have to prove—"

"That's right, and I have proof."

"I don't believe you. If you had proof you'd be at the police station this minute. Wouldn't you?"

"No I wouldn't, because in three or less years you'd be back out of prison. Then I'd have to worry about you all over again. This way, I keep you in line and you know where you stand."

"Think you're smart, don't you. Remember, I'm not responsible if you have an accident."

Revenge

Kathy pressed her knee into his side until she saw him wince. "Remember, I have an accident or anyone one else I've mentioned, I won't be responsible for the tape becoming public knowledge. Simple as that."

"Think you're damn smart, don't you. You realize I'll find that tape and shove it up your ass."

She pressed her knee into his rib cage. "You won't find the tape, Trevor. I learn you're looking for it and you won't like the consequences."

"You bitch. Think you got it all figured out, don't you?"

She moved off him, then walked to the door. "I do have it all figured out, so don't try and cross me. By the way, are you certain Chyna died in that accident?"

He didn't move, just watched her walk out the door. What was wrong with him? Shouldn't he go after her and stop her for good? Trevor remained motionless, stunned by her comment. Did Kathy know something he didn't?

He slammed his fist into the carpet. "Damn!" He shouted, rubbing his throbbing hand. He couldn't have hated Kathy more than he did at that moment. "You're going to pay, sweetheart," he vowed, seething under his breath.

Chapter Seventeen

Chyna relived gripping Trevor's jacket, pulling him with all her might, dragging him from his teetering truck. She couldn't have disliked the man more. Yet, she couldn't stand by and let him die. She'd had the perfect opportunity. She wanted him dead but she couldn't do it, no matter how much she wanted it.

In ways she was grateful she couldn't kill him. In ways she was disappointed that the awful man wasn't lying in a heap of burned metal. It would have been an accident, just what she'd been planning.

Was it because she believed thou shalt not kill like they taught in Sunday school? It was a rule for living in a civilized society. She had a responsibility to herself, to her sister, and to her niece. If she had killed Trevor, she knew she'd have let Abi, Kelly and even God down, and Chyna couldn't face doing that.

The pain in her left leg reminded her of how Trevor meant to kill her. She'd never forget the look in his eyes, when he felt the triumph of her demise. She wondered how stupid she could have been to help him, so he could turn around and try to kill her.

"Is the pain getting worse?"

The deep voice brought Chyna from her reverie, startling her at first. Once she saw Harry, she offered a weak smile. "I'm afraid so. It's a reminder that Trevor tried to kill me. It's a reminder of what a fool I've been. Geez Louise, what ever made me think I could get proof he's been stalking and scaring Abi? All I've managed to do is get myself nearly killed and I haven't helped her one bit."

"You're really hard on yourself."

Chyna found Harry easy to talk to. He had broad shoulders and a muscular build that gave him a rough-edge. He gave her a sense of protection. His face appeared bronzed by wind and sun, telling her he spent a good deal of his time outdoors. He seemed the opposite of her husband, right down to his laid-back nature and boyish grin. John had always been a serious man, not one to share his feelings and definitely not one to worry about hers. He was way too busy to give it much thought.

Chyna had always believed she didn't really care. That John's distance was just the way things were. He had his work and she had hers. They didn't have kids. For the first time it occurred to Chyna that something was missing in their relationship. There was

more to John's distance than pre-occupation with his work. Why it seemed apparent now, she wasn't sure.

"Maybe I'm not hard enough on myself," she finally answered Harry, then added, "Maybe nearly dying has made me realize I've been wasting my life. If I had been more aware of things around me, instead of functioning in my isolated world, I might have noticed what Trevor was doing. I should have been following him months ago."

"You were following Trevor? Tell me about that."

Chyna allowed Harry to place a pill on her tongue and press a glass of water to her lips. She drank with a vengeance.

"I thought...I believed Trevor was capable of hurting Abi and Kelly. I didn't trust him and so I decided I was going to see what he was up to. I must admit, I wasn't much of a detective. I fell asleep during surveillance. I lost his car in traffic. I'm afraid to say, I even tried to run him down with my car once. I couldn't do it though. "

"You tried running him over?"

"Dumb, huh? I'm not strong enough for something so vile. I couldn't have lived with myself. I should have let him crash down that embankment, instead of me!" She wouldn't have shared that thought with John.

"You did the right thing. I have to agree, it would have solved a lot of problems had Madden been the one hurt or dead, but there's more to all this than any of us realizes. We just haven't figured it out, yet."

"Meaning?"

"I'm not sure. I've been in touch with the office and I've been enlightened on how Abi and you have experienced, well, unusual accidents or threats lately."

"At least it runs in the family." She watched his mouth curl as if on the edge of a smile.

"Trevor is in the crux of things. I keep thinking I'm missing something though."

"So do I." Chyna agreed.

"When you're feeling better I think we'll go over all the things you've observed. You probably have the answer somewhere in that muddled brain."

She offered him a bemused smile, then adjusted her weight, realizing her left hip ached, too. "How long will it take me to heal?"

"Can't blame you for wondering. Your ribs should heal fairly fast. I've had a few broken in my day. They leave a person short of breath and in a lot of pain. Yours won't be that bad. I'd guess in a couple weeks they'll be close to good as new. As for your legs, well, they're going to cramp your style for sure. Heard the doc mention a wheelchair."

"No way! I'll be using crutches in a few days. You can tell him that for me. I wish I knew where Abi was so I could let her know I'm alive. I mean, she'll be so distraught when she hears I'm dead. She'll blame herself. She just doesn't need the stress—"

"It's out of the question. She hasn't been located yet. Yes, it'll be hard on her, but if you're going to stay alive, you have to remain dead. You know that, too, don't you?"

She nodded. "Trevor said Abi and Kelly are with Miles Sandler."

"If that's true, they're in good hands."

Chyna struggled to move her left leg. A sharp pain stabbed up to her waist. "Feels like I'm being assaulted by millions of needles," she stated between gasps of pain.

"Would you like me to roll you onto your stomach for a while?"

She gave a slight nod. "My hips are hurting, I think it's because I'm stuck in one position."

"This might hurt," he said.

Harry slid one arm under her back and the other under her bottom. He turned her to her side. She could feel the heat from his body. A vaguely sensuous sensation passed between them, she tried to ignore it, but it did happen. She grit her teeth as he adjusted her legs, then, as though he held every inch of her body, he eased her over. "Good...job," she said between the throbbing pains that answered the adjustment.

"Relax. You're all tensed-up. It's going to hurt like hell if you don't. Here, let me massage...close your eyes and think about relaxing."

Closing her eyes, she didn't answer him. As he moved his fingers over her bare flesh, she gave into the therapeutic massaging. His fingers were like warm, kneading bubbles in a Jacuzzi. Normally she couldn't stand anyone massaging any part of her body. There wasn't one inch on her that wasn't ticklish. It surprised her that nothing felt as good as what Harry was doing with her back. He moved down her spine, massaging her waist, lower to her buttocks. She should have been embarrassed and shocked, but it felt so good. She allowed him to continue. He moved his palms across her hips, kneading the skin, rubbing the tips of his fingers into her flesh at just the right places.

When he moved to massage her thighs, it seemed impossible to stay awake.

Abi continued to pray for Chyna throughout the night. She woke to a crying Kelly. Nursing her daughter only made her feel guilty to have such joy in her life, when Chyna no longer was around to enjoy even the simplest pleasures of life. Abi couldn't imagine what it would be like not to have Chyna around; her best friend to share everything with, cry with, laugh with, even be angry with. It seemed impossible to believe Chyna was gone.

"The two of you make a pretty picture." Miles said from across the room.

Abi quickly tossed a towel over Kelly's head. Heat flushed her cheeks. His voice sounded deep, or had she imagined it? "It's a beautiful experience," she managed to answer. "I've wanted to be a mother all my life. When I turned thirty I thought maybe I'd never be lucky enough to have a baby. I wanted to be married, happily married, and I wanted a baby. There were times I thought about just getting pregnant so I could have a baby. But, it seemed wrong. I didn't want my child embarrassed by not having or knowing his or her father." She adjusted the pillow behind her back.

"I can understand that. I never thought I'd make a good parent."

"Why would you say that?" Abi asked, looking over at Miles. She noticed he intently watched Kelly nursing, even though he couldn't see her under the towel. Did she see longing in his expression? The thought made her blush. She hoped he didn't notice.

"I've always felt uncomfortable around babies. They make me nervous. They all hate me."

"They don't hate you."

"They do, too. I'm serious. Usually when a kid sees me, they start crying immediately. When someone plops a kid in my arms, it starts screaming like I pinched its butt. There's nothing more irritating than a crying, screaming, fidgety kid."

Abi laughed. She moved Kelly to the other side, guiding her mouth to the nipple, beneath the towel. With Miles watching it almost felt erotic. "They can feel your uneasiness, like a dog senses who likes them and who doesn't. Seems to me Kelly was snuggled pretty comfortably on your chest the other night."

"I'm starting to think Kelly is the exception to the rule. She has to be the sweetest little thing. Besides, us red-heads have to stick together."

I suppose there's something to that. She could pass for your daughter. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to—"

"You don't have to apologize, I'm not offended. She could pass as my daughter. Don't worry so much about saying the wrong thing."

"Trevor use to say I always spoke before thinking. No matter what I said, it seemed to be the wrong thing. After a while I resorted to silence. I know that seems strange, coming from a woman with my background. But we compensate to the kind of man we believe we love."

"What kind of man—"

"A controlling one. You have to understand something. When a person is with someone like that, you don't notice they are taking control of every aspect of your being. I mean, it never occurred to me that he wasn't right in making me feel wrong. It's much easier to see other people's problems, and to fix them."

"I truly believed I was doing the wrong thing in our relationship, causing Trevor to retaliate. Once I realized things for what they were, I needed to do everything I could to get out of that situation. Which is what I did, and why Trevor resorted to his games to stay in control of my life." She raised the towel and watched Kelly nurse, then glanced up at Miles.

"What kind of things?"

"He monitored all my phone calls. He decided what I made for meals. I never did any grocery shopping. He decided when I should visit his family and he had to be with me for all visits. If we went out with friends, I had to be careful of what I said. I never could go to the bathroom with the women, because he said he couldn't trust what I'd say to them."

"Unreal! You didn't realize he was controlling?"

"Yes and no. I didn't want to believe he had control of my entire life, because I believed he loved me so much, he didn't want to share me. Of course, that's what I wanted to believe. When I became pregnant and found out I was carrying a girl, that's when I found out how wrong I was."

"Why didn't you just leave him?"

"Because I believed in the sanctity of marriage. I chose Trevor, and in the eyes of God, he was my partner for life. I didn't want the divorce. I fought to keep my marriage together, at all costs. I felt his rejection and it tore me apart. I wondered how I had failed—"

"How *you* failed *him*?"

"I wasn't giving him a boy child. He wanted a son."

"That's what this is all about? Why is that so important?"

"I don't know. He's never told me. It's a guy thing, you know, someone to inherit the ranch and all that. He's strange when it comes to daughters."

"What do you mean by that, Abi?"

She hesitated. Was it right to voice her suspicions? She never believed in false accusations. But, if she was right, then shouldn't she alert someone else to the truth, just in case? No, she would wait. "I'm not sure. I mean, I...it's nothing."

"You're holding back on me, but, I'll respect that. You decide you want to share this burden, know I'm a good listener."

Abi closed her eyes, fighting to keep the tears from surfacing. She felt a single tear break free and slide down her cheek.

"Did I say something wrong? Miles asked.

She felt him move to the bed and sit next to her. When he slid his palm over her shoulder, she opened her eyes. His gaze was as soft as a caress. "No, I'm not used to a man truly listening. I'm not used to...I've felt so useless this past year. I've felt so unattractive and such a failure," she choked off with a sob. Abi placed Kelly between two pillows then brushed a tear away.

"You're far from unattractive and you're not a failure."

"I quit my practice to be a better wife and to be a mother. I've counseled so many couples into making their marriage work and yet, mine was failing. I wondered why Trevor never told me he thought I was beautiful. I wondered why he never remembered my birthday. I wondered why he never saw all the ways I tried to make his life better. I did all the things I had told my couples to try. I failed to realize it couldn't be one-sided. Trevor had to want to make it work, too." He squeezed her shoulder, she paused and took in the comfort he offered.

Miles didn't interrupt, or comment, so she continued. "He told me I wasn't much to look at, but he'd overlook it if I could keep his house clean and his meals done on time—"

"I'm sorry, Abi, but I can't believe you bought into that!"

"At the time, the way Trevor had me thinking, yes, I did believe him. You have to understand something, psychiatrist or not, I was a woman in a controlling relationship. I wasn't exempt from his abuse because I had training. Maybe I was even more susceptible, since I thought I should have all the answers for making this marriage work." It was impossible not to feel like a complete fool for even telling Miles the way it was between her and Trevor. "If he told me I was ugly, well, after being told it time and time again, I believed it."

"You truly believe you're not much to look at? Have you looked in the mirror? My word woman, you're beautiful."

She stared at Miles, then smiled. "Thank you, a gal likes to hear that once in a while. It's refreshing after what I've been through."

"I'm serious, I hope you realize that. Let me tell you how I see you—"

"I'm not sure I want to know right now. I'm heartsick over Chyna and I'm worried about Kelly. I'm scared someone will succeed in killing Kelly and me. I'm afraid they'll even kill you in the process. That's more than I care to deal with right now."

"Well, I've been patiently listening to you. Now I want you to sit back and listen to me for a while."

"Fair enough," she said, afraid of what he might say. He moved closer, sitting in front of her. She held still. He slid his palms beneath hers. Her breathing increased just from the gesture.

"This is how I see you. Don't interrupt. One thing I want you to keep in mind, I won't be lying. I won't be trying to make points so I can take you to bed. Now that I've cleared that up...here goes."

"The first time I saw you was the night of the fire. I watched you from the doorway of your living room and you were sitting on the couch with Kelly. I felt drawn to your motherly gentleness. I was moved by the love you had in your eyes when you watched Kelly nursing in your arms. I'd never watched a baby nurse, as I'd told you, but it had to be the most beautiful thing I've ever witnessed."

Abi leaned back against the headboard, feeling the warmth of his hands, hoping he wouldn't pull free.

"I see a shapely, slender woman, who radiates beauty as a mother. You have both delicacy and strength in your face. You have the cutest pug nose. Your full, soft lips seem to be begging to be kissed. Your smile is your greatest asset. When you smile your whole face lights up, your blue eyes sparkle, and your cheeks rise. I find it captivating."

"Miles, you're embarrassing me!"

"Hush. I'm being bold and honest here. Did you know that when you're angry your eyes turn dark as sapphires, and when you're excited they glisten brilliant blue?"

He paused, and Abi held her breath. She had no idea how to respond, so she remained still, watching him choose his words carefully, yet, he seemed to be sincere. He rubbed his thumbs across the back of her hands. The gesture jolted a rush of heat up her arms.

"I'm not normally attracted to blondes. I know that sounds stupid, but the stigma of dumb blondes does live up to its reputation at times. But you're different, you're intelligent and far from flaky. Your hair reminds me of blowing fields of wheat. It's sexy how it bounces around your face, soft and wispy. I like it when you absently curl it behind your ear, only to find it slipping free within minutes, bouncing around your cheek, down past your shoulders. It's mesmerizing."

Abi made a face at Miles then licked her lips. She found his description of her embarrassing, yet it pleased her. She wanted to tell him to stop, yet she wanted...needed to hear more. He moved closer, she stared into his dark, steamy eyes.

"You have no idea, do you, that when you walk across a room you do it with the most enticing wiggle known to man?"

"Miles, that's...that's—"

"True. You have a cute butt that makes a man do a double-take."

"Miles! You're embarrassing me!"

"Good! I want you to realize you're quite a woman. I know for a fact you think you're far from sexy, and I'm telling you that's what Trevor wanted you to believe."

"That doesn't make sense."

"Of course it does. If you think you're ugly, undesirable, and no man out there could possibly want you...then, you'd be grateful he kept you around. You'd be grateful that he'd accept you as you are, even though you aren't much. It's that control thing. Are you hearing what I'm saying?"

"Yes, and I should have seen it. It's what I'm trained to diagnose and treat. It'll take some time for me to gain back the confidence he's destroyed. For so long I haven't felt like much of a prize—"

"Stop it!" Miles napped.

Abi jumped, shrank against the pillow, and pulled her hands free. She quickly glanced down at Kelly who fussed a few seconds, then fell back asleep.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to shout. You have to stop saying things like I'm no prize. It's self-destructive. Do you understand what I'm saying? You are a prize, Abi. You're beautiful, mysterious, and so much a woman. A man would be lucky to have your love."

"Miles, you're sweet to say this...I—"

"You don't have to say anything. I just wanted you to know that Trevor has been feeding you lies. He's made you feel ugly and undesirable and that's just not the way it is. Forget everything he's told you and start over. Think about how you felt about yourself before Trevor. How did you feel?"

"If you must know, I'd been quite successful in my practice. I busted butt for that degree and I believed I was doing a lot of good. I liked working with couples, young and old. I studied their cases and worked hard to offer them options to make their marriage work. I was good at what I did. When it came to me, it seemed like I attracted the wrong kind of guy."

"What do you mean by that?"

She looked at him and read puzzlement, even hurt in his expression. "My first boyfriend from college beat the crap out of me. Put me in the hospital for two months and I paid that bill for the next ten years. My next commitment was with a married man. He didn't tell me he was married until I found out a year later. I was devastated. He wanted us to continue the way we were, but there was no chance of that. I was angry and bitter." She swallowed, smirked, and then looked up shaking her head. "Quite a track record, huh?"

"Man, you haven't been lucky in love, have you? First two horrible relationships, and then Trevor."

"Not exactly," she said, laughing, because it didn't seem possible it could get worse. "You won't believe...maybe you will...my next relationship was with my boss. Oh, I know it's the oldest relationship in the book, but, he wasn't married and it started out with being very good friends. He was the most handsome man I'd ever met. I felt privileged that he'd even think of me romantically. Something seemed wrong, but I chose not to notice."

"How do you mean?"

"He didn't want us to be seen together in public. He always wanted people to believe we were only friends, not romantically involved. That hurt my feelings, especially when we were out with his friends."

"He was married, wasn't he?"

"No, that's just it, he wasn't. He'd been through two divorces already, but I finally asked him why, and he told me I wasn't exactly the kind of woman he usually had a relationship with."

"What's that suppose to mean?"

Miles' tone inferred he found the comment irritating, she felt good about that. "That's what I asked him. He said, that he was usually attracted to classy women from the right side-of-the-tracks. Women who had daddy's money to fall back on. He liked women who wore expensive dresses and suits, not jeans and T-shirts. He preferred women who liked the opera, not country music. Women who liked horse racing, not the rodeo. Women who found the dramatic theater a cultural must, and not the movie theater. They preferred ballroom dancing, not my aerobics. So you see, I was an embarrassment in his social crowd. I felt like Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman*."

"He had some nerve. If he truly felt that way, then why did he encourage a relationship with you?"

"I don't know. I guess it was sex with no strings attached. So, you see, I do attract the wrong kind of man. I broke it off with him, and let me tell you it wasn't easy."

"How did he take it?"

"Said he was the best thing that ever happened to me. That he'd made me. That he took me out of the gutter and made me into a lady. That I was nothing without him."

"Same old, same old."

"Exactly. That's when I met Trevor. He was a cowboy. Was fun and seemed to like me as I was. At first he treated me like a queen. He was at my apartment almost every night. He sent me flowers and candy. He made me feel like I was someone. I don't know when it really changed, but oh boy did it change. I don't know what's wrong with me, but that's the story of my life."

He gathered her into his arms, and held her against his chest. Gently he rocked her back and forth. The comfort it gave her was immeasurable.

"I won't hurt you," he whispered into her ear.

Chapter Eighteen

Trevor stepped out of the shower, then wrapped a towel around his waist. He opened the bathroom door, venting the steam. He heard a door open and close. Was someone in his trailer?

He inched down the hall, then stood staring around, anger filling him. The room had been ransacked. At least four men were plowing through his belongings.

"What the hell are you doing in my house?"

"Mr. Madden?"

Trevor glanced to his right. Officer Wildung stood in front of him, extending a paper.

"Trevor Madden, this is a signed Search Warrant for these premises, your garage and car."

Trevor grabbed the piece of paper, looked it over and tossed it to the floor. "What's this all about, Wildung? What the hell do you think you're going to find here?"

"We're not sure, Trevor. But, there are some of us who believe you're guilty as hell for the death of Chyna Brown. There are others who believe you had something to do with the disappearance of Abi and Kelly Madden."

"Hell, I didn't take them, that cop did."

"What cop would that be?"

"Miles Sandler."

"You're mistaken there. He's on vacation. Besides, cops don't go around kidnapping women and babies."

"I'm telling you, she's with him. I talked to her on the phone when Chyna...after the accident."

"You spoke with Abi Madden?"

"Sure did. She was with Sandler. I even talked to him. Think they were in Canada."

"He does have a cabin in Canada. But why would she be with him?"

"Cause they have the hots for each other. What other reason could there be, and she's still my wife."

"Speaking of which, is she all right? I mean, did she mention any distress or did it seem she was a willing participant?"

"Hell, I didn't ask her. I just informed her that Chyna had an accident."

"What was her reaction?"

Trevor smiled. "Was real strange. She wouldn't believe me. I expected her to fall all apart. Chyna is her sister. Instead, she called me a liar, so I hung up."

"Is there anything else you can tell us, Mr. Madden?"

"I'm going to shave. You break anything, I'll send a bill to the police station." His knees shook, but he still strutted back to the bathroom.

As he shaved, Trevor listened to the sounds of his place being searched from top to bottom. Strangers going through his shit pissed him off. Abi would pay for this, too. Thoughts of Kathy came to mind, and he clenched his teeth. He'd see that she paid even more.

Trevor finished cleaning up, then went to the bedroom, ignoring the men searching through his belongings. He pulled on a pair of black jeans and a Big Johnson T-shirt.

He couldn't help wondering why Kathy had asked him if he was sure Chyna was dead. It was all over the news. He'd watched his truck roll down that embankment and crumble like a sardine can at the bottom. He'd heard the explosion and saw the fire. Hell yes, Chyna was dead.

But Kathy had connections. What if she'd heard something on the inside? He had his connections, too. He'd find out the truth. Maybe if he did it with a concerned overtone. Distracted and guilty, he could manage that. Maybe Kathy just wanted him to panic or worry. The bitch would do that.

"What are you looking for?" Trevor asked, behind Officer Wildung.

"Anything that looks suspicious. You know—"

"Wildung, come here!"

Trevor turned to see a young man motioning for them to follow him. Trevor wondered what could have possibly excited the young officer.

"Over here, sir."

"What's up, guys?" Officer Wildung asked, entering the garage.

Trevor hurried through the doorway, curious about what seemed so interesting. He stopped dead in his tracks, staring at a black plastic bag. It was tied in a knot at the top. A profuse odor emanated through the air.

"I don't know what the hell that is. I've never seen it before," Trevor explained, or tried explaining. "Someone must have put it here." He watched Officer Wildung move in closer.

"Where'd you boys find this?"

"Under the work bench, down behind several bags of potting soil."

"Anyone touch the bag without gloves?" Wildung asked.

Trevor looked around the garage, no one admitted to the offense.

"Is there any reason your prints should be on this bag, Mr. Madden?"

Trevor shook his head. "I don't think so. I mean...I have stuff packed into bags like that all over. Someone could have emptied one of them and put something else in it. It could have my fingerprints on it. Hell, this is my garage."

"Scotty, get a picture here. Barns, when he's done, open the bag onto a sterile plastic sheet. Come on boys, let's get moving."

Trevor didn't like what was happening around him. The police watched him with accusing stares. It seemed too obvious, too easy, and too suspicious. "It wouldn't surprise me if you fellas brought this in here, just to scare me. I'm not guilty of anything. I don't know what's in that bag, but you can be sure—"

Trevor stopped immediately as a decayed fetus rolled onto the sterile tarp. He immediately covered his nose. The stench violated the air. He gagged, struggling to keep the rising vomit down into his stomach. He turned and lost the battle. A policeman vomited in the opposite corner.

"My God! It's a human baby." Trevor said, then vomited more. "I don't know where that came from. I swear! You can't believe I'd...I don't know a damn thing—"

"Sir?"

Trevor glanced back to the doorway where a plain-clothed man stood, flanked by two uniformed officers. He held something in his hand, but Trevor couldn't make out what it was.

Trevor watched as Officer Wildung walked over to the men, they mumbled among themselves, then headed toward him.

"Mr. Madden?" Detective Scott Trent began in a stern, direct tone.

"Cut the Mr. shit, Scott. What's going on here?" he asked, a sense of foreboding engulfing him.

"Do you recognize the items this officer is holding?"

Trevor looked down at the plastic bag the detective held up. Trevor immediately scrunched his lips outward. "What the hell is this?"

"Little girl panties, Mr. Madden. Do you recognize them? They're quite distinctive, I mean, they're not your average cotton white panties. Can you explain why they'd be hidden behind the drawer of your night stand?"

"It's a damn setup. I have nothing to do with . . ." he glanced back toward the deformed, semi-curved body, then quickly away, "the body of a baby any more than I do little girl's panties."

"Could they be your daughter's undies? You do have a daughter, don't you?"

"Yes. But I don't know what they'd be doing behind my nightstand. I don't see my daughter all that much. My ex-wife takes care of her most of the time. I have her one weekend a month and only one week of the summer, and that's only because the court ordered it."

"What do you mean, the court ordered it?" Wildung asked.

"The Court feels the child should know her father, even if her father doesn't want to know her. Social workers felt the kid would adjust to society better if the courts made sure she knew her father, even though the parents were irreconcilable."

"You don't want your daughter visiting you?"

"Maybe you like girls, detective. I don't. Never wanted a daughter and still don't. I have to have her one weekend a month and one week during the summer, like I said. I manage. Doesn't make me a kid killer."

"No one is accusing you of killing anyone. Let's get out of here. The smell is...come on," Wildung said, moving back into the house.

Trevor wondered who was behind this. He couldn't imagine anyone he knew would be able to hide a fetus in his garage, not a damn one. "I didn't know about that black bag. I swear. I don't know who put it there, but it wasn't me."

"We'll check it for fingerprints. Our forensic labs are some of the best. Tell me, do any of these panties look like those you've seen your daughter wear when she was here visiting?"

The bag of assorted panties alarmed Trevor. "How the hell would I know? I don't pay attention to her underwear. She stayed with me only—"

"Yeah, we know, one weekend a month and one week during the summer."

"Well, it's not a damn life-time. How the hell do I know what kind of underwear she has?"

"You're not helping us much, Mr. Madden. It's not normal nor is it common to find little girl panties hidden behind a night stand, between the cushions of your couch, in drawers of your bathroom—"

"Shit, I know that! Ambur must have put them there, I just didn't notice. I don't know a man who cares much about housekeeping."

"That could be true, but behind your night stand is more than I'm capable of believing."

"I don't give a shit what you believe. I don't know how they got there, so prove it was me."

"We just might do that. And you don't have a clue how that bag got in your garage either."

"That's right! Now, either arrest me or get the hell out of here. I'm sick of all this shit."

"I'm afraid it's not that simple. We're going to arrest you, Mr. Madden."

"What? What's the charge?"

"Let me put it this way, Madden, you'd better hope your fingerprints aren't on that black bag. You'd better hope your semen isn't detected in those little panties. And you damn well better hope we don't find the body of a woman who died in childbirth."

"What the shit you talking about? I have nothing to do with this. I—"

"Trevor Madden, you have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a Court of Law..."

Trevor went numb. What was going on? Who was doing this to him, Abi and Miles? Was his hatred that great? Kathy and her soon to be husband? But why, he hadn't started looking for the tape, yet? What would they gain? His business associates wouldn't be involved in shit like this. It had to be someone else, but who? Chyna? He felt a chill crawl the length of his body. He thought about Kathy's question, Are you sure Chyna is dead?

"I know someone who might want me to suffer, even go to prison," Trevor announced.

"Oh, yeah, is that right, Mr. Madden. And who might that be?" Officer Wildung asked.

"Chyna Brown."

"A dead woman?" he asked, laughing. "You won't get a jury to believe that one."

"I don't think she's dead. I don't. Think about it. Who else would want to do this to me?"

"We don't know, Madden. Enlighten us. Why would Chyna Brown want to do this to you?" Detective Scott Wildung asked, taking a pair of handcuffs from his jacket pocket.

Trevor stalled, wondering what or how to explain why Chyna would want to frame him this way, without admitting he tried killing her. "I don't think she's dead. We had words and she thinks I'm trying to hurt her sister. You know me, Scott. You know I wouldn't be doing this shit."

"I used to know you, Trevor. It's been years, and people change. Don't expect an old friendship to protect you in this."

"But Chyna told me if I didn't leave Abi alone, I'd be sorry. She'd make sure I was put away for the rest of my life. I didn't think she'd go this far, but obviously I don't know her as well as I thought."

"Pretty hard for a dead woman to—"

Trevor pulled away from the handcuff. "Maybe she did this before she went over that embankment?"

"Don't fight the handcuffs, Madden. We'll add resisting arrest to the charges."

Trevor looked at Scott and decided he didn't like him any more than he had when they were classmates. "I know nothing about what you found. I'll expect a God damn apology from you, Scott."

"If I'm wrong, and believe me, I doubt I am, you'll get your apology. But for right now, you look guilty as hell. Better get an attorney, a real good one, because you're going to need one!"

Trevor refrained from punching Scott right in the balls. He would regret his actions.

Trevor didn't have a clue about the black bag and its ugly contents. The panties were a worry.

Chapter Nineteen

Miles had fallen asleep with Abi in his arms. It'd been a long time since he'd held a woman all night long. He thought about the men in her life and wondered how one woman could have met so many jerks. One thing he knew for certain, she wouldn't trust a man for a long time to come.

He wondered what he was doing, holding her, getting close to her, falling in love with little Kelly. Abi was an active ongoing case. She was business. He inched his arm from under her head. It had gone completely numb. He wiggled his fingers to put some life back into them.

He left the girls sleeping, heading for the bathroom down the hall, so he didn't wake them. He showered, shaved and dressed within an hour.

The morning grumbled as rain pelted against the windows and lightening flashed across a dark sky. He loved days like this. What he wouldn't do for a good book and a quiet day of reading.

As was his nature, Miles slipped through the house, checking the alarm lights and the exterior premises through windows at a distance. Everything seemed quiet and undisturbed. He stepped back, then stopped. His bare feet detected water on the hardwood floor. Water that wouldn't be there unless someone came in from outside.

Miles stepped back, pressing his back against the wall. Was the intruder still in the house? The alarm was set and it hadn't gone off. He bent his head to get a glance at the floor, hoping to detect a trail of water, which he did. It appeared to be heading upstairs.

Shit. He hadn't checked the girls after his shower. If any thing happened...he chose not to think about it. Two steps at a time, he reached the upstairs landing in seconds. Hurrying down the hall, his bare feet offered no sounds.

Inching the bedroom door open, Miles stepped inside. He stared at the empty bed and his heart sank. They were gone.

He ran out of the room, back down the stairs to the kitchen. He reached for the phone, then paused. Abi and Kelly were his responsibility. He checked the back door and realized it wasn't locked. The alarm must have been turned off. Damn he was certain it was on. He stepped out on the porch. Except for the steady rain pelting on the wood, the early morning held an eerie silence.

If something happened to the girls, he'd never forgive himself. He'd gotten a little too close this time, and he didn't want to lose them. For the first time in years he enjoyed the company of a woman. For the first time in his life he enjoyed the sounds and activities of an infant. He couldn't help himself, that Kelly was a special bundle of love.

Would Abi have taken Kelly away, afraid of him? Maybe he'd gotten too close, too personal, and it scared her off. He stormed back into the kitchen and tossed the phone down on the table.

He thought about the wet footprints and chastised himself for not following them out, checking where exactly the intruder had been in the house. Miles went back up the stairs and realized the wet trail went directly to the bedroom where Abi and Kelly slept. He had hoped he'd been wrong, that—

A door creaked. Miles stopped dead in his tracks. He inched into the bedroom, then realized someone was in the bathroom. He made his way across the carpeted room, then toward the slightly opened door. He took a step toward the door. It quickly swung opened, catching him square on the nose.

"Damn!" he shouted, then grabbed the arm of the perpetrator and swung him clear across the room. Abi landed hard on the bed, for which he couldn't help feeling grateful. "I'm sorry! Are you hurt?" He rushed to her side. "Where's Kelly?" he asked, looking around the room.

"Fortunately, in her car seat on the bathroom floor. I was planning on taking a bath with Kelly, but forgot a diaper, came back out here and—"

"I came in and you both were gone. There was a water trail from the back door, up the stairs—"

"I'm sorry, Miles. When you were showering I decided to go out to the car and get Kelly's pacifier. It had fallen on the floor and, well, she likes it first thing in the morning."

"I thought I'd failed you both. I was convinced Trevor had found you and stolen you right from under my nose. If anything had happened—"

"Stop it. We're fine. We aren't your responsibility."

"Yes, you are, Abi. It's my job to keep you both safe. I don't make a habit of losing my...those I'm protecting."

She reached over and placed her palm on his clean-shaven cheek. He held still, aware how the slight touch set him on fire. Did he see tenderness in her gaze?

He wanted to pull her into his arms and kiss her with the hunger he felt. Instead he stared into soft blue eyes, seeing warmth that caused his breathing to quicken.

With considerable effort, he remained still, afraid to send her reeling away. She leaned toward him, then covered his mouth with hers, kissing him with a hunger that belied her outward calm.

He allowed her to decide the tempo. The velvet warmth of her mouth brushed against his. Her soft curves molded to the contours of his body, fueling a desire deep inside him.

"You sure you want to encourage this?" He asked barely above a whisper.

"You want me to quit?" She reclaimed his mouth, parting his lips with the tip of her tongue.

Raising his mouth from her, he said, "I give you three hours to quit." He first kissed the tip of her nose, then her eyes and finally, he satisfyingly kissed her soft lips.

"Only three hours, I'll just be getting started."

He chuckled, then hungrily covered her mouth with his. He kissed her with passion and intimacy. Her response fueled him with renewed aching. He kissed her, lingering, savoring every moment.

"I'm not so sure we should be going here. I—"

She guided his hand to her breast and he gently massaged the full round orb, lowering his head to tantalize the nipple with his tongue. Her breast surged at the intimacy of his touch. She writhed against him, imprisoning him in a web of growing arousal.

He kissed her sound and lovingly, wanting her more than any woman he'd ever wanted. Knowing she was asking him to take her to the edge. She needed to be loved, and he only wondered if he could fulfill that which she so desperately wanted.

Without hesitation he opened her robe and took in the beauty of her naked body. "You are beautiful," he whispered, nuzzling his face between her breasts, the warmth of her soft flesh intoxicating him.

Raising his arms, he allowed her to pull off his shirt. He hurried out of his clothes, feeling impatient and somewhat exposed to her watchful eye.

"You're blushing," she whispered.

"I doubt that," he answered, sending a trail of kisses down her stomach. She lightly scratched up and down his back with the tips of her fingernails. He teased her repeatedly, kissing, licking and tasting. He took his time, feeling every inch of her lovely body. He sensed her impatience grow.

When she rolled him over he was pleasantly surprised. He found it incredibly sensual. She kissed, touched, licked and brought him to waves of pleasure like no woman had.

"I don't have...protection. I won't be irresponsible."

"Thank you," she whispered.

He smiled, kissing her deep, enjoying the taste of her mouth. He moved his hand downward, skimming the side of her body to her thighs. "I want you," he whispered. She tensed slightly and he knew doubts were rushing in to haunt her. "I can wait," She immediately relaxed against him.

"I shouldn't be acting this bold. It's not like me. I haven't felt like this in such a long time. You make me feel like a woman. I know that sounds stupid, but I'm aroused by your voice, your touch, your—"

He kissed her, gentle and lovingly. He rolled to his side, taking her with him. "You're doing the same thing to me. But right now I have a duty to protect you and Kelly. It's wrong for me to get involved with—"

"I understand. I was forward and I didn't mean to throw myself at you. I don't usually act like this."

"Wait a minute, Abi." She pulled from his embrace and he let her go. "I wasn't done explaining—"

"It's okay, I understand. I'll go take that bath now."

"Abi, come back for just a few minutes, please?" He watched her rush into the bathroom, close the door, then heard the lock click. It sounded as loud as a car backfiring, the meaning tugged at his heart.

He lay back on the bed, yearning for her already. He couldn't blame her for feeling rejected. He had to throw cold water on their growing fire. He never meant to hurt her. He had a job to do and he couldn't very well do it with romance distracting his mind.

Miles thought about how she rolled him over and brazenly straddled him. She excited him to the core. Even just thinking about it caused him to react.

As difficult as it would be, he'd do his best to stay out of the arms of Abi, but once the hearing was over, nothing would stop him from knocking on her door.

How long she'd slept, Chyna wasn't sure. But she felt better than she had in some time. She remembered Harry's message, then blissful sleep.

"Well, you finally got enough beauty sleep. I was beginning to think I should wake you just so you could eat. Hungry?"

Chyna didn't have to look to see who was talking. Harry's deep voice gave him away. "I'm starving," she answered, realizing her stomach growled just from the mere thought of food.

"You like cheese and ham omelets?"

"Geez Louise, you cook?"

"Of course, just because I'm a man, doesn't mean I can't cook. Of course, if you feel a need to get up and do that domestic duty, be my guest."

She laughed, glancing over at him. "Before you start the eggs, what would you think about flipping me over on my back?"

"Good idea. Doc is coming to take a look at your progress today."

Chyna held her breath as Harry attempted to gently move her over onto her back. She felt like a child struggling to keep from crying out as pain gripped her left leg. He adjusted and elevated her casts on pillows. Sliding both hands under her arms, he lifted her higher against the pillows. She found his closeness disturbing in every way. She liked the clean scent he wore, fresh rain.

"I'm sorry if I hurt you," he said, sliding the blankets up to her neck.

"Can't be helped. I'll let you make it up to me with another one of your massages. Dang, that was incredible. You'd be worth having around just for that one purpose." His smile spread quickly across his face.

"The look on your face is one of surprise," he said, heading for the kitchen. What about?"

"Oh, I guess I was thinking John didn't appreciate my humor or quick comments. He said they were silly and immature."

"If I didn't use humor in my job, I'd go nuts. Most times I deal with death and accidents. People out to hurt other people. It's serious, sad and even unforgiving stuff. Without a little humor to break it up, it'd be insufferable."

Chyna watched Harry move behind the kitchen island. "Harry...?"

"Yes, sweet thing?"

She paused at the name. A sting of tears welled in the corners of her eyes. He came back to the bed and sat back down.

"What is it? You hurting?" he asked, pulling her hand into his.

"I'm scared. I know it sounds silly, but I can't shake the feeling Trevor knows I'm alive. I have these uneasy feelings he won't stop until Abi, Kelly and I are all dead."

"He'll have to go through me to get to you, and I don't plan on letting that happen. He'll have one heck of a battle with Miles Sandler, too. He'll protect Abi and Kelly, don't worry about something you can't do a thing about."

"But—"

"Concentrate on getting well. You can testify against him, and when you do, nothing will keep his butt out of prison. Come here," he said, suddenly leaning into her.

Chyna accepted Harry's gentle hug. She clung to him, needing the security offered in his arms. He held her for the longest time. They said nothing. She stayed wrapped in his arms.

"Thank you, Harry. I feel better now."

"You're welcome, sweet thing. Let me make us some omelets, I'm starving."

She smiled as he helped her lean back against the pillows. She remained silent as he went about the kitchen, clanging pans, dropping knives and chopping. He sang to the tunes on the radio in a deep voice. His tremendous omm-papa-omm-papa-omm-papa-mow-mow had her laughing.

"Geez Louise, you have a marvelous voice."

"Tell that to my Karaoke buddies!"

She could just see him, beer in hand, singing away with a group of fun-loving buddies. It conjured up a pleasant image. "So, is there a Mrs. Harry Lindquin?"

His singing stopped. Chyna wished she hadn't asked. Silence answered for what seemed forever. He approached her with a plate and fork in hand. He sat on the edge of the bed, then proceeded to feed her eggs.

"This is wonderful. You're hired," she said, swallowing the delicious omelet. She watched him feed himself a large bite. She couldn't help smiling. "One for me and one for you, eh?" She noticed Harry wasn't smiling.

"My wife, Janet, died three years ago from breast cancer."

Sadness washed over him, his shoulders sagged, and his energy level dropped noticeably. "I'm sorry, Harry. Do you have any kids?"

"No, that is something I regret. Janet didn't want to be the wife of a policeman, waiting with the kids to see if I would make it home each night. She didn't want to raise children by herself and she didn't want kids to be without a father. She was an attorney for abused women. She did an incredible amount of volunteer work at a woman's shelter."

"It sounds like she was an impressive woman."

"That she was. We had a good marriage. She never complained about my hours or about anything, really. We met in college and had a good life together."

"Why do you make it sound like your life is over? Haven't you ever considered looking again?" Chyna asked, wishing she could keep her mouth shut sometimes.

"I haven't found anyone that has interested me, until you. Don't look so shocked. If you weren't married, I'd ravish you this very moment."

She laughed, ignoring his last comment. "It surprised me, that's all. I mean, I can't imagine why I'd be of any interest to you."

"Well, sweet thing, you are about as feisty as they come. You just bubble over with life, not like Janet's zest for life. Your spirit is, well, sexy."

Chyna laughed, then quickly closed her eyes to block the pain in her head. "I need to keep still, not the easiest task for me, I'm afraid," she said, taking another bite of eggs. As she watched him eat, she couldn't help noticing the stubble of a beard that covered his face. It gave him an even rougher appearance, a manly look for sure.

"You know how many people could have survived that accident?"

"What?" she asked, wondering why he'd suddenly ask that.

"You're one strong, determined woman. You fought back and you survived. You have any idea how commendable that is?"

"Shucks, paw, I don't expect no trophy."

"Not good at taking compliments, are you?"

Chyna looked up into Harry's eyes, boldly aware of the admiration it revealed. "You got me, there. I never have been one to toot my own horn. I cover everything with humor. It's my way of coping."

"That's part of your charm. Tell me, you have any kids?"

Chyna looked down at her hands, then back up at Harry. "I never wanted children. I know that sounds odd, but I thought I was content without them. Then Abi had Kelly and I suddenly felt like I'd missed out on something special. I told John I was having second thoughts about having a baby..." she paused, looked away, struggling to hold back the emotions. It seemed strange not to be able to keep her tears in check. It had to be the concussion.

"What did John say?"

Chyna realized Harry clung to each and every word she was saying. "He said it wasn't open for discussion. We'd made our decision before we got married. End of subject."

"Why'd he say that?"

"Years ago we decided not to have children. He said that I'd find motherhood a novelty for a brief time, then I'd get tired of it and the responsibilities of a kid. That I just wouldn't make a good mother. I don't think he's right. I think I'd be a wonderful mother. But, it's too late now anyway."

"Why do you say that? You're not much younger than me, what, thirty?"

Chyna nodded. "I turned thirty last week."

"You're far from being too old to have a baby."

"You forget something, it takes two. John made it clear he wanted nothing to do with kids." She thought for a moment, allowing her eyes to close. She'd washed his jacket the other day and found a toy car in the pocket. She'd forgotten to ask him about it. There were other things that seemed out of place lately, and some of John's late hours increased to overnights at the office. She believed it was in preparation for the upcoming trip. He had fewer clothes in his closet and drawers. She bolted upright at the thought, then cried out in pain.

"Whoa, take it easy, Chyna."

She looked at Harry with tears filling her eyes. She held her ribs, struggling to stay calm and ease the pain.

"What's wrong? You think of something we can use against Trevor?"

She shook her head, then leaned back.

"You're obviously upset. It won't hurt to tell me, will it? Maybe I can help."

"All this talk about kids, your wife, and my husband got me thinking. Harry, I'm convinced my husband is having an affair."

"You're pretty distraught right now, Chyna. The concussion, your injuries, threats on your life and your sister. It has a tendency to make a person paranoid."

"No. John has a handsome life insurance policy out on me, as I do him, now that I think about it. Maybe he has something to do with all this."

"You're grasping here."

"No, I'm not. Trevor wants Abi and Kelly out of the way and John wants to be free, too. Making it look like Trevor, he has the perfect fall guy. No one would suspect John, he's out of the state and there's a history of dislike between Trevor and me. Heck, I'm accusing Trevor, and that's exactly what John would be counting on."

"There's a flaw in your theory. You know it was Trevor that tossed you into his truck, and caused your accident. Nothing can change that."

"True, but, what if that was just a coincidence? With all this craziness going on, who would even consider another reason for my death? Why don't you find out who told John about my accident? See if his reaction was...what? A great loss, too unemotional, or maybe overly distraught?"

"Okay, for you, I'll have it checked out."

Chyna fought the grogginess that overcame her. "Ask them to find out if he is having an affair."

"You sure you want to know?"

"Yes," she said, allowing her eyes to droop back down. In her heart she knew there was another woman in John's life. She'd been so trusting, so supportive, and so foolish. She tried to remember the last time they'd made love, and she couldn't.

Chapter Twenty

Abi soaked in the tub, ashamed at her brazen behavior and her immature jolt from Miles' arms. They barely knew each other. She should be thanking him for putting a stop to things. She was married.

Miles Sandler surely had women throwing themselves at him all the time, why would he waste his time with a used-up woman with a baby.

She didn't want to face him. She wondered if Trevor had been right. Tears flowed down her cheeks and she sobbed in silence. The only thing worthwhile in her life was Kelly.

Abi glanced down at her sleeping daughter and thanked God for the gift of life, in more ways than one. Since she truly believed if Kelly wasn't in her life, she wouldn't have anything to live for.

A banging on the door caused Abi to bolt upright.

"I'm sorry to bother your bath, but, are you okay in there?"

She heard the concern in Miles voice. "I'm fine, thank you," she answered, hoping he didn't hear the emotion in her muddled tone.

"Just thought I'd check—"

An alarm pierced through the house. Abi bolted from the tub, grabbing a robe over her wet body within seconds. "What's that?"

"Come out of there now, Abi! That's the security alarm!"

"I think I turned it off and forgot to turn it back on."

"I noticed and reset it. Someone is in the house."

She didn't waste any time. In one swoop she had Kelly in her arms and she cleared the bathroom door. She glanced around. Miles wasn't there. The shrill alarm wore on her nerves. She quickly pulled on a pair of forest green sweats and matching sweatshirt, something Miles had mumbled about it belonging to his mother at a thinner stage.

Abi looked out the back bedroom window. She saw nothing but trees. Collecting the diaper bag and car seat, she slipped into her shoes and made her way down the hall, inching toward the stairs.

With no sign of Miles, she tiptoed toward the kitchen. A jolting hold and firm clamp over her mouth nearly caused her to faint from sheer fright.

"Shhhh. It's me," Miles whispered.

He'd taken his hand from her mouth, but held her and Kelly firm against his chest. Abi glanced around the kitchen, then noticed a figure run past the patio doors to the sunroom. Was it Trevor? She shook and welcomed the tightening arms of Miles.

He took the car seat from Abi and set it on the floor. He motioned for her to ease down to the rug, then opened a backpack. He stuffed the contents of her diaper bag and a blanket off the window seat into it.

He took another backpack and strapped it in front of Abi. He stuffed the bottom with dishtowels, then grabbed an Indian blanket off the window seat. Miles wrapped Kelly, then slipped her into the pack, facing Abi.

She made no comments, nor asked any questions. He was doing his job and she had to trust and rely on his experience to make the right decisions.

Miles crawled to the back door. She followed, holding a squirming Kelly against her chest. The morning sun drenched the back yard, and Abi already felt over-heated in the sweat suit. She ran behind Miles, hurrying through the pine trees and scraping shrubs. Her side ached from the fast pace, but she pushed herself, knowing it was imperative.

They stopped to rest on the backside of a rocky overhang. She nearly cried with joy when Miles offered her a bottle of water. Without a word, she took a long drink, then handed it back to him.

She gasped in horror, his forehead bled profusely. "What happened—?" He pressed his finger to her lips and she stopped speaking immediately. He pointed toward a trail to the east of them, then she saw his concern. A single figure ran up the trail, paused, looked around, and headed back toward the cabin.

Without another word, Abi reached down alongside Kelly, into the backpack, and pulled out a dishtowel. She folded it, then wrapped it around Miles head, tying it into a knot behind his head. He looked a lot like Rambo, she thought, nearly laughing. Would Miles find it so humorous?

He motioned for her to follow, and she did. They walked down a path that seemed to be endless to Abi. The day droned on, hotter and hotter as they continued further and further away from the cabin.

Since Miles wasn't talking, she kept silent, too. Kelly fussed and Abi rolled the edges of the backpack down, then lifted her sweatshirt enough to allow Kelly to nurse.

"Come on, we'll sit under that rocky overhang so you can feed her," Miles said, taking Abi's arm, leading her across a narrow ravine. "Stay here while I double check for rattlers."

The hair on her arms lifted. She could tolerate just about anything, but she drew the line on snakes. Miles probed the area with a long stick, then motioned for her to join him.

Miles had already positioned himself comfortably against a boulder. He patted a place for her in front of him.

She considered finding her own rock to lean against, but his suggested spot and the security it offered seemed too inviting to turn down. She settled her back comfortably against him, then guided a hungry Kelly to a full breast.

Sitting in the shade and nursing her daughter, leaning against Miles, seemed the most natural thing in the world. If only they could stay that way. If only time would stand still. She just might find happiness after all.

"Who were those men, Miles?"

"Wish I knew. There's more involved here than Trevor being pissed you're divorcing him. They are pros, and I'm—"

"What do you mean, pros?"

"Thugs, hit men, the brawn behind the money. Do you know if Trevor was hanging around anyone new or unusual?"

"I'm sorry, I really don't. He kept me out of his business."

"He's in bed with some unsavory people. We just need to figure out why they're after us."

"Miles, where will we go now?" she asked, adjusting Kelly to her other breast. She shifted the heavy sweatshirt and the air felt good to her skin.

"The path we've been following ends here. About a mile down through rocks and boulders there's a sod house built into a hillside. Few people know about it, since us property owners really don't want hoards of people coming to our quiet spot in the world."

"I can understand that, but a sod house, I mean, not only is it primitive but isn't it underground? Is it empty? What about snakes?"

"I understand your concerns, especially with Kelly, but, until we lose our shadow, we don't have much choice. It's going to be the safest place to hide away."

"What about food and...I'm sorry. I'm sure we'll make due. Miles, did you get a look at the intruder?"

"No. He wore a black face mask and got in a good hit with a baseball bat, but the force wasn't enough to put me down for long. I think the perp thought I was dead."

"You have any enemies we should be considering?"

"That never occurred to me. I'll have to give it some thought. Come on, we'd better get going. A mile doesn't sound like a very long way, but in this terrain it'll feel more like five by the time we get there."

Abi leaned forward so Miles could get to his feet. She changed Kelly's disposable diaper, hoping the remaining two would last for some time.

"Hand me your pack," Miles said.

He took his knife and slit holes on the bottom right and left edges of the bag, then adjusted the dishtowels through the opening. He reached for Kelly and placed her into the bag, allowing her little legs to drop below the openings, surrounding her soft skin with the towels. "Looks like that should be a lot more comfy for her."

"Thank you, Miles," Abi choked.

"It's going to get pretty rough ahead. If you wouldn't mind, I could strap Kelly to the front of me. You'll have all you can handle without worrying about her, that's if you trust me."

"You know I trust you, Miles. What happened this morning was my fault. I'm even embarrassed to think about my behavior. I never meant to put you in a compromising position. We don't even know each other."

"I want to get to know you, Abi. When this is over, you can count on me being there. I don't plan on forgetting either of you. When the job is done, just try getting rid of me."

She didn't respond. Abi heard him, but found it almost impossible to believe. Did she understand he planned on pursuing both her and Kelly for his future?

Watching him strap Kelly to his chest seemed natural. Her daughter appeared relaxed and comfortable snuggled against Miles. If it had been Trevor, no doubt Kelly would have screamed until he'd given her back to her mother.

The hot sun beat down on them. Abi wished she had dressed in something cooler, but remained silent in her heavy lined sweats. It took over three hours to master the rocky, uneven terrain to the sod house.

In all her imaginings, Abi couldn't have begun to believe people truly lived in something so primitive, yet functional. "I'm in awe," Abi admitted. "Women must have been so strong, so hardy and incredibly admirable to make a home out in this wilderness."

"I agree. Doesn't look like much, does it?"

"On the contrary, imagine digging this out."

Miles lifted the door latch.

"Look, the hinges are made with leather strips and square nails. They've got to be really old." She felt cold air from the underground room immediately. Damp, musty odors filled her nostrils. "I can't see a thing."

"Shhh, don't make a sound. You hear that?"

She listened and froze. "Is that what I think it is?"

"Yup. I'd say there are at least six or more fat rattlers enjoying the cool shelter."

Abi clung to Miles side. She held still, glaring into the dark space. Miles snapped a cigarette lighter and she gasped as the room took shape.

"Look," she said in amazement. "An old stove and the chimney is even in place. Wow, they used log beams across the whole upper ledge, for the roof I suppose."

"I'd guess so. If you look closely, there are several rattlers stretched out up there," he said, lifting the lighter so she had a better look.

She shivered, unnerved by the site. "The walls are nearly like cement, yet, they're dirt, aren't they?" she asked, glancing around at something she'd never guess to have the privilege of seeing.

"Incredible precision. Look how flat and smooth they are. The floor is hard packed dirt, nearly as level and smooth as any house today. Remarkable, eh?"

"We're not going to shoo these snakes out and stay here, are we?" she asked, afraid he might suggest just that.

"One snake I might be able to handle, this little community has squatters' rights. We'd better not try and move in on them."

Abi physically released a sigh of relief. She thought she heard him chuckle, but wasn't sure. "Now what?" It seemed nothing was going their way.

"I'm not without resources. Let me think."

"You brought us out in the middle of no where, surely you must have a back-up plan." She retreated several steps back through the open door, hot immediately in the sunshine.

"You watch too much TV. Life is stranger than fiction, believe me." Miles leaned against the open door.

"That's a cliché, not one I'm impressed with hearing right now. Why don't we go back to your cabin, get in the car and drive away? Simple as that."

"It'll be dark before we'd get back there, first of all. Second, I wouldn't trust the car not to blow up or lose its brakes, or something equally lethal. No, I think we need to find shelter for the night, then in the morning make our way to a highway and hitch a ride to the nearest hotel."

"Can't we try that right now? What's to keep us from—"

"Hold still. I didn't see that snake coming from behind that stove. They don't usually strike unless they feel threatened."

Abi shook, her heart pounded so hard she was certain the snake heard it, too. Trickle of sweat dribbled down the side of her face. She wanted to close her eyes but was afraid to. She felt lightheaded and feared most of all fainting on top of the slithering reptile.

"Steady, slow breaths, Abi. Come on. Pull in deep, slow, steady release. You hear me, Abi?"

She nodded slightly.

"Then listen, if you know anything about hyperventilation, you'll realize you can't let it get in control of you right now. Come on, steady. Take a slow breath in, slow breath out, again...again...good. Look, he's turning around and moving back inside where it's nice and cool."

Miles pulled the makeshift door closed and latched it as it had been before they intruded. "Let's get out of here," she suggested, her voice wobbling as she spoke.

"I agree and second that motion. Come on," he said, grabbing her by the waist, nearly carrying her away from the old underground house. "Well, that was interesting."

"We should have left a trail for our perp, making it look like we were inside. What a surprise he'd have gotten."

"Why Abi Madden, I think your dark side is showing. Did you hear what your mama said?" he asked, looking down at a wide-eyed Kelly.

Abi couldn't help smiling. Trevor never said funny things. Since Chyna's John was serious too, it seemed strange yet fun to be with a man who could take a lighter view of things.

"Let's sit down on this rock so we can decide what to do," Miles suggested, offering Abi a hand up.

"How well did you know Chyna? I know you said you met in college and didn't date, but..." She paused when Miles lifted Kelly out of the backpack and laid her across his lap. She didn't seem to mind at all.

"As I told you, we met years ago. We actually had mutual friends in school. She dated one of my good friends, before she met John. We had lunch now and then and she was a great help when I was in the dumps. Even in school Chyna made sure I was studying and not in the bowels of despair, as she said."

Abi stared out at the scenery. "How do you know which way to go?"

"Instinct. I always follow my gut instinct."

"What does your gut instinct tell you right now?"

"That we're in trouble if we don't find shelter for the night."

"Then what are we doing sitting on a rock, hotter than frogs frying on a highway, visiting like we're at a church social when we should be—"

"You're a distraction, Abi Madden. I could sit and talk with you all day and night." He slid a content Kelly into the backpack. "It's not an easy stretch, but I would imagine we could make it to the road if we cut south. I've done some hiking through that area, but we'll be pushing it close to dark."

"Then let's get moving."

"Let me know when you need to stop. We're in for some rough country."

She didn't answer, just followed Miles as he led the way, step-by-step. Sometimes she wondered if she could move another foot forward, but she did.

"Miles," she called out. "Could I ask you something about Chyna's husband? I mean, would you be honest with me?"

"I'll always be honest with you, Abi. I don't believe a lie is ever better than the truth, no matter how painful."

"Good. I've suspected, I mean, I've had reservations...oh, hell, do you think John could have been cheating on Chyna?"

"Wow, you think so? I never quite understood their relationship. I mean, they never go on vacations together. He always seems to be traveling here and there, and she never goes with him. She never brought the subject up. If she suspects something, she never said anything to me."

"Darn. I never had the nerve to ask or suggest it. I mean, look at my marriage. I wasn't going to question hers. But, deep down I never believed everything was okay with her and John. I hope I'm wrong."

"I hope you're wrong, too. But, once things get back to normal, I'm going to check it out. If I even slightly suspect John had anything to do with her death, I'll drag him through the mud and make sure he spends time in the pen. You can count on that."

Abi felt relieved. "Thank you, Miles. I seem to be saying that an awful lot, don't I? How will I ever repay you?" she asked, feeling totally inadequate.

"Let me come see you and Kelly after this is over. Let me spend time with you and get to know you both. Let me...encourage me to be a part of your life."

"You mean that?" she stopped following him, stunned by the actual words. "You're truly interested in Kelly and me?"

"What do I have to do to make you understand I'm entirely attracted to you, woman? I feel Kelly is the sweetest, most precious darling I've had the privilege of toting around."

Abi smiled, took several steps toward Miles, then rising on her toes she placed a soft, warm kiss across his lips. "I won't make any promises, yet. And, I don't expect you to either. But Kelly and I would be pleased if you wanted to come by and see us once this is all over."

"Great, now, as you pointed out before, we need to keep our minds on surviving. I think you just tricked me into taking a short rest," he added.

She chuckled under her breath.

Chapter Twenty-One

Overnight in jail. The humiliation outweighed the sleepless nightmare. Trevor wanted a shower, a long delousing shower, just in case.

"Madden, get your sorry ass over here, you've been bailed out."

"It's about time," Trevor snapped.

"Understand you carry a high bail. By the looks of things, I'd say your daddy must have money. I also understand you're knee deep in shit if you killed that baby they found in your garage?"

Trevor glared at the guard.

"Nothing stays a secret around here. You get your pretty ass in the joint and you won't last long. They especially don't cotton to baby killers in the pen."

Trevor wanted to put his fist into the big mouth of the overweight, annoying man. "Who told you that shit? I'll make sure my attorney knows about it."

"I hear things. Like I said, in a place like this, nothing stays a secret. Nothing. You sniff those little girl panties or do you try wearing them?"

Whirling toward the obnoxious man, Trevor moved his face within inches of the double-chinned, beady-eyed bastard. "I'd be careful, if I were you. Remember one thing, daddy's money can buy just about anything."

"Are you threatening me, Madden? 'Cause if you are, that could get you slapped right back in that cage, where you belong."

"We're just having a friendly conversation, now, aren't we? I understand you, and you sure as hell understand me. Don't get in my face again."

"Remember one thing, you come back in here, I'll make your stay a memorable one. Daddy's money won't help shit. I don't cotton to threats, Madden. Better make sure you get one fine attorney, 'cause I'll be watching for you."

Trevor walked through the unlocked door. It snapped shut, causing him to jump. He hated this place. It reeked of sweat and unwashed men. No way in hell was he coming back.

"Osthorn, where the fuck have you been?" Trevor shouted at the family attorney. "What kept you so damn long? My dad must have told you to get me out of here—"

"I knew you'd be mad. Your father told me to give you a taste of jail overnight. He said it might make you realize how lucky you are to have what you have, so to speak."

Trevor seethed. "Get me the hell out of here. I need a shower. I need...just get me the hell out of here!" They walked to the parking lot together in silence. A mile down the road Trevor gathered his wits and looked at his dad's old friend. "What did they decide about the black bag?"

"It'll be a while before they finish testing it for fingerprints, DNA and such, at the forensic lab. I know one thing, you're gonna take some heat. This morning's paper showed a black bag, headlines read 'Fetus rolls out of garbage bag. Boy child— identity unknown.'"

"Damn, how'd they get wind of this? Listen, Osthorn, I don't have a fricking clue about this shit. I want you to know right now, I didn't put that bag in my garage. Why would I? Besides, I wouldn't be that stupid. Someone is setting me up. It has something to do with Abi and Kelly, I just know it."

"You can't make me believe Abi placed a fetus in your garage to make you look guilty."

"Well, someone did! Maybe it was Kathy?"

"I'd believe that about as much as I'd believe it was Abi."

"You better figure out who then, and you'd better be able to prove it."

"Start taking responsibility for your actions, Trevor. Christ, you won't be getting any sympathy from a jury when they find out you put your eight and one-half months pregnant wife in a hotel. They'll be even less sympathetic when they find out you wanted nothing to do with the kid, once you found out she was a female. To add to that, you didn't even take your wife and daughter home from the hospital, but you put them back to a hotel to live. What bullshit is this, Trevor? I'd convict you on that, myself! What were you thinking? It's down right inhumane. There isn't a jury in the world that'll be compassionate toward you."

"Okay, I've made a few mistakes. Big shitten deal. I didn't do this fetus thing. You do your job and prove it." Trevor wiped the sweat from his upper lip. He had a monster of a headache and had a feeling things were going to get a lot worse, before they started getting better.

Why would his dad make him spend the night in that horrible jail? Who could have put that disgusting black bag in his garage? Who alerted the police to look for girlie panties in his house?

How much of this could Kathy have accomplished? The thought startled him. No, he reasoned, she wouldn't have had the guts to do any of it. She, and her soon to be husband, may have followed him the night of Chyna's accident, but that was the extent of Kathy's involvement. He'd bet the bank on it. She wouldn't have been able to keep from gloating if she'd been involved with setting him up.

Then who? Abi? He'd had her going in paranoid circles. She'd never have had the strength, or the balls, to go through with this sick shit. Her principals would have gotten in the way. Chyna? No doubt that bitch had it in for him. But, even she wouldn't go that far.

No, it had to be someone who...of course!"

"Of course, what?" Osthorn asked.

Trevor shot a glance at the man, surprised to find the attorney staring at him. "John Brown. You check him out, because he's the only person I know who might want me discredited. I have a scoop on him that could land him time in the slammer."

"John Brown, your brother-in-law? Care to share your knowledge with me?"

"All in good time. All in good time. You see what you can dig up, that way you don't have to say I told you. Admissible in court technicalities, and all that shit. If you don't dig up the dirt, I'll give you an anonymous tip. How's that for—"

"Save the crap and the games, Trevor. We don't have time for it. In two days you'll be standing in front of a judge—"

"Two days? Why the hell so soon?"

"Because baby killers and little girl panty collectors are considered dangerous, no matter how high the bail is set."

"Get this straight, Osthorn—"

"No, you get this straight, Trevor. You're innocent until proven guilty by a court of law. I don't have one thing to go on to prove you could be even slightly innocent. So if you think you might know something, even a little thing, you'd better come out with it now, because your ass is in hot, no, boiling water."

"Watch that corner. Could you slow down? I'd like to live long enough to clear my name."

"The info, Trevor. Cut the crap and give me what you've got. I need it, or should I say, you need it."

"Okay. I was in Chicago about a month ago. I was at a restaurant, nice little place called Little Anthony's, if you ever get a chance—"

"Trevor, get on with it."

"Well, I was having lunch with this cute little number from the Auction Barn. You know the type, blonde, young, legs go all the way up. A couple hundred and she's your long lost lover. She was hot that day—"

"Trevor, spare me. Get something straight here. We are not playing one of your clever games. I've known you too long to fall for the, I'm this sweet Montana rancher who is as innocent as a balling calf. Now cut to the chase."

"You're just not in a good mood today, are you Osthorn?"

"Trevor!"

"You'll never guess who I saw having lunch with a very charming young lady?"

"No, I would never guess, that's why you're going to tell me!"

Trevor rolled his eyes upward. Osthorn's attitude was getting on his nerves. "John Brown. Little Chyna Brown's loving husband."

"Big deal. This is your earth shattering news?"

"Let me finish. I didn't let John know I'd seen him. Matter-of-fact, I decided to follow them when they left the restaurant."

"Why would you do that?"

"I don't know. You might say one never knows when some information might come in handy. Besides, it was damn suspicious."

"You mean blackmail. You can't admit to that in court, it alone will put you in prison. Dang it Trevor, I thought just maybe this one time you'd be useful."

"Oh, but, I haven't told you everything. You see I found out the young lady worked at a jewelry boutique. I managed to get my little blonde to stop in the shop and have a chat with the gal. You can't imagine how surprised I was when I found out the gal was John Brown Wainscott's wife."

"Wife? Are you sure about that, Trevor? 'Cause if you're not—"

"As sure as I'm not guilty of putting that black bag in my garage. The guy has two wives. Now isn't that interesting? Wouldn't you do just about anything to keep that secret?"

"You know where the Wainscott name comes from?"

"Now don't you think you should get paid for doing something? I can't do it all—"

"Trevor, so help me, young man. You'd better stay home on the ranch for the next two days, until your arraignment. You visit your folks both days and make sure you have alibis on and off during that time frame."

"What for? I'm innocent until proven guilty."

"Right. But I'm sure some woman out there is going to be convinced you snuck in her house and stole her little girl's undies. We don't need—"

"I'm really tired of all this. You do your job, and I'll be walking out of that courtroom a free man. You find out who is sick enough to put a damn fetus in my garage. If it's not John Brown Wainscott, then who the hell is it?"

"Okay, forget that for a moment," Osthorn said, pulling up in front of Trevor's mobile home. "You keep evading one important subject, what about the little girl panties? I don't hear you denying anything about them."

"It's like this, I have a small daughter, and she has panty accidents. When she has a mistake, as she calls it, she'll hide them. I have found her panties under the couch cushions, under the towels in the bathroom, even behind the refrigerator once. It's not a big deal."

"You have any proof? You tell anyone this? You tell the police this?"

"No, I was so upset about that fetus thing, I completely forgot. No law against forgetting, is there?"

"Damn it, Trevor. Does Ambur do the same thing at her mother's house? Would your ex-wife, Kathy, testify to the fact?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. Kathy might, depends on her mood. As for telling people, would you if it were your daughter? It's a disgusting habit. I've been trying hard to break her of it. So, you tell me, I should have been telling everyone? That's sick, man."

"Trevor, you have a quick answer for just about everything. But I'll tell you something, your mother told me last night that, no, I won't tell you. You have a chat with your mother tomorrow. Then you tell me how your daughter likes to hide her panties."

Trevor grit his teeth, bolted out of Osthorn's car, then slammed the door. "You're my attorney, get busy."

"I'll be honest with you. If your dad hadn't asked me as a special favor to him, I wouldn't be taking your case. I'll do my best, because I'm a competent attorney. Don't expect me to like it, and don't expect me to take any crap from you. You continue with your present attitude, I just might drop the case."

"You wouldn't do that, my dad pays you far too much. Like Dad says, the almighty dollar always speaks the loudest." Trevor ducked as Osthorn's tires kicked up a shower of rocks as he drove away.

Trevor hated that short, skinny man. He reeked of cigar smoke and always looked at people over the top rim of his glasses.

But if there was one thing Trevor knew, Osthorn owed his dad big-time. The man wouldn't have the guts to drop the case. On the other hand, he'd better dig up some evidence proving who put that damn bag behind the potting soil. Trevor knew one thing for sure; there was no way in hell he would willingly go back to that God-awful, urine smelling jail.

He felt pleased with himself for having thought of the panty story. Too bad he hadn't thought of it sooner for the police. One more thing bothered Trevor, what had his mother said to Osthorn?

Trevor had a hard time believing his mother would have said anything. If there was one person he could always count on, even if she didn't believe him, was mother. She would always take his side. He loved her for that.

What if Ambur talked to Grandma? Shit! That had to be it. Ambur told Grandma about the touching game. Mother told Kathy, that's why she had a chance to video it. Damn! Trevor paced the driveway, then headed for the house. He stomped inside, slamming the door behind him.

He stopped dead in his tracks. A banner stretched across his living room. Welcome home, baby killer—little girl panty collector. Now who in hell would do that?

Somehow he felt bad about that fetus. It had been a boy child. It nearly sickened him. Who ever performed that disgusting act had to know how much he wanted a son.

That shed a new light on the gesture. Maybe it was John Brown. He had everything to lose. He wouldn't be a bigamist if Chyna died. Trevor had proof, and John knew it.

Trevor grabbed the banner and scrunched it into a tight ball, then slammed it against the wall. Someone had been in his house. He felt violated. He walked down the hall, glanced around, and wondered if the intruder had done anything more than tape a sign up.

He pulled his boots off, stripped to the skin, and headed straight for the shower. His skin crawled from being in jail. As he stood under the shower, exhaustion enveloped him. He toweled himself dry, slipped on a pair of jockey shorts, then strolled back to the bedroom and dropped onto the bed. He tucked his arm under his head and stared at the ceiling. Within minutes his eyes drooped as fatigue conquered his body and mind.

Trevor bolted upright. Had Ambur told Miss Slipka about the game? Maybe she had put that banner in his living room. A teacher would have access to paper like that. Was it a threat? Was it her way of telling him she knew the secret?

He glanced at the clock on the nightstand, two in the afternoon. Maybe he'd go and give Miss Slipka a little visit. Maybe he'd better wait with that one, it might draw attention to the damn woman. He wasn't stupid enough to give the police any help. Trevor pulled on a T-shirt and a pair of worn jeans. He'd go see Mama instead.

Chapter Twenty-Two

"How much further, do you think, Miles?"

"You see that slight, grassy hill? You'll be happy to know the road runs alongside it." He couldn't begin to express his relief at finally getting there. It had grown almost dark within the last five minutes. His concern couldn't have been more apparent when he considered they stop until morning.

"Is Kelly fussing?"

"Surprisingly she's still sleeping. I think it's the momentum of being carried. I'm sure once we stop she'll wake. Hopefully we won't have to wait long to hitch a ride."

"I'll put my faith in people. Who could resist stopping for a mother and child? Even I'd stop to help them."

"You've got a point there. It helps to flash my badge, too. But, they have to stop in order to see it. I like your approach better." He extended his hand toward Abi, and helped her up the final rocky edge. "Well, we're on the highway. Now it's up to you, mother."

He handed Kelly over to Abi, then grabbed the blanket out of the other pack. He wrapped it around both Abi and Kelly.

They walked slowly down the road. The night air grew chillier with each passing minute. They'd been walking for about a half-hour when the sound of a roaring semi blew its horn at them. The screeching tires and applied squealing brakes told them the driver had decided to stop.

Miles opened the passenger door. "Thanks for stopping. We seem to have gotten ourselves lost, and finally found this road not that long ago. We sure would appreciate a ride into town."

"Lord man, what you doin' out in these parts with a wife and baby in the first place?"

"Picnic," Abi offered.

Miles reached for Kelly, then helped Abi climb into the truck. He handed Kelly back to her, then followed. "Boy, that heat is welcome."

"Picnic. You city folks don't have the brains God gave you. You realize you could have been walkin' around in those woods for days and never found this road?"

"No doubt, we've been more than lucky. Gets cold here at night, doesn't it?"

"You folks ain't from around here, are you? Where you from?"

Miles realized he hadn't meant to attract attention. "Oregon. My folks have a ranch there. I'm a banker and my wife runs a day care center. We're vacationing. Never been to Canada before."

"Doubt if you'd gone hiking in the woods before either. How long you been walkin around out there?"

"Since this morning," Abi offered. "I mean, we didn't know we were lost at first. We were in the prettiest area and the water was—"

"You walked to this road from the lake with a woman and a baby? Fools. I'm sorry, but that was foolish, mister."

"I realize that now. I can't begin to thank you for picking us up. You can drop us off at the first hotel and we'll get help to find our car in the morning."

"No way. You can get taken advantage of if you're not careful. I'm headed home, but you can be stayin' at the Moose Lodge tonight. They're good folks and friends of mine. Bet you're starving, too. Got any money on you?"

"Miles patted his pockets, then shook his head. "I guess I left my wallet in the car. You give me your name and address and I'll make sure to pay you back."

"Wet behind the ears, greenhorns. I'm sure Mable and John will put you up for the night, with a wife and baby. They'll even feed you. You can be beholden to them, not me."

"We sure appreciate it, mister."

"Folks call me Hoss. The name's Hoss Barns. And before you ask, yes it's after Hoss Cartright. Been big my whole life, includin' bein' born. Guess I was an eighteen pounder, bless my poor mama."

Abi laughed. "I can't even imagine. Kelly here was only six pounds, two ounces, and I thought that was a chore. I guess I won't complain."

"I have to confess, my mama is about two hundred pounds bigger than you, so I guess she might have had an easier time of it than a little thing like you."

"You been driving truck long?" Miles asked, hoping to change the subject away from getting too personal.

"Loved these big hummers since I was old enough to walk. Thought I'd like takin' them apart and puttin' them back together, but instead, I found I loved driving them more than anything. My wife knew from the start that I'd be truckin'. She manages real well bringing up our four boys, most the time without me. But they know who their daddy is, you can be sure of that."

"All boys, huh?" Abi asked.

"Not for certain, the misses is due to pop another any day now. Kinda why I was hurrying along when I came upon you folks. Wasn't plannin' on stoppin', but when I saw you with your bundle, I knew my Anna wouldn't be forgiven me for leavin' you folks on the road, dead of night, with it gettin' colder than icicles in January."

"Thank you, Hoss," Abi said. "God will bless you two fold for your kindness."

"God fearin', are you? Well, Anna would like you real well if she were to meet you. Heck, why don't you just come to my place? Save me the time from stoppin' at the Moose and heck, we got plenty of room. Anna would love it."

"We couldn't impose," Abi said quickly.

"Wouldn't be imposin'. Heck, maybe you could fix breakfast for the crew and we could let Anna get a little sleep for a change. Would that be a fair trade?"

"I think we'd enjoy that, of course it's up to you, honey. You're the one that'll be doing the cooking," Miles said, giving Abi a smirk.

"Well, that's not exactly how I see it. Miles cooks rather well, Hoss. You've got yourself a deal."

"She snookered you into that one, Miles. Women have a way of doin' that, don't they? My Anna is a whip at trickin' me, but I love her for it anyway."

Miles laughed. He liked Hoss and felt certain his Anna would prove to be quite a woman. Miles pulled Abi into the crook of his arm. He noticed her eyes drooped heavily. He reached over and lifted Kelly against his chest. She looked up at him and smiled. He couldn't help smiling back.

"Nothin' like them, is there?"

Miles glanced over at Hoss, then shook his head. "Never expected I could feel like this. She's so small, so innocent, and so precious. I sound like a blubbering woman, but she's truly amazing. Just look at her little fingers wrapped around mine, how sweet."

"She's got you pegged already. It's a girl, right?"

"Yup. Little Kelly."

"Boys seem to be louder and more demandin'. I wouldn't mind havin' a daughter. I'd feel sorry for the bloke who mistreated a girl of mine."

"So would I," Miles added, chuckling with Hoss. They traveled down a single-lane dirt road, and Miles suddenly hoped his first instincts about Hoss were right.

"There she be, my log house. I built the whole thing myself. She's sturdy, draft free, and not a more solid place in these parts."

Miles stared at the massive house just up the road. "Dang, Hoss, it's incredible. Why, it's down right beautiful. You built this?" he asked, awe rightly lacing his tone.

"Yup, that I did. Helped my brother build one similar for his family. You'd be amazed at how efficient she is to heat in winter and how cool she stays in summer. It's a fine house for a fine family."

Miles reached over and shook Abi's shoulder. "We're at Hoss's place, you'd better shake the cobwebs off."

"What? Where? Oh," she said, looking at Miles, then at Hoss. "Wow, that's your place? I'm impressed."

"Just was tellin' Miles that I built her myself. Let's get inside, need to check on Anna and you folks need some food and sleep."

Miles slipped his hand around Abi's waist, guiding her to the house, holding Kelly in his arm. Neither Abi nor Kelly complained of his attention, somehow that worried him.

"Papa, Papa!"

"Howdy boys, what you doin' up so late. You givin' your mama a bad time? You know I won't—"

"Mama's havin' the baby. She is callin' for ya."

"Dang, I knew it. I just knew it. You see that these folks get somethin' to eat, I'll be right back."

Abi laughed. "Now there's an excited, soon-to-be daddy. I hope it's a girl this time. I really like him."

"I know what you mean," Miles agreed, guiding them into the house and closing the heavy, front door. He could hear the screams of a woman in labor, and wished he could be just about any other place than there.

"Paw says to have you come upstairs, ma'am."

Abi looked upward to find a young boy leaning over the railing. "Me?" she asked.

"Course you, don't see no other woman here, do you?"

She glanced at Miles, then shouted, "I'll be right up. Miles, you okay with Kelly?"

"Sure, we do just fine, don't we precious?" He smiled at the babbling his comment received.

"I don't know much about delivering a baby, but you do, don't you Miles? I mean don't policemen have training?"

"Well, some, but, why don't you see what you can do. To be honest, I don't have any experience with this sort of thing." He wanted to tell Abi he'd be petrified to have anything to do with a woman's birthing, but he didn't.

Abi hurried up the rugged set of stairs. The screams from Hoss's Anna were wearing on Miles's nerves. He only hoped nothing was wrong.

Chapter Twenty-Three

"I can't believe they have no idea where Abi, Kelly and Miles are. Wouldn't Miles check in?" Chyna asked, taking a long, hard draw on the straw. She couldn't get enough to drink.

"I'm sure he would, if he could. I mean, other things could be a factor, like his cell phone battery could have run down. He might not want to use a traceable phone, so he's being extremely careful. Miles Sandler is one of the best men in the field. Kelly and Abi are in good hands."

"Like me?" she asked, feeling a flush creep up her cheeks from the comment.

"Exactly," Harry answered, not skipping a beat.

She couldn't help chuckling. "Harry, did you talk to your people? I mean, have they, you know, said anything about John, yet?" she asked, wishing she could be more patient and discrete, but she just didn't know how.

"I asked you this once before, and I'm going to ask you again. You sure you want to know?"

Harry showed signs of discomfort. So, her suspicions were founded. "He was cheating, wasn't he?" She held her breath, hoping hysteria caused her uncertainties. She could tell by his expression, he didn't want to talk about it. "You know by now I like it straight."

"This won't be easy, that much I'll say."

"Harry, just tell me. This warning shit gets on my nerves."

"You are John's second wife. He's been married to Sharon for twelve years, and they've never been divorced. They have two sons; John Junior who is almost twelve and Jerry is ten."

"You've got to be kidding. For four years I've been married to a married man. That bastard! No wonder he never wanted kids. I'm not really married. Why? If he had a wife and kids, why?" Tears filled her eyes and she wiped at them with disgust.

"I'm sorry, Chyna." Harry moved closer.

"It's okay. I realized some time back that things weren't quite right. I didn't want to face it. So you see, it's kinda my fault, too. You want to know the strangest part of it? I

don't really care. I'm not heart sick over my loss, I'm damn mad about the deceit." Harry sat on the edge of the bed and pulled her into his arms. She welcomed the comfort.

"Chyna, maybe I shouldn't have told you. I'm sorry."

She burst into tears, holding her ribs, fighting the pain external as well as internal. She allowed Harry to hold her. She clung to him and cried until she had no tears left.

"Thanks for staying," she whispered, still clinging to Harry's shirt. "I don't know why I cried. Abi and I make quite a pair, don't we? I was so full of advice and wisdom. And here I've done everything wrong, right down to...it doesn't matter, does it?"

"It matters, Chyna. I just don't know what to say. I really don't. He went by the name John Brown Wainscott. He has a different social security number. He has a beautiful house with a pool and even a maid, and he's gainfully employed, too."

"What kind of job?" she asked, finding it hard to comprehend what Harry just said.

"He's a realtor. Last year's income tax showed an income of one hundred twenty thousand dollars."

"Wow, he only makes seventy-two thousand as an architect, with me. We have a small house, comfortable and affordable, no pool and no maid, but I guess I shouldn't complain, right?" She knew she sounded bitter, but the betrayal tore at her heart.

"Chyna, you deserve better. I wish this hadn't happened. I know you must love him and this—"

"Love? I think John and I had become comfortable. We hardly talked to each other. I can't say it feels earth shattering to know it's over, but the betrayal is heartbreaking."

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

She looked at Harry. His eyes were filled with sympathy. "Arrest him for bigamy. I'm still alive, and I plan on making sure he has to face me. He'll know how much that betrayal cost when his first wife and his boys learn the truth." She clung to Harry, appreciating the comfort he offered.

"I need to stop at the station and do some paperwork. We won't arrest John until this thing with Trevor is settled. We still don't want him to know you're alive."

"I understand."

"Would you like me to move you onto to your stomach? I'll only be a couple of hours and the position change will be good for you."

She nodded. She could tell he flipped her over as tender as possible. She bit back the sharp pains that shot up her left leg. Her right leg barely hurt anymore. "Thank you, Harry, for everything."

"You like Chinese?"

She nodded.

"Good, I'll pick some up on the way home. We'll eat and tell each other every joke we've ever heard. Is that a date?"

She smiled. "Yes, Harry, that's a date."

"You get some rest now. I know this will sound hokey, but try not to think about it. Being upset isn't going to help you recuperate. Would you like a pain pill?"

Chyna considered it, the throbbing in her ribs and even legs had lessened. The headache had nearly disappeared. It was the pain in her heart that hurt the most.

"Maybe this time I will, but instead of two, just give me one." She swallowed the pill he offered, following it with a long, healthy drink.

"When I get back we'll change the bandages on your arms."

She pressed her face into the pillow and listened to Harry's footsteps click across the floor, then the creak of the door opening, then close. The lock clicked in place. She wished Harry had stayed.

Groggy, Chyna realized someone had lifted her, his actions not caring like Harry. She struggled to bring herself out of the heavy state the pain pill had sent her. It seemed impossible to open her eyes.

Was he carrying her across the room? He let her go and for a split second she fell, landing mercilessly into water. She fought the sinking feeling. Someone grabbed her forehead and pushed her underwater. She focused on holding her breath.

Once surfacing, she gasped for air. She swung her swollen, wrapped arms at the assailant, connected several times. It sent currents of stabbing pain to her semi-conscious mind.

Again the man pushed her head under the water. Chyna grabbed at his arm, digging her fingernails into the underside of his wrist, clawing four skinless paths. She held her breath, realizing this time he wasn't letting her up for air. She went limp beneath his hold.

In the back on her mind, she heard a loud pop, like a firecracker. The man attacking her had disappeared from the bathroom. She choked and gasped for air, fighting the grogginess that still lingered.

"My God, you okay, Chyna?"

"Harry? He tried to kill me. Did you get him? Was it John?" she heard her quivering, fear-filled voice. She didn't recognize it as being her own. Harry pressed a speed-dial on his cell phone.

"Stay still, Chyna. I think you need to stay put until I can get some help. I don't want to hurt those legs any further."

She fought to keep her eyes open. "You won't leave me again, will you?" she asked, praying he'd tell her no.

"I'll stay here, Chyna. I won't let you slide into the water. Try to relax, I'll be here for you."

She believed him. If only she hadn't taken that pain pill. She listened while Harry talked on the phone.

"Bring leg braces. I know, but the water has dissolved them completely. I'll tell you all about it when you get here. As soon as you can, I'll need help getting her back in bed."

She wished he hadn't finished his phone call. Listening to his voice seemed soothing.

"Detective Trent, please," Harry said in a deep tone.

Chyna relaxed some as Harry moved his thumb in a circular motion near her temple. She liked it. She shivered, realizing the water still had an icy edge to it.

"Trent, Harry here. Discretely, send a couple boys to my place for fingerprinting. You heard right. While I was at the station, someone broke in and tried drowning my houseguest in the tub. Nothings wrong with your hearing. I'm telling you, this was no accident. Thanks. Be in touch."

"Who knows I'm here?" she asked through the grogginess. A shiver sent her body trembling. The sound of water running turned her icy coffin into a warm, soothing haven. He stretched a towel across the tub, and she first became aware she had nothing on but a wet tee shirt. "Thank you," she whispered.

"Who knows you're here? Good question," Harry finally answered her. "Trent, Captain Warrett, and Doc. Willard. I think that covers it. None of them could be—"

"What about that policeman?" She fought to concentrate on their conversation. The pain pill gripped her senses.

"Chyna, what policeman?"

She struggled to function. "The one...when you found me at the accident site."

"Yeah, um, Johnson. Now that you mention it, I forgot about him. I'll have it checked into. Good girl, you'd be great at detective work."

She barely tipped her lips in a smile. "I tried that once, remember?"

"Oh, yeah, your work following Trevor. That's something we need to discuss when that pain pill wears off."

"Harry?"

"Yes?"

"Check the pills. I don't usually feel this heavy, pulled down with the pain pills. Something doesn't feel right."

Chyna woke to find her legs elevated, encased in light-weight air casts. "Wow, I'm impressed," she whispered, looking around for Harry. At first she didn't see him, then realized he slept right next to her on the bed. She didn't mind. It gave her a feeling of protection, security. She glanced over at him and found him watching her.

His dark eyes held her like a magnet. "Thank you for staying." She watched a slow, warm smile spread across his face. His eyes darkened with emotion, she wondered what he was thinking.

"Had yourself quite a day, didn't you? I'll tell you one thing, I'm glad you decided you needed only one pain pill—"

"Why?"

"They weren't pain pills. After you told me you didn't feel right, I had them pump your stomach, just to be safe. Your pain pill capsules were filled with digitalis. If you had taken two pills you'd have been dead in a fairly short time. I think you surprised the killer by being alive, so he decided to drown you, making it look like you had an accident and drowned. He didn't expect me coming back so soon. That's the scenario

I've drawn up. I fired a shot after the bastard, but he was way down the alley. He got away but he won't next time."

Chyna reached over and traced his forehead, cheeks, chin, and then lips with the tip of her finger. "You have any suspects?"

"Other than Trevor Madden? No. I don't think he knows you're alive, but someone sure does."

"John?" She watched Harry closely. His expression stayed the same, one of searching. "How would he know?"

"There's only one way. He hired someone to do the job, but Trevor beat him to it. The only way the hit man could know you're alive is—"

"He dressed like a policeman at the accident scene and no one noticed him," Chyna offered.

"How much you want to bet Officer Johnson, the real Officer Johnson, wasn't at the scene of your accident?"

"We have an idea how, but we're no closer to proving who and why. Unless... could I have seen something that I wasn't suppose to?" She sifted through images of events, wondering what could be worth killing over.

"If it's John, why would he choose now to get rid of you? We're missing something here. I don't think John has anything to do with any of this."

"I hope not."

"If it's someone else, then we're not talking small time, someone with real connections is behind this. You must have seen or heard something you weren't supposed to."

Chyna breathed deep. It was frustrating. Not being able to move infuriated her. She didn't have a whole lot of patience left. "I don't know, Harry. I mean, it doesn't seem possible. I'm nobody. I don't rub shoulders with people who make waves or are loaded with money. So what could I have observed or witnessed that would cause someone enough grief they'd kill to cover it up?"

"Whoever did this was a professional. He broke in here at least once before to replace the pills, without a trace. Then he returned, when I was away again, and left no clues as to forcible entry, as though he had a key. He wouldn't have failed drowning you, either, but I returned earlier than usual. That means he's been watching me coming and going. Damn, wish I'd shot the jerk in the ass."

Chyna listened to Harry work things through. He covered each comment from every possible angle, sort of like a writer brainstorming for the plot to work out just right at the end. "Maybe I saw something when I was doing surveillance on Trevor?" she proposed, searching her mind for anything that might seem out of place or suspicious.

"Did anyone meet him at his apartment, restaurant or in the middle of no-where?"

"Let's see, the mail man came around ten in the morning. One day, no twice, a guy from Tom's Motor Shop came and got Trevor's black farm truck, the one I had the accident in."

"Now why would they do that? I doubt if most vehicle repair places would drive that far out into the country to service a vehicle. What did you think about that?"

"The first time I didn't think that much of it, but the second time I thought it incredibly strange. I considered drug running. I wouldn't put anything past Trevor."

"No love lost, is that what you're saying?"

"Would you love someone who tried killing you?" Chyna asked, immediately thinking of Abi. "My sister would. She believes everyone deserves forgiveness, that's what got her in this mess in the first place."

"Anything else happen when you were watching him?"

Chyna closed her eyes and thought through the events of following Trevor Madden. "I wish I'd written things down, a good investigator would have done that. Heck, a good investigator would have stayed awake, too," she admitted, chuckling. "Say, my head doesn't hurt when I laugh. I'm getting better."

"I'm glad. You didn't deserve this, Chyna."

"Why, thank you, Harry." She turned toward him and found his face within inches of hers. She felt strangely flattered by his interest. She was married, then stopped at that thought. For all practical purposes, no, she wasn't married.

"What you thinking about?"

"I was thinking that I'm no longer married. John's marriage nullifies mine. I'll get the courts to declare it void."

"I can't blame you. I can only imagine how hurt you must be. But, maybe it's for the best—"

Chyna closed the distance between them, placing a soft, slow kiss on his lips. He responded tentatively, then increased the pressure until she felt breathless. She knew she shouldn't encourage Harry, but she wanted and needed attention, holding, kissing, and the assurance she was still a desirable woman.

"Chyna, I can't do this. I mean, I'm fascinated with you and I definitely want you, but now isn't the right time. The circumstances aren't right. I wouldn't be much of a man to take advantage of you in your vulnerable state. And, it's against all the rules for me to get involved with someone I'm protecting." He leaned over and kissed her on the top of her head.

"I know you're right. I don't usually act like this. I didn't mean to put you in an awkward position. You won't find someone else to watch me, will you? I mean, I won't throw myself at you again, I promise." Chyna looked at him quickly, hopefully.

"Don't you worry about that. I'm not going to put anyone else on your case. You hear me? Besides, I kissed you back, didn't I? It's not just you, Chyna. It's me, too. I feel the attraction and I have needs, just like you. I'm not rejecting you. I'm postponing you. Okay?"

Chyna looked at Harry and read the sincerity in his eyes. "Okay."

"You feel up to answering a few questions about last night? Did you see him?"

She shook her head. "I was so groggy. I realized I was dropped in the tub. I had an awareness of when I was being held under the water. It was hard to stay awake long enough to focus."

"Fair enough. Was there anything that struck you as odd?"

It seemed impossible to put the disjointed night together. "I kinda woke and realized someone was walking toward the bed. I thought it was you. Next thing I remember is being carried. He almost dropped me."

"He was a small man?"

"No, I don't think he was small, he just wasn't very strong. He dropped me into the tub. It seemed like I was too heavy for him to carry. It woke me some because the water was ice cold. I saw his hand coming toward my face so I took a deep breath. I thought my lungs would burst, but he let me up. I gasped for air. I think he wanted me to suffer, he didn't want it to be over too quickly."

"Interesting observation. Anything else you can think of?"

Chyna closed her eyes and struggled to relive everything that happened. "That's all I remember until you came."

"Did he say anything to you?"

"It seems odd, but I don't recall him saying one word."

"Maybe he thought you might recognize his voice? You think it could have been Trevor?"

"I don't know. He thinks I'm dead and how would he know I'm here? I wish I remembered, but—"

"Tell you what. I'm going to go take a quick shower. I'll leave the bathroom door open in case something spooks you. You give last night some thought without my interruptions, see if you can think of anything else. Okay?"

"You don't have to leave the bathroom door open. I'm awake and I can scream pretty loud. You'd hear me with the door closed." She laughed; it sounded flat and nervous. She held still as he moved off the bed, then turned around, knelt back on the mattress, leaned over and brushed her lips with his.

Without a word, Harry headed for the bathroom, leaving the door slightly ajar. The sound of his shower water soothed and relaxed her. Harry's kiss remained on her lips. She wasn't disappointed, just confused.

Chapter Twenty-Four

"Hi, Anna, my name is Abi. I wish I could tell you I'm a midwife or an OB nurse, but no such luck. Where on earth is your midwife?"

"She's with Mrs. Brewski, who's havin' a baby, too. I'm afraid this one is givin me a bit of trouble. I think it might be breech. Now, my Peter was breech, so I do have some experience here. You've got to reach in and turn the babe before it comes out."

"You mean me?" Abi asked, nearly fainting from the thought.

"Well, I wouldn't be askin', but I can't do it myself, and I'd prefer not to ask Hoss to do it. I don't want to lose this baby, Abi girl. I must put myself in your hands and those of the Lord."

"Well, you'd better start praying, because I think God will be able to help you more than me."

"You are his tool, child. You'd better wash your hands good in soapy, hot water, scrub your nails, and do it up to your elbows. Don't waste any time, the pressure is near unbearable."

Abi rushed from the bedroom and leaned over the baluster. "Where's the bathroom so I can wash my hands?"

"Down the hall," a small voice answered.

Abi ran to the right, went into the room and realized it was another bedroom. She heard the screams of Anna, and quickly rushed back the other way, charging into a smaller room that finally was indeed a bathroom. She used the hand brush on her skin, nails and elbows. She grabbed a towel and rushed back to Anna, wiping as quickly as she could.

"I'm here, sorry it took so long..." she paused, seeing the pain etched across Anna's face. "What's wrong?"

"Turn the baby, right away, or it'll be too late."

Abi didn't try to argue. She ran to the woman's bed and whipped up the sheets, uncovering Anna's legs. There wasn't time to wonder what to do, she could only hope her actions would save Anna and Hoss's child.

Reaching up into the birthing canal, Abi felt the feet of the moving infant. Exploring slightly, she discovered which direction the baby was curled, then finding the baby's

bottom, she pushed, hoping the child would circle around, bringing the head to the birthing opening.

The child kicked and Abi reached higher, grasping the infant's head. She guided it in a downward position. The painful screams from Anna nearly sent Abi running, but she knew she couldn't leave this woman without help.

"Make sure the cord isn't wrapped around the baby's neck!"

"Lord, it better not be...wait...the head is coming out," Abi shouted, excitement filling her. "Push, Anna, it's looking good."

A lot of water and blood gushed out of the birthing opening, then in one movement the baby eased completely out of its mother's body.

"You have a daughter, Anna!" Abi shouted. "Her face is kinda blue . . .what do I do?" Abi asked, panic filling her.

"Hand her to me, then grab a suction bulb off the table."

Before Anna had a chance to give any more directions, Abi had passed the child to her mother. Abi found the resuscitating bulb and handed it to Anna.

"There we go," she said, clearing mucus from the infant's mouth, then nose.

Loud cries filled the room and Abi found herself crying with joy! "I thought, never mind, I'm so relieved."

"Let's tie off her cord," Anna said, laying her daughter across her chest.

"I'm here! Lord, I'm here!"

Abi glanced toward the door and observed a full-bodied woman bustle into the room. Her labored breathing interrupted her words.

"You're a might too late, Leslie," Anna answered. "Young Abi here did all the hard work and saved both of us."

"She was breech, wasn't she? I just knew that was going to happen. Well, we aren't going to wonder what could have happened...as I see it, we got lucky Abi was here. Mrs. Brewski has a ten-pound boy, Jeremy John. Poor young girl, being her first, it wasn't an easy going. Tore up something fierce."

Abi wondered if Leslie ever stopped talking long enough to catch a breath of air. "I'll go down and check on my daughter...and husband," she added sheepishly.

"Grab those scissors, girl," Leslie directed. "That's it. Now, cut a quarter inch below the knot. Fine job. Bring me a wet wash cloth and towel. While I'm cleaning Anna here, you'd best do the same for her daughter."

"I'm glad you're here, I wouldn't have known the first thing to do with the clean-up," Abi explained, somewhat mortified. She handed Leslie some towels and a basin filled with warm, sudsy water.

"It's important to make sure the birthing sack has completely expelled and that there's minimal bleeding. Not that much to it. Come look here and see what I mean."

Abi didn't want to look, yet she did. It was incredibly fascinating. She'd help bring a baby into the world. The feeling couldn't be described. Watching Leslie remove the afterbirth and clean the area with experience and care, Abi helped pull the rubberized sheeting out from under Anna.

"I'll bet that feels better," Leslie announced. "You just relax there, Anna. I'm going to clean up your little girl, and then we'll send that proud papa up here to see his first daughter. You go down and tell Hoss that he can come up in a few minutes. Keep quiet about it bein' a girl, we should let Anna have that privilege."

"Certainly," Abi said rather quickly. She glanced at mother and daughter and couldn't help smiling. It flashed back the feelings of joy when Kelly came into the world. The excitement, the awe of having a child, the—"

"Where's my baby?" Hoss's booming voice reached the women.

"Come on up, Hoss," Leslie shouted. "We're just about done in here."

Abi watched Hoss's incredible frame fill the door jam. It amazed her how light-footed the large man seemed. He beamed as he took several steps into the bedroom.

"How ya be, Anna of my heart?"

"Just fine, Hoss. Would you be terribly disappointed if you are the proud papa of another strapping boy?"

Pausing at the door, Abi waited to see Hoss's reaction.

"Now Mrs. Barns, you know I'll love a son as much as I would a daughter."

"You're not disappointed?"

"Of course not. We'll take a healthy boy and be mighty grateful for the gift."

Abi couldn't help smiling. She glanced from Hoss to Anna. She could read the love that flowed between them. A tinge of jealousy flooded through Abi. She'd have given anything for Trevor to have spoken to her that way, looked at her that way.

"Would you like to see?" Anna asked.

"Darn right. Hand me my strappin'...Lord, woman you plain fooled me. Look at her! She's a wee little gal. Lord, we have us a daughter. I'm real proud, Mother. Thank you for the gift."

Those words surprised Abi. How wonderful it was to hear a man thank his wife for the gift of their child. Tears misted Abi's eyes and she left the room in a rush.

She ran down the stairs and hurried outside, hoping the fresh air would bring back her senses. She sat on the porch steps, looking up at the black sky and the endless twinkling lights.

"You alright?"

Abi jumped, then turned toward Miles. "Of course. It was...she's quite a woman. Where's Kelly?"

"Sleeping in a crib with a two-year-old boy. I made him promise to behave himself."

She chuckled. "That's nice. Hoss and Anna finally have a daughter. I'm happy for them. They seem like really nice people."

"I agree. While waiting, Hoss and I talked about everything from trucks to tadpoles. Nice fella. His folks are direct descendants of Irish peasants. His mother can't speak a word of English, uses Gaelic. Hard to believe in this day and age."

"I agree. Did you tell him the truth about us?" She watched him kick dirt around with the tip of his hiking boot.

"Yes and no."

"Yes and no, what kind of answer is that?"

"I told him about you and your ex-husband. I told him that someone threatened your life. I felt he had a right to know."

"Maybe we shouldn't even be here. I mean, you think we could be putting them all in danger?" She wouldn't take any chances hurting these nice people.

"That crossed my mind. But Hoss pointed out, how would anyone figure out we're here? There's no connection between this place and us. Someone will find our car, but we're literally miles from that place. And we didn't stop anywhere on the way here, so no one has seen us."

He sat next to her on the step. She felt the heat from his body. It somehow seemed intimate. "True. You said yes and no, what didn't you tell Hoss?" she asked, leaning her back against the porch post.

"I didn't tell him we're not married. I didn't want you to be alone in a strange house. I thought, well, it seemed more acceptable to let them believe we're a couple. Our room is the one past the nursery just down from the master bedroom."

Abi stared at the handsome man sitting beside her. He'd rested his elbow on his knee, and pressed his chin into his thumb and forefinger. Through the window a pale light cast across his features. He looked like a cover on one of her romance novels. Covers she had a habit of staring at, imagining the man looking back at her with lust in his eyes.

"Did you want me to tell them the truth? I can. It's not like I care if they know. It appears to be an excuse to spend the night with you, but, I'm not trying to corner you into a situation that makes you uncomfortable."

"I wasn't thinking that at all, Miles." She shivered from the cold air.

"Well, I made the decision for what I thought was best for you. Are you listening at all?"

Abi realized she'd been silently staring at him. "No, I mean yes, I'm listening. I think I'd feel uncomfortable if they knew the truth about us."

"You're disappointed, then?"

"Disappointed? How's that?" she asked, looking at him completely dumbfounded by his comment. "How could I possibly be disappointed with you? You've saved both my daughter and me from certain disaster more than once. You've been kind and caring. You've made me feel like a desirable woman, something I haven't felt for so long, I forgot what it felt like. Anyway, I'm not disappointed with you."

"You are desirable. It's just, well, as much as I want to get to know you both better, and even think I'd like you in my future, I've been thinking—"

"You're still in love with Lana, aren't you?" she blurted without thinking. "It's pretty hard for me to compete with a dead woman."

"Why would you say that?"

"I believe you somehow feel responsible for her death. Because you don't feel you're entitled to a loving relationship because of what happened to her. You resist making a commitment or following through with a relationship, because you're afraid the woman will cheat and desert you like Lana. I would guess you start out with good intentions, but the more you feel, the faster you run."

"Is that what you think, Doctor Madden?"

She adjusted her position on the stairs, sitting sideways so she could look at Miles better. "I didn't mean to sound clinical. I merely, yes, that's what I think. You've been the perfect gentleman. I see you're becoming attached to Kelly and I think it's scaring the hell out of you. I'm not sure what you're feeling about me, but I don't doubt that it's scaring you, too. I haven't asked for your attention or anything else. I don't need more complications right now."

"Sounds to me that you're the one who's backpedaling. I didn't say one thing about...hell with it, Abi. I'm not about to start arguing with you. Women always think they've got everything figured out, way before there's anything to figure out. Same old story every time. I didn't ask for this."

Abi quickly stood and turned her back to Miles. She swallowed hard. "I'm sorry. I'm way out of line on this. It's hard for me to turn off the therapy. You didn't ask for my opinion. I had no right to give it. It used to bother Trevor, too. I'm sorry."

"You don't have to be sorry. You don't need to compare me to Trevor, either. I don't make idle promises. I am interested in you and Kelly. I'm not afraid. It's damn annoying, this whole ordeal. I wasn't backing down on what I said about getting to know you and Kelly better, once this is over. You should know a few things. Things I should have told you right up front."

She turned to face him. She noted tense lines in his jaw and tightened lips. "I don't think I need to know anything. I've always believed a person's past belongs there, as do their past relationships. But, I also believe that past relationships should be over, resolved, and healed before a new one begins. I haven't even followed my own advice. Since I haven't resolved all my past issues and feelings, you don't owe me any explanations, Trevor."

"Christ, Abi, you just called me Trevor."

She reached up and placed her palm on his cheek and he immediately turned his face to free himself from her touch. "I'm sorry, it just came out. I'm so use to arguing with Trevor that it just—"

"Do I remind you of him?"

She stared at Miles, shocked at his question. "Resemble Trevor? Why on earth would you ask me that? You're the complete opposite of that poor excuse for a man. I'm sorry, Miles. It meant nothing, it was an honest mistake."

"How would you like it if I'd call you Lana? You'd accuse me, once again, of being in love with a dead woman. Was it an honest mistake? Maybe he's the man on your mind. Is that it, Abi? When I first met you, you said you wanted to try and make it work with Trevor. You've decided that's what you want, isn't it?"

"Don't be ridiculous. After all that's happened, you really think I'd go back to him? That's absurd. If you think that, you really don't know me very well."

"I think there's a great deal we don't know about each other. I think we should concentrate on business and see where we are when it's all over. It's been a long, stressful day and tomorrow will no doubt be a repeat. We'd better call it a night."

"I think we'd sleep a whole lot better if you told me what this is really all about."

"I just did."

"I don't think so. I know you're angry and you're using my calling you Trevor as an excuse to be cold with me. But there's more to it, I just know it."

"Maybe I understand why Trevor had a hard time with your non-stop psychology evaluations. I've had enough analysis for one night."

"If that's how you feel, thank you for being honest. As the saying goes, I'll take care of my business and you take care of yours. I think we both imagined something that really wasn't there. I think unhappy people have a habit of doing that. It's called the rebound. Sorry, there I go again. Let's just stick to business."

"If that's what you want."

"Meaning?" she asked, seeing a side of Miles she hadn't before. It scared her.

"Tomorrow is going to be a long, hard day. Get some sleep. Don't worry, I'll take the couch."

Miles turned and walked into the house. Frustration filled her to the core. What had she said? She'd called him Trevor. She'd brought up Lana and accused him of still being in love with her. Abi wondered why she'd done that. Was it the fear of feeling again? Fear of getting too close? Her psychology expertise failed to help.

She liked Miles...more than liked him, if she was honest with herself. How would she feel if he were killed because of Trevor?

Everyone was looking for a long-haired blonde with a redheaded daughter, Abi thought. What if she and Kelly were to disappear even from Miles? Everyone was looking for a tall redheaded man, too. All of them were easy to spot, especially together. At the first opportunity, Abi and Kelly were going to become dark brunettes.

Thoughts flashed through her mind. Yes. She'd take Kelly and disappear for real. Abi shivered and realized how cold it was outside. Light snowflakes were falling. She quietly went inside. The household had settled down. Abi went straight to her daughter's room. She peacefully slept next to a pudgy redheaded boy who could easily have passed for her brother.

Abi slipped Kelly into her arms, then placed her back down. Crossing the hall to her room, she allowed her eyes to adjust to the darkness and finally made out the form on the couch.

"Go ahead and sleep in the bed. I'm going to make use of the small bed in the nursery. We'll both get a better nights rest that way."

"That's not necessary, Abi. I'm damn comfortable where I am."

"Stay then. I'll be in the nursery." She heard his heavy breath of disgust, but welcomed his silence. She took the backpack and quietly left the room.

Without even the slightest hesitation, she slipped into the nursery, closed the door and turned on a small lamp. With near silent gestures, she eased open a dresser drawer, withdrew a sleeper, hooded sweatshirt outfit, a couple pairs of socks and several diapers. She'd make sure she sent money to cover the expense of the clothing, along with a baby gift when she got settled in her new life.

Stuffing the items into the small backpack, Abi wrapped Kelly into a heavy blanket. "Well, precious, looks like it's just you and me again. We're both going to be brunettes, how does that strike you? Somehow it didn't sound all that appealing to Abi.

She tiptoed out of the room, down the stairs, and finally made her way through the kitchen. She stopped at the table and grabbed a couple of apples, then spotted a heavy parka hanging on a peg along the wall.

It bothered her to be helping herself, like a common thief. These were good people and she knew they'd understand when she wrote them.

"You'd better take a pair of boots, too. Canada is a cold mother."

Abi jumped, then gasped. Hoss leaned against the doorway. "I was going to send money to cover the things I borrowed. I really—"

"I wasn't questioning what you feel you gotta do, missy. I meant the offer. You'll need a pair of boots. Consider your helping Anna payment. She couldn't have done it without you."

"I'm sure she'd have been fine."

"No. Fact is you saved my daughter and my wife. I'll be beholdin' to you for a lifetime. We'll be namin' her Abi, just thought I'd let you know."

"Please, don't. I don't deserve—"

"Honey, I bless the moment I picked you stranded folks up on the road. One more thing, here's the keys to the little Jeep out back. Ain't fancy, but she has a good heater, chained tires, and a tank full of gas. Here's a bit of cash for a place to sleep a bit of food. You'll be needin' it, so you best take it."

"Hoss, I couldn't. I feel so guilty."

"My Anna's slightly opened window is just above the porch. We overheard your conversation with that young fella down there. We understand your situation and we want to help. We've signed the title of the vehicle to you, but we hope some day you'll use it to come visit us when things are better for you and little Kelly."

"I can't take your Jeep. It just wouldn't be right," Abi nearly whispered, hoping Hoss would catch on and hold his voice down before Miles heard it and came downstairs, foiling her plans.

"Listen to me. You shouldn't be taking that babe out on a night like this. I shouldn't even let you drive by yourself. There's a storm headin' in and I wouldn't, well, you'll miss it if you get yourself goin' right now. God be with you."

"If I take the Jeep, Miles will hear me," she explained. "It won't take me long to hitch a ride—"

"You're not thinkin' right. You either take the Jeep, or you stay. But no gal and her babe is hitchin' a ride, even if we was near a traveled road, which we ain't. Now, don't be arguing with me. What's your choice?"

"I'll take the Jeep, but, I won't get far when Miles hears me driving down the road."

"He won't be hearin' a blame thing. I built me a mighty fine, well-insulated house. He's sleepin' on the other side of the house. The wind is blowin' and I guarantee you he won't hear nothin'."

"Hoss?"

"Yes, missy?"

"Thank you. Tell Anne I said thank you, too. This is what I have to do."

"We understand. Do give us a post and let us know how you fared, okay?"

"I promise. Thank you." Abi didn't wait for an answer. She handed a sleeping Kelly to Hoss, pulled off her tennis shoes and slipped on a pair of seal fur-lined boots, then tucked her shoes into the backpack. "I won't forget this," she whispered, took her daughter, then reached over and gave the large man a tentative hug. He wrapped his arms around her and gave a return hug that nearly squeezed the breath out her.

"We won't ever forget you either, child. Our little Abi will be raised knowing an angel arrived on the night she was born."

Abi didn't answer him. She held Kelly to her chest and walked out the back door, straight to the Jeep. The cold biting wind snapped at her face. Hoss was right, a fierce, unearthly storm had already begun. If Trevor was out there, she hoped it'd swallow him whole.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Trevor stormed into the country log house his folks had built. He would have constructed a fine mansion like none other in the county. It angered him every time he saw the two hundred thousand dollar disaster. They had no right to be spending his inheritance.

"Mother, you home?" he shouted, heading for the kitchen.

"I'm baking bread," she answered.

He watched his stout, overweight mother and wondered when she'd stopped being pretty to him. Did the same thing happen when his dad looked at her?

"Aren't you going to ask me how I enjoyed my stay in jail last night?" He knew his tone sounded sarcastic, but he was pissed and hurt she hadn't saved him from the experience.

"I told your father you'd be angry. He thought it might be good for you. No harm came to you, I see."

"No harm! You have any idea what that hellhole is like? No, of course not or you wouldn't have let your son spend the night there. Let me tell you it stinks. It's filled with lice, filth, and slimy, yellow toilets. I had to throw my clothes in the garbage. Does that make you happy?" He watched her drop into a chair and squirm when the gravity of his words sunk in.

"It wasn't my doing, Trevor. You do realize your actions have gravely embarrassed the family, again. I just don't know what gets into you sometimes."

"Are you saying you believe I had something to do with that black bag?"

"No, son, and please don't raise your voice to me. I didn't say such a thing. I don't believe that for a moment."

"Then exactly what are you saying?"

"I recognized the pink, polka dot panties they found hidden in your night stand. I had a talk with Ambur—"

"You what? You had no right! She is frightened enough as it is. Now you have to add to it. I didn't think—"

"Trevor, I want you to sit down and listen to me."

"Don't go getting—"

"Sit!"

He gritted his teeth, then strode to the table and sat, leaning against the tall country-style back. He took time to prop his feet on the opposite chair, knowing the gesture annoyed her.

"Well?"

"Ambur is holding something back, I can tell. I tried talking to her about the panties. She clammed-up and wouldn't talk. Trevor, you're going to have to tell me what is going on. I have already heard the gossip and you can be sure it will get back to Ambur and Kathy. You have to tell me the truth."

"What, you think all I do is lie? Shit, this is going to get ugly and I haven't done anything to deserve it." He allowed his voice to crack and tears to surface. He glanced at his mother through lowered lids. She was stern-faced. He'd have to do better or things were really going to get sticky.

"Convince me, Trevor. I don't want a song, dance and some tears for affect. The truth this time."

"Ambur won't tell you about the panties because she hides them when she has an accident in them. There, you satisfied? It was our secret. She gets so busy playing she forgets to go, or doesn't make it to the bathroom on time. I told Osthorn all about it."

"She hides them?"

"Yes, she hides them. I've found them everywhere. Kathy keeps asking me where all her panties are going, well that's where. Behind the frig, under the couch, in the closet, and even in her playhouse."

"Well, I can see why she wouldn't want to tell Grandma that. You swear, Trevor, that this isn't one of your smooth stories?"

Trevor kicked the chair that he'd been resting his feet on. It went sailing across the room, then toppled over, clattering to the floor. He stood, glaring at his mother. "You use to always be there for me. Why not now?"

"I won't be able to forgive you, if you've hurt Ambur in any way."

"In what way, Mother? Are you accusing me of something deviant here? Your own son! You think I've been sexually abusing my own daughter? Damn it, Mother, how could you?" He watched her tremble and knew he'd gained ground.

"I didn't say I believed it or was accusing you. I just want to know the truth. I want to be able to defend you when people whisper or ask me questions. I don't want to find out the truth later, and realize I'd been a fool again."

"Oh, that's it. I wouldn't want you to be embarrassed by all those good people out there. If they were such great friends, then they wouldn't be gossiping and putting you on the spot. They're church-going hypocrites!"

"Trevor, that will be enough. I warn you."

He took several steps toward her. He noticed she physically shrunk into the chair. "Don't warn me, Mother. You and all the others can believe what you want, I don't give a shit. Don't you be filling Ambur's head with bullshit, either."

"It disappoints me to hear you talk like this. You know I love you and—"

"And won't stand beside me when I'm wrongly accused. You made me spend a night in jail. I'm not sure I can forgive you for that."

"I'm sorry, Trevor. This is all a nightmare. Who could imagine a fetus in a black bag in your garage? Then there's your daughter's panties hidden in your bedroom. I wish I had never lived to see this day."

"Me either, Mother, me either." He turned and stormed out of the house and headed straight for his truck.

"I hope to hell you didn't upset your mother."

Trevor looked up to find his lanky, borderline nerdish-looking father heading toward the truck. "I'm not in the mood to talk to you."

"Well, now ain't that a fine ta do. You liked your taste of heaven, I take it."

Seeing his father laugh at the idea of his son being in jail made Trevor seethe. "That was a chicken-shit thing to do. I'm innocent and you show your support by leaving me in that hell hole. Thanks a lot. I'll remember this one, Father."

"You really don't want to argue with me, do you, son? I have my attorney helping, don't I?" He paused. "It's just this thing with Ambur."

"You going to start in with the questions? Mother did that one already." The slight breeze brought the scent of fresh baked bread. Trevor considered going back in the house for some. He glanced at his father, patiently standing and staring at him. He had all the time in the world. "Osthorn is a useless piece of shit. Why do you use him? There must be at least one good lawyer in Great Falls that might know what he's doing and would represent me."

"Osthorn will do just fine. If you're innocent, he'll prove it. Know one thing, if you're guilty I'll see you don't get a penny of my money."

"I'm not guilty, and thanks for having confidence in me. Why do you always have to hold this ranch over my head? You find some sick satisfaction in knowing it would tear me apart to leave this place? You want me to grovel and beg to inherit what is rightfully mine?"

"Nothing is rightfully yours, get that through your head. My fortune is just that, mine. If I see fit to give you or your sister anything, that's my business. I just might give it all away. Would suit you both right."

"Yeah, I've heard this all before. I've worked my ass off for you since I was ten. You seem to forget that."

"You've managed to get yourself into quite a fix this time. I find out that you've laid a hand on my granddaughter, I'll see that you rot the rest of your life in prison. Same goes for that baby they found."

"You've got to believe me, I don't know shit about that damn fetus. Someone is setting me up. I have a good idea who it is, too. You wait and see. They'll find me innocent and you and mom can apologize by signing the ranch over to me. I'll make this place something to be proud of." Trevor noticed the expression on his father's face change from total control to sheer anger.

"Don't try bargaining with me. You damn well better be innocent, Trevor. It'll break your mother's heart if you had anything to do with either charge. You'll pay if you drag

my family's name through the mud. You'll pay like you've never paid before. Are you understanding me?"

Trevor stared at the man he called father. They'd never seen eye-to-eye. They'd been at each other's throat since the day he was born. When younger, Trevor believed his father hated the attention Mother dotted on him.

"It's pretty hard not to understand you, Dad. You manage to come right out with it. Parents should always stand behind their kids. How are you going to feel when they announce I'm innocent and you weren't there for me?"

"I'm not sure you can talk your way out of this one. You put your pregnant wife in a hotel. That's when I realized how cold you could be. We're taking responsibility for the way you are, Mother and me. But, don't expect us to stand by you if you're guilty, this time."

Trevor gave his father a hostile glare. "You'll regret this conversation. I've earned this ranch and if you want it to stay in the family, then you're going to have to back me up."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning I've plans in the making for a grandson. That's what you wanted and that's what I've been working on."

"You have a gal pregnant? Who is she? You're not even divorced from Abi yet. You jump from one hot frying pan to another, don't you?"

"You saying you don't want a grandson?"

"No, I'm just saying your tactics are unethical, that's all."

"Well, I'm not getting a divorce. How's that for ethical? Abi and I are going to work things out and she's going to give me a son, and you a grandson."

"She said that? After all you've put her through? She's more of a woman than I even gave her credit for. Your mother and I have felt terrible about the way you've treated Abi. If it's true that you're not getting a divorce, and I'm not saying I completely believe you, it surely would help you in this other scandal."

"It's not a scandal, it's a set-up."

"Who's setting you up and why?"

Trevor realized his father's tone had changed, so had his disposition. So, possibly believing there's a grandson in the oven certainly made a difference. By the time Abi found out about it, he'd have impregnated her for real.

"I asked you, who's setting you up, Trevor?"

"I'll tell you, but you have to swear to keep it to yourself, don't even tell mother. You know she couldn't keep quiet, even if she tried."

"Get on with it."

Trevor noticed his father leaned in closer, ready for his secret. "I found out that John Brown is married to two women; Chyna and another woman in Chicago."

"You don't say? You know this for a fact?"

"For a fact. I think he'd do just about anything to keep that bit of information quiet, don't you?" Trevor watched his father digest the new information. He somehow seemed less tense.

"You might have something there. You tell the police this?"

"No, not yet. Osthorn is doing some checking. We need evidence to prove someone else could have done those lame-brained things to Abi. The fact we're reconciling must say I'm innocent. Why would I threaten or try to kill a woman I still want to be married to?"

"Don't try convincing me, Trevor. It seems when you start explaining every little detail, that's when you have something to hide. I'll be glad when this whole ordeal is over. You bring Abi by some night for supper. That's what this family needs, a good old-fashioned home cooked meal."

"I'll do just that."

"It'll be nice to know we have someone to pass this place onto. I've worked far too hard to have it fall into a son-in-law's hands. It's not quite the same as a grandson from my son."

"Know what you mean. I won't let you down, Dad. You'll see, I'll be found innocent of all charges and Abi will be back in our lives. Things are looking up already, wouldn't you say?" Trevor didn't wait for an answer. He climbed into his truck, started the engine and spun out of the driveway.

Things were back on track. He shifted the gear and stepped on the gas. "Here I come, Abi. Hope you're ready for me."

Chapter Twenty-Six

Miles tossed and turned. The couch didn't begin to stretch long enough for his frame. If he was honest, the couch had little to do with his restlessness. Abi Madden did.

He wanted to go to her, but what would he say? He'd come on strong about wanting to know her and Kelly and then he'd expressed cold feet. What woman wouldn't take some offense to that? Especially a woman who'd been treated as badly as she had.

The wind howled outside the bedroom window. Tiny balls of sleet clinked against the glass, warning all foolish enough to challenge it. He couldn't help thinking the storm fit his mood, cold, tense, and striking out at anyone in his path.

Why had he turned on Abi? He knew. He didn't want to admit he'd fallen completely in love with little Kelly. He'd grown to like the feeling of being a husband to Abi. Both scared him to death, and also filled him with happiness.

Most frightening had to be the fear of them leaving, taking his heart with them. He didn't think he'd be strong enough to handle that again. This time would be worse. He already missed little Kelly. He preferred her sleeping across his chest. He missed Abi's spirit and smile. He missed her Tuscany perfume and her quick, soft laugh. He liked how she bit her lip when she thought things over, and how a dimple formed in her right cheek when she frowned.

The hours ticked away. Miles got off the couch and headed for the door, then paused, turned around and went back to lie down. He couldn't go to her at three in the morning.

Maybe if he explained his fear of losing them. Would she understand? He didn't understand. The whole ordeal annoyed Miles. Women turmoil over emotions, men didn't, they just punched a bag or ran the mile.

When he fell asleep, Miles wasn't sure. He woke with an incredible shiver. The room must have cooled off to barely fifty degrees.

Glancing toward the four-poster, he'd hoped Abi had changed her mind and had used the bed. It remained smooth and not slept in. He realized, like him, she could be every bit as stubborn.

Fresh coffee, bacon and eggs assaulted his senses. His stomach growled in response. Keeping a blanket wrapped around his waist, Miles grabbed his clothes and headed for

the bathroom. A long hot shower would warm him, he felt chilled to the bone. His teeth chattered together as he stood above the toilet bowl.

Reaching behind the shower curtain, he turned the water knob to the right. A horrendous squeal and sputter occurred, but no water. "Damn, it must be frozen," he gasped between shivers.

Within seconds he'd pulled on his clothes from the day before, wishing he had something fresh and clean. He hurried downstairs, heading straight for the kitchen.

"Morning," he shouted.

"Shhhhh!"

"Sorry," he responded in a hushed tone. "I forgot there's a new baby in the house. Have you all seen her?" he asked, looking around the table at chubby, happy faces.

"I have a new sister."

Miles smiled at four-year-old Jacob. "I'll bet that makes you happy," he said, taking a seat at the table.

"Sure does. We have enough boys. We were gonna have more if'n Mama had another boy."

Releasing a chuckle, Miles looked at the eldest Barn's boy, Jeremy. The young man seemed nervous about something, actually, Miles thought, everyone seemed a bit quiet in respect to the night before.

"Is something wrong? I mean, everyone's so quiet."

"We're trying to let Mama sleep, aren't we, crew?" Hoss asked his family.

"I can understand that. Are Kelly and Abi still sleeping? They're usually up by eight at least," Miles looked from one staring face to another.

"What gives?" he asked. A quick and disturbing thought entered his mind and he jumped up from his chair, sending it crashing behind him.

Without waiting for an explanation, Miles took the stairs two at a time. He bolted into the nursery and found the crib empty, as well as the small bed against the far wall. They were gone. They had left him.

He glanced at the snow covered window edges and new fear filled him. How had she left? Was she walking in that storm with Kelly right this minute? What time last night did she leave? Were they freezing to death in some ditch — because he got cold feet?

"If anything happens to them, I'll never forgive myself," Miles said to Hoss as he entered the kitchen.

"I let her take the Jeep, least we could do. She had her mind made up to leave and I don't think anything would have stopped her."

"It's my fault. How stupid can I be? Did she mention where she intended to go? You think she made it in this storm? What if they landed in a ditch somewhere? A lone woman and a baby, she's got to be crazy."

"Stubborn maybe, I doubt crazy."

"What'd she say to you?" Miles asked, anxious for any information. "You know I'm supposed to be protecting them. How can I do that now? What if Trevor finds them before me?"

"Hold on, you're getting all riled up. I think she just needed some space. Maybe she and the child will disappear safely, no one will ever find them. You wanted them safe, well, that would be the best thing for them."

Miles shuffled to the frosted windows and looked out at the stormy white morning. "What about what's best for me?"

"Isn't that best for you, young man? I'll be honest with you, Anne and I overheard your conversation last night. We don't blame Abi one bit for leaving. My Anne said to keep out of it, but I'll tell you this much, if I'd said those words to my wife, she'd have high-tailed it in the opposite direction, too."

"We're not married."

"Oh, I had that figured out right away. But you know the woman has feelings for you as you do her and that baby. You want to throw it away, that's your business. But it seems to me that woman has been hurt enough—"

"You're right, Hoss," Miles interrupted. "I'd like to fix that. You have any idea where she went. She give you any kind of hint?" He watched Hoss thinking.

"She never said. Not a word."

"She must have said something. Think." His tone reflected the tension that had been building all night. "Maybe she mentioned a relative or friend? Maybe you saw which way she left."

"Son, there's only one way to leave, down that road. I can't see the turn-off, but think about it, she wouldn't have turned right to head back to Montana, so she must have turned left."

"What time did she leave?"

"About one this morning."

"Why didn't you wake me. You must have realized it wasn't right for her to be leaving alone. What if she landed in a ditch? What if—"

"You can what-if this thing to death and waste another hour. Or you could get your butt into my Suburban and chase after her."

"You mean it? Dang it, Hoss, why didn't you say so?" he asked, running toward the stairs to get his jacket. "You won't be stranded here without a vehicle, will you?"

"Naw, I still have my semi. Anne won't be driving for some time, so we can spare it for a short time. Make sure you bring it back."

"I will. Hoss?"

"Yup, young fella?"

"Thank you for everything. What color is the Jeep? You know the license plate number?"

"Its lime green, says LADYLUC."

"I should have guessed!" Miles said, a hint of humor returning to his voice. "One good thing about that, it'll be easy for me to spot. I could put an APB on it—"

"Now wait a minute. I didn't tell you that so you could scare the hell out of her by having her arrested."

Miles looked at Hoss, puzzled by his comment. "I'm not having her arrested. Dang, I'd never do that to her. I just want to tell her I'm sorry and I miss her and Kelly. I didn't

realize how much they meant to me until last night. I'd be lying if I said I didn't care, because I do."

"Well, that's more like it. You do that APB and have the little lady call us so we know she's alright."

"I'll do that, Hoss," Miles said, taking the keys from him. "She's in more danger than she can imagine. I allowed my personal feelings to get in the way of my job. If anything happens to either of them, I'll never forgive myself."

"I don't think anything is going to happen to them. My Mrs. and me have a strong feeling she is being protected."

"Protected?" he asked, uncertain what the large man meant.

"Like she has a guardian angel or a protector of sorts watching over her. My Anne is tuned into stuff like that. I've learned never to question it."

"I won't question it either, then, but I hope she's right. Abi could use a guardian angel right now." Miles took the stairs two at a time, entered the bedroom, and grabbed his jacket. He glanced around and found nothing else to take with him. He'd gotten used to the baby car seat and a diaper bag. The thought saddened him. He wondered if Kelly was babbling her sweet baby talk or sleeping. He wondered if Abi thought about him. Was she happy or sad? Was she facing terrible roads or were they still clear and dry? Was she safe or in danger?

He didn't want to care, but it was too late for that. He didn't want to admit it, but he'd fallen in love with Abi and Kelly. There he'd faced it. Now what was he going to do about it?

He had driven about an hour on ice-packed, nearly zero visibility roads. Miles had considered turning back nearly every mile or so, but the thought of Abi and Kelly out in the elements, alone, made him push on.

He felt responsible for her decision, as he should. She'd never have left had he not said the things he had. A deer ran across the road in front of him. Quickly he hit the brakes, and the car slid toward the animal. Miles abruptly turned the steering wheel and hit the brakes even harder. It sent the vehicle spinning in a complete circle, then stopped. He'd missed the deer and the metal guardrail. It left him shaking and all the more determined to find Abi.

Being alone for the first time in ages, Miles realized this gave him the opportunity to think. Most cases he'd solved required hours of solitude to brainstorm. He'd spent precious little on this case.

What solid evidence did they have against Trevor Madden? Last night Warrett had told him about the one fingerprint they lifted from the black bag found in his garage. It was Madden's. Yet, similar garbage bags were found with his prints on them, too. It was his garage, for Christ's sake.

As much as Miles believed Trevor had been responsible for the shit happening to Abi, something else was going on here. Something that everyone was overlooking, because of the distraction of Abi and Kelly's ordeal.

Maybe that's just it! Miles told himself. Abi and Kelly weren't the focus here, they were the decoy. As long as the police weren't concentrating on Trevor Madden, who

would be looking for someone setting him up? But set him up for what? Who would leave a dead fetus in his garage? Miles had a feeling Trevor knew nothing about it. Abi mentioned Madden's obsession with wanting a son. It would then seem unlikely Trevor would be involved with the death of a male fetus.

"So, where does that leave me?" Miles asked, slamming his palms on the steering wheel. Who would hate Madden enough to set him up? Abi? How far would a mother go to protect her daughter? Miles didn't like where his thoughts were going.

"Who else?" he asked out loud. Silence answered. There had to be someone besides Abi who hated him enough. Miles searched for the answer. Who could put a dead fetus in a black plastic bag? It would take immense nerve and a cold heart. Maybe heart wasn't the right word.

Trevor Madden didn't have many friends. But this wouldn't be a friend. What had Trevor gotten himself into?

His ex-wife, Kathy, seemed to be going on with her life. It appeared she had little to do with him.

So, who did that leave? Miles slowed down, sliding slightly down the steep hill. He hoped the weather would let up soon. In another thirty miles he'd be at Edmonton. He hoped Abi would stop there, considering the road conditions. He'd go hotel to hotel, if need be. But he'd find that green Jeep with the LADYLUC license plates before the night was over.

Miles brought his thoughts back to Trevor. Instead of wondering about Abi, Miles forced himself to change his way of thinking. Who wanted Madden in prison?

Miles worried about the options; Abi or Kathy. Chyna popped into his mind and for the first time he discovered some light. Why would Trevor want Chyna dead? An even stranger question, who would want Chyna dead and Trevor framed for murder? Maybe Trevor didn't send Chyna down that embankment. But why would he call and brag to Abi about it? To prove he was still in control, of course. But, that didn't mean he did it.

On the other hand, maybe Chyna knew something about Trevor and he had no choice but to silence her. Could it have been a separate incident and coincidental to the person trying to frame Trevor? Miles considered it a strong possibility. He'd call Warrett back and go over a few things with him.

It seemed to Miles that he'd never been more disconnected from a case before. Had Abi distracted him, or was there a lack of communication between him and the team? Scott Trent and he went way back, yet something seemed different, almost distant.

What had Scott said? Miles thought. The way the case was going one would have to believe a woman was the perp. That suggestion had stuck with Miles. Trevor Madden didn't have a good track record with women. That didn't make him a fetus killer or a little girl pervert, even if Miles almost hoped they'd prove it true.

A woman? Did they think it was Abi? How many of the guys thought he was involved with Abi? If that were true, they wouldn't give him the information, they may not think he'd be objective anymore. "Shit!"

Then there was that panty thing, which seemed nearly impossible for Miles to imagine it could be true. Trevor was an asshole without scruples, but, little girl undies

just might be stretching it a bit. As a detective, Miles had to be objective. There was no room for personal differences.

City lights shone ahead. Miles released a sigh of relief. Driving in blizzard conditions wasn't something he ever considered enjoyable.

Whirlwinds of snow whipped through nearly deserted streets. He took the first right and circled around the hotel lot, looking for Abi's Jeep. Nothing. He continued up the next block, hotel after hotel. After an hour he wondered if it made any sense to go through with it. Maybe he should have tried getting the office and check if Abi had any relatives in Canada.

A horn blared, jolting Miles from his reverie. He looked up at a green light and stepped on the gas. Another half-hour passed and weariness set in. Had Abi disappeared from his life? The thought brought a sting of tears to his eyes.

Ahead he noticed a lime Jeep parked inside an overhead parking stall, with head-bolt plug-in facility. He pulled next to the vehicle and stopped the engine. Stretching his jacket up around his ears, he stepped out of the Suburban. Cold, lashing wind tore at his face. The sudden drop in temperature caused him to gasp.

He literally ran to the back of the Jeep and wiped the icy, snow covered license plate with the elbow of his jacket. Ladyluc stared back at him.

Thank God. He'd found his girls. He glanced at the stall number and noted number twelve. He headed straight for the lobby, nearly frozen by the time he pushed open the front door.

"Howdy. You're braver than most."

Miles shook off the snow and wiped his feet before walking toward the full-figured woman behind the desk. "I think its more stupidity than courage. Dang, that's one heck of a storm. Hope you're not filled to the brim."

"Nope. Actually it's slow. Most people don't travel around here when they get wind of a storm coming. You Montanans just don't heed the warnings, eh."

Miles couldn't help chuckling. "Might say we're use to warnings, but we do what needs to be done, baring nothing. I'm Detective Rutledge, out of Great Falls," he said, flashing his badge for her. "Don't look so startled, it's nothing as serious as all that. I'm looking for a friend of mine."

"Lady, right? What you do, have a fight?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Well, a pretty lady with a redheaded little girl just arrived this morning. She looked like she'd been shedding a few tears. She in trouble with the law or—"

"No, Ma'am, it's personal. Would you feel at liberty to let me know which room she's in? I promise you I'm not violent and she won't be upset to see me."

"Just because you have a badge doesn't mean you can't be a wife-beater."

"I'm not her husband. Like I said, I'm her friend. I'm in charge of protecting her from the soon to be ex-husband. She got scared and ran last night." He watched the woman think it over, then nod.

"She's in room twelve. I notice anything suspicious and I'll call our boys. Get my drift, eh?"

"Yes, I get your meaning. Thank you." He turned and headed back to the front door, wishing he didn't have to go back out in the freezing blizzard.

Miles ran across the parking area and straight to unit number twelve. He stood under the overhang and knocked on the door. He realized the TV had been turned off and someone peaked toward the door from a slightly raised curtain.

The door swung open. "Hurry in," Abi said, opening it wide enough for him to step inside and quickly close it.

"Thank you for letting me in," he said, feeling as awkward as a boy asking a girl out for the first time. "I wasn't sure you would."

"I wasn't sure I would either."

She looked wonderful, in spite of the dark circles under her eyes, which revealed the little sleep she'd gotten lately. He glanced at the bed and his heart lunged at the sleeping angel. "Are you both okay?" he asked, feeling stupid.

"As good as can be expected. Why'd you follow?" she asked.

"You really think I wouldn't? You're my responsibility. It's my job to—"

"Get a different job, then. We don't want your protection anymore. We're going to blend into the Canadian population. Different names, different hair color, and even a different past. We're going to start a new life. Trevor won't ever see his daughter again, and I won't ever have to see him."

"I understand," Miles said, sliding out of his jacket and letting it drop to the floor. He watched as a piece of blonde hair brushed across her cheek. He wanted to slide it back behind her ear, but refrained. Her blue eyes betrayed sadness. "I missed you," he said, not realizing he'd spoken aloud until he heard the words.

She stood staring at him, unmoving.

He reached out his palms, and after a few seconds she placed her hands on his. "I'm sorry for what I said. I hurt you and Kelly, I didn't mean to."

"You don't have to apologize. I was reading way too much into things. They say women do that when they're on the rebound."

"Stop trying to analyze what you perceive to be wrong actions. You weren't to fault, I was. In all your studies, didn't they have a chapter or even semester on evaluating fault? You blame yourself for everything that happens to you. It's not always you."

"That's something I need to work on. Obviously there are a lot of things I need to work on."

"Start with me," he said, rubbing the top of her hands with his thumbs. She didn't move toward him, but she didn't move back either. "May I kiss you, Abi?" he asked, his voice low and soft. He stared into compelling, misty eyes.

She placed her palm on his stubble beard, then moved closer.

He wanted to pull her into his arms, but held still. Her warm breath brushed his cheek.

She moved within inches of his lips. Immediately his breathing increased. Her mere closeness excited him. He could only imagine ravishing her full lips until she begged for more.

"Yes," she whispered.

He gently moved his arms, encircling her, placing one hand in the small of her back. He looked at her, photographing her with his eyes. Ever so lightly, he brushed his lips across hers and a jolt of heat rushed through his veins. She responded by parting his lips ever so gently, touching him with the tip of her warm tongue.

"I've missed you, Abi," he murmured into her ear. "I'm so sorry for hurting you. I thought I'd lost you both. I'm scared to make a commitment, but I'm more scared of being without you. I want back in your lives. I want you. I know—"

"Shhh. Let's talk later," she said, taking his hand and leading him across the room.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Chyna came to a single, frightening conclusion; someone wanted her dead. She couldn't run if she had to. She couldn't prove it, but she had a feeling it wasn't Trevor Madden. Oh, he'd tried pulling it off when he had the chance, but something or someone else was behind this barrage of attacks.

Trevor wouldn't know she'd survived, unless he had a friend on the police force. Maybe Trevor was privy to more information than she'd been giving him credit.

"You okay?"

Chyna looked up as Harry crossed the room. He'd pulled on sweats and wore no shirt. She found it incredibly sexy. John wouldn't have walked around like that. He wore pajamas and that was only in the bedroom. He wouldn't have considered parading around in anything indecent in the house. Someone might be peeking in the windows.

"I've been wondering who wants me dead," Chyna finally said. "Think about it, there have been several attempts on my life. Trevor did try the first time, but this last time, I don't think it was him. It probably has nothing to do with Abi, and everything to do with me."

"If it wasn't Trevor, then who?" Harry asked.

Chyna fidgeted with the blanket edges. "Whose toes have I been stepping on without realizing it? I just don't have a clue. Do you think John's wife, in Chicago, found out about me? Chyna paused to gain control of her quivering voice. "Would she do anything to save her marriage? You said they have kids, all the more reason."

"I'm sorry, Chyna. I'm sure this has to be difficult," Harry said.

Chyna barely heard him. She leaned back. He remained sitting on the back edge of the bed.

He gently picked up her leg and stretched it across his thigh and massaged her toes. It felt incredibly good.

"I've been thinking about being dropped into the tub of water. I told you the person who carried me, wasn't very strong. I think it's haunting me because it felt awkward. You think it could have been a woman? It would account for the lack of conversation, too."

"You think John's other wife tried to kill you? I just don't see a woman trying something like this. Think about it, she's a mother of two. I already have someone checking her out. We'll even know where and what she was doing on the night in question. Besides, I still think it was professional."

"It has to be someone with a big score to settle. I keep trying to think of what I might know, or have seen, or have hurt for that person to want my life. It's not something little like a difference in opinion. I mean, dead is a big deal."

"Did John have any enemies?"

"I've asked myself that, too. But to be honest, I really didn't know much about his business or associates. I never thought about it before. I never asked, he never told me. I really don't know much about John. That's obvious, huh?"

"Don't be so hard on yourself."

"Do you think he put a contract out on me?" Tears filled Chyna's eyes.

"I wish I had an answer for you, but I don't."

She welcomed the attention he gave her other toes. It seemed strange to have a man massaging her feet. "That feels so good," she confided.

"Great, let me roll you over and I'll give your back and shoulders a rub-down, too."

"You don't have to. I'm sure you have better things to do with your time than babysit me."

"It's my job to keep you alive. If you want to call it babysitting, fine. I make it a habit to massage all the women I protect. It's a job perk."

She could tell by his humorous tone and smirk on his face he was teasing. She smiled back at Harry, allowing him freedom to roll her onto her stomach. She glanced at the nightstand and noticed a picture of Harry and his wife. They looked happy together. She turned her head the other direction. "It feels so good to be off my back."

"You need to tell me when you're feeling stiff. I don't know unless you tell me."

"I hate to be such a bother. I'm not used to being taken care of. It's not my style."

"I'll bet it's not. Well, think of this as a vacation, you might enjoy it."

Chyna smiled, then closed her eyes at the heavenly massaging of her neck. She moaned softly, knowing he probably smirked to himself. "You could do this for a living and be a rich man."

"I learned to massage Janet. She said it made her feel loved."

Silence grew between them. She didn't know what to say, so she remained silent.

"Didn't you and John share your work day with each other?" Harry asked.

"I never thought about it. He never seemed to want to talk about work with me. I always thought it was because I didn't understand much about designing buildings. I thought our marriage was okay. We had an arrangement that allowed us both to do what our jobs demanded, yet we were also a couple. Compatible, our friends and family called it."

"Sounds lonely."

"Something was missing, I just didn't know what." She relaxed as Harry moved his hands up her bare back. His massaging performed miracles. He moved forward when he talked, his breath brushed across her skin, sending sensual signals to her body.

"I'm not getting fresh, but I'm going to continue this massage down. Relax and enjoy," he said.

She heard the huskiness in his voice, but didn't answer. She nearly cried out in pleasure as his magical fingers kneaded and soothed her buttocks and thighs. Her breathing couldn't help but increase. "Geez Louise, you should be arrested for molesting an invalid," she whispered.

"You might want to wait until I'm done before arresting me."

She liked his play with words and lightheartedness. Without warning, he rolled her onto her back. His bare chest caused her to gasp as his muscles rippled from the effort. He lowered his face near hers. She gazed into his ebony eyes, imploring him to kiss her.

Lower...lower...lower he moved his head, bringing his lips closer to hers. She could almost feel the softness of his lips, yet he hesitated, resisted, then drew her mouth into his. Warm, soft, and coaxing.

His moan excited her. He'd tried to resist, but he couldn't any more than she could. She kissed him back, sliding her hand behind his neck, pulling him into her.

Without lifting his lips from hers, he moved massaging fingers beneath her oversized tee shirt, plying the skin until they moved across Chyna's firm, soft breasts. Her nipples hardened and surged at the intimacy of his expert touch. She allowed him to pull the shirt over her head.

She lay back as Harry moved his lips across her cheek, down her neck, then lower until he captured a breast with his mouth.

He moaned softly, it excited her. He tasted and licked, and kissed the soft skin, then returned his trail of kisses until he captured her mouth once again.

Her breasts brush against the hardness of his chest. Her body came alive, something she hadn't felt for years. She wanted Harry to make love to her. He continued massaging her skin; arms, neck, shoulder, breasts, waist, hips, thighs. He ignited her flesh everywhere he touched. She couldn't get enough.

He captured her mouth and kissed her deep and demanding. She eagerly responded, wanting more and more. When he slipped his finger into her moist womanhood, she bolted. "Stop, Harry. I'm sorry..." she paused, "I know I encouraged you, but I'm not ready for this."

"I want you. I really do—"

"Don't, Harry. I need your support and protection. I can't handle more right now," she whispered, hoping he wouldn't press the issue.

He kissed her deep and long, then sat back. Without a word he pulled her shirt over her head and helped her adjust it back in place.

"Thank you."

"I never take advantage of a lady," he said, stretching out along side her, pulling her close.

Chyna closed her eyes, content and safe in Harry's arms.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Trevor glanced at the rear-view mirror. A black Dodge had been following him since he'd left Great Falls. It could be an undercover cop, or it could be, he didn't want to think about it.

The weather got worse the farther north he drove. Finally, he stopped at a nowheresville hotel to wait out the storm.

He found the clerk rude, the room unbearable, and even the damn TV rolled with snow as unclear as the storm outside. Exhausted, it didn't matter much. He buried himself into the blankets and shut the world out.

"We warned you, Madden!"

Trevor struggled to wake. He opened his eyes and found himself blinded by a blast of light from a flashlight. "What the hell?" he asked, struggling to see the two men standing at the foot of his bed. He caught a glimpse of a gun, his skin prickled with fear.

"We don't play games. You didn't hold up your end of the bargain."

"Listen, guys, you're misunderstanding me here. I have no intentions of backing down. I almost have the deed to the ranch in hand. But, I have a runaway bride, you might say. I'll get her back and everything will be back to normal."

"You missed your meeting. Skab is pissed."

"I was in jail, Arty. Pretty damn hard to call and let you know. They might have traced it. Understand me, I'm not backing out. I need a couple weeks to get my personal life back in order."

"You wouldn't be stringing us along, now would you?"

"Hell no. I'm telling you the truth, Wayne" he said, sitting, then leaning his back against the head board.

"Then tell us, Madden, why is your wife shackled up in Canada with a detective on the police force? Does she know your contacts? Does she know names and phone numbers? Is she in protective custody so you can turn state's evidence against us? Maybe you're some fricking undercover agent, too."

"That's a bunch of bullshit and you know it! She doesn't know jack shit about my connection with Skab. She was never a part of my business. How do you know she's in Canada? Where?" Nerves gripped him like a steel bear trap.

"She has more lives than a cat!"

"You touch one hair on her head and I'll—"

"What about the baby girl? You worried we might hurt her? You'd be grateful, wouldn't you? You're sick, Madden. No way would I put my pregnant wife in a hotel because she's carrying a girl child instead of a boy."

"Who the hell told you that? My personal business is none of your business."

"That's where you're wrong. We don't like loose cannons."

"What the hell are you talking about? I've done nothing to jeopardize the operation," Trevor said, his voice loud and unnerved.

"There's a little matter of a black bag and little girl panties." Arty shouted back.

"You assholes should never have threatened me with that shit. You realize the police put me in jail? I didn't need a warning. I had things under control. Now I'm facing a possible trial on charges of murder and child molestation. How the hell am I supposed to get this deal on, if you're compromising my position. I won't be a damn bit of good to you if I'm in prison." Trevor released a forceful breath of frustration.

"We had nothing to do with either. Someone else set that up, if you were set up."

"Bullshit!"

"I'm telling you, Skab had nothing to do with it. You need to get your shit together, man. Don't you realize this all calls attention to you? That bit of news hit national coverage. You're in a deep well with two feet of water. You'll drown yourself for sure."

"Damn it, Arty, those charges are going to be dropped. I had nothing to do with that dead fetus. Shit, it makes me sick to think about it." Trevor reached for a cigarette and lit up. He took a long, steady drag.

"What about those panties, you disgusting piece of shit?"

Trevor leaped toward Wayne, heard the cock of Arty's gun and froze in place. "No need for that and you know it. I'm solid. I have a deal with Skab. You give me two weeks and I'll come through. You leave the folks and my sister's family alone. Now tell me where the hell my wife has gone off to," he snapped, sitting back on the bed.

"You really don't know, do you?" Arty asked, sliding his gun back into the shoulder holster. "She ran from you and she even managed to run from that detective, for a time anyway."

"She did? How'd you keep track of her?" Trevor asked, impressed and even a bit scared by the ability of these low-lives.

"Matter of a micro-chip sliced into the kid's pacifier. She may change cars, but she takes that damn thing everywhere she goes."

"Clever, if I must say so. Well, where is she?" Trevor asked, pulling the blanket over his chest, the room had grown chilly.

"She's shackled up with the detective in a hotel room in Edmonton. Wiley said they're socked-in big time with ice, fog, and one hell-of-a snowstorm. They'll stay put for some time."

"Kinda comforting to know your wife is alone with some detective, screwin' night and day. Gives ya a warm, glowing feeling, don't it, Madden?"

Trevor shot up from the bed and grabbed Wayne by the jacket. "Shut your fucking mouth, Wayne. He's nothing more than protection."

"Whoa, Madden. A little touchy there," Arty said, his gun back in hand.

Trevor released his grip on Wayne. Staring him down, Trevor sat back on the bed.

"There's the matter of your sister-in-law," Arty said.

"Chyna, what about her? She had an accident. Shit I didn't get a chance to help her," Trevor wondered how they knew anything about Chyna.

"Well, that's not exactly the way we see it. That little piece was following you for days. Even had your trailer under surveillance. You know anything about that?"

Trevor's veins grew cold. What didn't these bastards know? "She couldn't have learned anything about our deal. If she had, believe me, she'd have turned me in as fast as a fart in the wind. No love lost between us."

"Maybe she's the one setting you up, ever think of that?" Wayne suggested.

"She's dead. Cold as ice. She can't really hurt me now."

"Ever think she set it up before she died?"

"Naw, she had balls, but they weren't that big. She was trying to protect Abi—"

"Protect your wife? From what, you?" Arty asked.

Suddenly Trevor realized how odd that sounded. "Well, not exactly. You see, Chyna didn't think Abi and I should be together. The conniving bitch did her best to break us apart. If she followed me, it was to scare me into leaving Abi alone."

"Well, you took care of her, didn't you, Trevor?" Wayne asked. "She's no longer a threat, that's what counts. Whatever she knew went to a fiery grave with her. You'd better hope she didn't talk to anyone."

"Doesn't exactly look like you have everything in control, does it, Trevor?" Arty asked. "Any other loose ends out there?"

"No, damn it! I'm telling you, my attorney, Osthorn is good and he'll get those charges dropped. As for Abi, I can handle her."

"Suppose you didn't hear that Osthorn was in a head-on collision? Struck a tree and it killed him instantly."

Trevor stared at Wayne. His snide expression made Trevor want to punch him. The man stunk like cheep beer and it gagged Trevor's senses.

"Why the hell did you kill him for?" Trevor asked, shaking his head in disbelief. "He was going to prove me innocent. He has connections in my county. The judge is his brother. Hell, you just put my ass in jail." A cold sweat washed over him.

"You need to relax a bit," Arty said, taking a step closer. "Can't have that loose cannon back, can we? Skab wants you to know that if you decide to turn on him, you'll regret the day you were born. There won't be a family member left alive to see you buried. That includes the bitch wife in Canada."

"Ain't killin' the kid, though," Wayne added. "Too young to know a thing. Besides, you don't give diddly about the little girl anyway. Only one left livin' will be the one

you didn't want. How's that for incentive not to cross us?" Wayne asked, pulling a straight-backed chair toward the bed and straddling it backwards.

"When you assholes going to get it through your heads? I'm not crossing you, haven't thought about crossing you, and I'm doing nothing but getting my business in order. Now get the hell out of here so I can get some sleep." He hoped he sounded calm and in control.

"Sure, Madden. You want two weeks, you got them," Arty said, putting the gun away for the second time. "Have the deed for the ranch in hand or we'll get it from ole' pappy ourselves. He'll sell to us or die trying not to. Choice is yours."

"It doesn't need to be this way, and you know it. I've come through every time," Trevor pointed out, pissed with the strong-handed, threatening way they were treating him.

"Get one thing clear, Madden. We don't screw around. You're in or you're out," Wayne said, teetering on his chair. "I don't like you, so it would suit me fine if you're out."

"Listen you son-of-a-bitch—"

"You listen. Two weeks. We'll be back," Wayne said, standing, then slamming the chair to the floor. "I look forward to cuttin' out your blue balls and shoving them down your throat. Keep that in mind two weeks from today."

"You tell anyone about our arrangement?" Arty asked, leaning closer.

Trevor stared at the emotionless man. "I'm not stupid, asshole. I've told no one. I get the ranch and trucking business and you get your Montana drug and kiddy porn distribution center. We both get what we want. Got no need to tell anyone."

"Good. Glad to hear it. Here's something to take the edge off," Arty said, tossing a small white packet on the bed. "Remember where it comes from and that there's an endless supply if you behave yourself."

Trevor grabbed up the packet and swallowed hard. The men left as quickly as they had come, leaving the door wide open. "Bastards!" He jumped up and slammed the door closed. He shivered from the blast of cold air and snow that entered his room. It had been chilly before, now it was deadly cold. He jumped back into bed, took a long drag on his cigarette, then smashed it out in the ashtray next to his bed.

He'd gotten himself in deep this time. Too deep, he thought burrowing himself under the covers. He still had the packet clutched in his palm. He reached under the bed and fumbled around until he felt a small leather pouch beneath his fingertips.

Flipping the reading light on, Trevor tapped the contents of the packet onto the small, glass square. He created two thin lines of fine, white powder with a razor blade, took the straw and sniffed one into each nostril. The hit was powerful. Immediately he felt the warm rush. He lay back, basking in tingling sensations. He needed that.

He wanted to forget about everything, no problems only bliss. But no matter how good the hit, his mind wouldn't stop thinking about the mess he'd gotten into. Maybe he should find Abi and stay in Canada. Hell, that wouldn't work, Skab's thugs would find him there, too. He knew it. As soon as the storm let up, he'd head for Edmonton. He'd find that bitch and drag her back if he had to.

Trevor shook his head and slight nausea gripped him. Slowly it passed. He shivered, from the cold or fear, he wasn't sure. Abi would take him back, and she'd let him screw her. If not, he had the kid to bargain with. She was too young, but Abi wouldn't know that. He'd have Abi pregnant before they got back to Montana.

He knew it was wrong to like little girls. Hell, that's how he got mixed up with Skab in the first place. He had connections and Trevor found he couldn't stay away. Then he'd started sniffin' a little cocaine and bingo, he'd had the best and worst times of his life.

The shit kept getting more expensive all the time. He'd hocked his entire antique guns and Civil War memorabilia. It only lasted for a while. He'd borrowed and stole all he could from the ranch, but that didn't quench his lust, either.

Now he was in deep. Only recently he'd turned to his own daughter. She didn't cost anything. She wasn't willing like Skab's little whores. She was more than innocent and he had to be careful. He'd gone slow and had taught her a thing or two. He could tell she didn't like it and that pissed him off. She should be more than willing to make her daddy happy.

Next time he wasn't going to hold back. He'd take her and show her the pleasures of a man. Yes, he'd be her first. She'd be good, too, he told himself.

A twinge of guilt washed over him. She was his daughter. He wanted her. But he wanted her to want him, too. He feared rejection.

Trevor realized he didn't even want a woman anymore. Their hairy, large bodies appalled him. Little firm tits excited him far more than fatty, sagging breasts. Some called it sick, but he realized it was merely preference. Skab's little girls enjoyed giving pleasure, so did his little boys. Trevor found no interest in boys.

Sleep eluded him. Thinking about those little girls had made him horny. How would a jury react if this came out in court? Trevor couldn't help but worry. He should never have hidden those panties in his nightstand. "Shit!" Nothing was going right.

Instead of a hazy pleasure, a burning sensation tingled through his veins. What had that bastard Arty given him? Fear, like never before, washed over Trevor.

Naked, he dove out of bed, falling to the floor. He struggled to get up, but the room spun, like a freaking merry-go-round. He noticed an athletic bag beside the fallen chair.

Pulling himself, Trevor reached over and unzipped the small, black bag and emptied the contents on the floor. A sharp pain gripped his gut and he grabbed his stomach and moaned. Several little white packets caught his attention. A good dozen videos lay in a heap. He picked one up, struggled to focus, then read the title, Daddy's Little Girl. Like a hot potato, he dropped it and grabbed another reading, Little Girl Tricks, and slammed it to the floor.

A pair of pink striped panties caught his attention. The silk felt good between his fingers. He brought them to his nose, they smelled like a little girl, soft and fresh. They brought a smile to his lips. He closed his eyes, allowing the black abyss to swallow him whole.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Abi positioned three pillows on the floor and slipped Kelly onto the soft little bed. She glanced back at Miles. He stood motionless, watching. She slowly pulled her sweatshirt over her head, standing naked before him. Desire reflected in his gaze. Her skin prickled as though he touched every inch of her with his lips.

He dropped his shirt to the floor, followed quickly by his shoes, socks, jeans, and finally his shorts. Boldly he stood naked before her.

Lean, muscular and tan, she was breathless just looking at him. Suddenly she felt self-conscious of her not so firm body and crossed her arms across her full breasts.

"Don't. Please, don't. They're beautiful just as they are."

Abi dropped her arms, feeling somewhat conscious of her changed body. "I wasn't thinking. The baby...I'm not as shapely as I once was."

"You have no idea how beautiful you look. Believe me, you have no need to want to cover up. I like what I see," he said, huskiness gripping his words.

"Well, I like what I see, too. You sure about this?" she asked, hoping he wouldn't back out this time.

"I'm sure. But—"

"I'm being too forward as before. I'm sorry," she said, crossing her arms over her bare breasts.

"No, that's not it. We should talk about a few things. I know how you feel about the past, but there are a few things you should know. It's not easy to explain. I mean, I want to tell you—"

"Miles, please don't. I would rather you keep whatever is in your past, in the past. You don't owe me any explanations or any confessions. Our relationship started the day we met. That's what's important. People always seem to carry the baggage of their life with them. They should learn to throw the garbage away. As soon as I'm divorced from Trevor, that's exactly where I'm throwing him!" She couldn't help giggling.

He walked toward her. Her breathing increased, sheer anticipation caused her body to shiver. "Love me, Miles, no questions, no hesitations, and no commitments. I need you."

"I need you too, Abi. I don't ever want to lose you or Kelly, that much I do know now. It's just there is something you need to know about—"

A knock at the door startled them both. She rushed for cover under the blankets. Miles pulled on his jeans, then hurried to look through the window blinds. He quickly grabbed the front door open.

"Hurry on in before you freeze to death," he said.

Abi noticed their visitor was the friendly woman from the front desk.

"I'm sorry to be botherin', but there was a fella askin' on you two. I told him you wasn't here, and suggested he check elsewhere. I noticed he drove around the lot looking at cars. Just thought you ought to know."

"Thank you. We'll be leaving. Since Abi paid for the night, would you mind if we leave the lights and TV on so it won't look like we've left?"

"That's fine. Where you folks headin' in this storm? You'd be smarter to stay put. That fella left, so it's my guess he believed me."

"Can't take any chances. The man might be dangerous. Don't provoke him if he comes back."

"I understand. You folks drive careful."

"We're leaving the Jeep. I'll settle up with you for parking when I return. If I don't come back, would you see that it's returned to the owner? Name and address is in the glove compartment."

"You're welcome to leave it parked with no charge. Heck business isn't exactly boomin' these days."

"That's why I'm happy to pay. We'll square up another time."

Abi listened, realizing Miles nearly pushed her out the door with his urgent tone. A gust of cold air followed after the woman left. Abi sprang out of bed and rescued Kelly from the drafty floor.

"We're leaving?" she asked, wishing they hadn't been interrupted. She still yearned for his touch.

"I'm afraid so. If it's Trevor, it's only a matter of time before he finds us."

"I think we should head back," Abi said, hooking her bra.

"What?"

"Whoever it is wouldn't expect us to be going back, would he? No," she answered for him. "Then that's what we should do. We have family and friends there. I can't help but believe we'd be safer." She could tell he thought her suggestion over.

"Maybe you're right. I wouldn't expect us to be going back either. There are safe houses we could go to. There really isn't all that much time before the hearing."

"I don't think this has anything to do with the hearing. I can't figure it out, but I'm convinced something else is going on." She stopped talking and watched Miles pull on his socks and shoes. His muscles rippled as he moved.

"You'd better hurry. We need to leave as soon as possible."

Abi recognized the tense lines around his eyes and jaw. He'd changed from the hot lover to a cold detective. "Don't you think we should get a few hours sleep first? Whoever is checking out other hotels and motels, he'll be stopping for the night soon

anyway. He's already checked this place and moved on. Well, I think he'll get some sleep at one of the other places and continue his search in the morning. I'm sure he figures no fool would go out on a night like this, not on purpose anyway." He walked toward her. She immediately went silent.

"A couple hours would do us some good. I'm so tired I can hardly stand up."

"If we set the alarm for four hours, we'll still leave here early enough to get a head start. What do you think?" she asked, realizing for the first time how really tired he looked. He sat on the edge of the bed and slipped his shoes and socks back off. She undid her bra, then slipped her tee shirt back on.

"You want me to sleep on the couch?" he asked, his tone drained.

"No. That's silly and you won't sleep that well anyway. I'll behave myself. You may sleep with Kelly and me." She smiled at his relieved expression.

"For a while I thought you only wanted me for my body."

Abi smiled. "I do." He chuckled as he turned off the light. She rolled to her right side facing the wall, with Kelly nestled into her.

"Mind if I snuggle in close, I'm freezing?"

"We don't mind at all," Abi whispered. She remained still as Miles moved his body into her backside curves. He finally settled down with his arm draped across her waist, his hand resting at Kelly's feet.

It seemed natural, maybe too natural to Abi. She wondered what it'd be like to end each day with such security and intimacy. She wondered if ten years from now would find her sleeping this way with Miles. She couldn't help but hope so.

When had those feelings developed? How could it have, with all the problems with Trevor? A psychologist knew better than to rush into a relationship. Getting to know a person of the opposite sex, then letting that relationship develop, way before sex became a part of that relationship was the correct way to go about it. How many times had she told a client those exact words?

Her relationship with Miles seemed to head in all directions. They barely knew each other, yet they both seemed bent on making commitments way beyond their readiness. They made demands of each other, then backed down in fear.

Abi decided to let her busy mind rest. She'd relax in Miles's arms, if only for this one night. If they made it back to Great Falls, they'd face the future as best they could. She decided her therapy for couples was definitely going to take on a whole new approach. She'd explore the emotional demands, the emotional direction, and the emotional needs before making any decisions on the couples' future.

She allowed her heavy lids to close. Miles's arm tightened around her and she smiled.

The alarm sent them both bolting upright and Kelly crying from the jolting sound.

"I'm sorry, I never thought about that dang thing scaring everyone half to death," Miles said, slamming at button after button, trying to get it to shut off.

Abi reached over and pressed a switch and the annoying clanging stopped. "Men," she mumbled, lying back down to soothe Kelly. Within seconds she'd taken a full breast and nursed. Abi smiled as Miles snuggled his body up behind her. She glanced back at him and realized he'd rested his head on his palm, and watched them. She liked the intimacy.

"She's a hungry one," he whispered.

"She's smart enough to take what she wants," Abi answered, baiting him.

"Don't talk so flip. If we had the time I'd show you how I can take what I want."

Abi smiled. "Oh, you sound so macho when you talk like that." He nibbled the back of her neck, then stretched her t-shirt to bare her shoulder before placing soft kisses over every inch.

"I give you half an hour to stop that," she stated in a husky voice. She adjusted Kelly to her other breast, wishing it was Miles mouth on her flesh. It made her flush at the thought.

"If I had that much time you can be sure I wouldn't be stopping. I'll get a quick shower while you finish here. You two can shower while I warm the car and get us ready to leave."

Abi nodded, wishing they didn't have to leave the warm, safe room. She needed more sleep and knew Miles did, too. She heard the shower running and felt tempted to burst into the room and join him. She didn't.

He seemed determined to tell her something from his past. She really wanted him to let it go. Couples should never feel a need to tell everything. His insistence got her to wondering what could possibly be so important. It seemed to affect his wanting to make love to her. Was he impotent? Lord, she never thought of that. It would be a dreadful thing to admit. Yet, she remembered the hardness she felt against her thigh. That didn't speak of failure.

As Kelly finished breakfast, the shower stopped. Abi pulled her shirt down and placed a kiss on her daughter's forehead. "What a blessing you are," she whispered. Rosy, chubby cheeks and pouting lips made Abi smile. No one could have described what being a mother felt like. There were no words to express the euphoria, the pride, the incredible sense of happiness it gave her.

"It's all yours," Miles said, grabbing his socks and shoes and heading for the chair at the far end of the room. He peeked through the blinds for an unsettled length of time.

"No boogy man?"

"Looks like a winter wonderland. We got about another foot of snow. We'll take the Jeep instead. It has chains and four-wheel drive. We just might need both."

"Maybe we should wait it out. Miles, we're running like outlaws. If we stayed here, what could he do to us? We go out there and we might be making it easier for him."

"That's occurred to me. But, I think we're making it easier for him if we stay. We keep on the move and he has to keep moving, too. I'm starting to believe there's something else going on, just like you suggested last night. Have you been thinking about other reasons or people who would benefit from your death?"

Abi picked up a naked daughter and held her against her chest. "I should have been more aware of what was going on around me. But, I was so depressed and angry with Trevor, I never paid much attention. All I wanted was my daughter to be born healthy, and my husband to take us home and give our lives together a chance. I put all my energy into that sole goal." Her throat constricted with emotions.

"I'm sorry to keep making you relive the hell you've been through this past year, but we're missing something. You know of any deals Trevor might have been involved with that could have gone sour? Was he mixed up in anything drug related? Was he trying to change his dad's will? Was he getting along with his folks?"

"Well, that's plenty to think about. I don't know of any deals Trevor was involved with. As for the rest, I'll give it some thought while I shower and see if I can think of anything." She quickly headed for the bathroom and closed the door. His questions made her nervous. Abi wasn't sure why.

As the water worked its therapy against her skin, she considered something she hadn't given much thought to before. Trevor had several strange phone calls at the hospital. What had the man said? She asked herself, as she soaped Kelly with her fingertips, resulting in precious chortles. Absently rinsing her daughter, Abi decided to tell Miles about the calls. Maybe they meant something.

Who could possibly want Kelly and her dead? How many times did Abi need to ask herself that gruesome question? She absently washed as she thought over all that had happened.. Kelly lay content, wrapped in a towel on the carpet.

What if Trevor had died in that accident, instead of Chyna? And if she and Kelly were eliminated, who would benefit? A cold chill traveled across her body. Who would indeed? Trevor's folks would for one. And his brother and sister-in-law would for another. And Chyna would have, if she were alive.

"That's it!" Abi cried out loud. She stopped the water with a hard slam to the shower knob.

"Hey, you need help?" Miles asked from a slightly opened door.

"That's it, Miles. I've..." She suddenly realized he stood in the doorway, staring at her nakedness. It made her hot all over.

"Woman, you continue to flaunt yourself in front of me and I might have to ravish you pretty soon."

She quickly grabbed a towel and wrapped it around herself, stepped out of the shower, then lifted a happy Kelly into her arms. No doubt her cheeks blazed crimson.

"Hand her to me and I'll dry and dress her," he offered.

Abi smiled, grateful for the help. "I think I've thought of something."

"Well, don't keep me in suspense," he said, walking with Kelly to the bedroom.

"I remember two phone messages I took for Trevor when I was in the hospital. The first one said; Tell Madden he can't back out. He'll know what that means. The other call was from a different male voice. Tell Madden the meeting's on and don't be late. Skab would be pissed." She noticed Miles' back stiffen. "I've considered the implications but I've come up empty. Does it mean anything to you?"

"Damn right! Skab is the missing piece."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning we finally have what we've been working so hard for. We have finally found out who Skab's connection is. I would never have guessed Trevor to be that stupid. Yet, I don't know why I hadn't thought of it. Abi, we need to get out of here. This isn't merely a husband's jealousy anymore."

"Then what is it?" Fear filled her. The controlled Miles looked nervous and edgy.

"Drug trafficking. I know this sounds impossible, but if Trevor is mixed up with Skab, he's in heavy shit with Canadian mob drug smuggling."

"I don't think Trevor would have anything to do with drugs. I would have..." she paused, then continued. "That would explain the late nights. The sudden phone calls and his trips for cattle. And even the arguments he had with his folks, that he never let me in on. You think they knew?"

"There's a good chance. Not much happens in a small town that doesn't get out. Your business is everyone's business. Tell me, did Trevor have a sudden increase in income? I'm not talking pocket change here."

"He didn't let me in on our finances. Said I had to know only one thing, if I needed something he'd decide if I needed it and would buy it. That all changed with Kelly, but I never did see our checking account. I don't even think it was in my name."

"How did you ever let him have such control over everything? I mean, you're so together and independent. I just don't see you letting anyone take so much control over you."

"I thought he loved me and I didn't want to disappoint him. I thought he wouldn't think I trusted him to take care of me if I questioned our money status. I thought, if I truly loved him I'd be the best wife I could; obedient and loving. I look at it now and realize I'd been the biggest fool of all."

"Don't say that, Abi."

She held still as he moved his palm across her cheek. He leaned forward and placed a warm, gentle kiss on her lips. She responded ever so slightly until his kiss deepened, taking her breath away. He pulled her into his arms and held her. She needed Miles. She needed him desperately. Of course she wouldn't tell him that. He needed to adjust to wanting and hopefully needing her and Kelly.

"Let's get out of here," Miles said, striding across the room. "I'll warm up the car. You get the two of you bundled for a cold one. Take the comforter and the blanket off the bed."

Abi didn't comment, nor ask. She didn't waste any time slipping on the boots and parka Hoss gave her. She couldn't help wondering how Anna and little Abi were doing.

"Dang, it's ghastly out there," Miles announced, stomping his feet at the door. "A literal white-out. We'll give it a try for a few miles. If we don't drive out of it, we might have to turn back."

"Maybe we need to wait it out until it clears?"

"We're in some serious shit here, Abi. If we can, we need to get the hell out of here."

There was no questioning Miles, his tone said it all. He rushed outside, slamming the door behind him. Fear filled her. If anything happened to Miles or Kelly...why hadn't she remembered the phone calls before?

Bundling Kelly into the blanket and grabbing the comforter, Abi rushed out of the hotel room. She slid into the front seat, grateful Miles had pulled up in front of the room. "Dang, its cold. You know, if things weren't so serious, this is actually beautiful," she said, looking around, amazed at the crystal virgin wonderland.

"I agree. I only hope the roads underneath aren't icy. You left the TV going?"

"Yes. How exactly could Trevor be connected to drug traffickers, Miles?" Abi asked. He swallowed, then adjusted the rear-view mirror.

"Montana is involved in more drug deals than anyone would believe. Everyone puts blinders on, thinking we're the last frontier and all that. Who would guess? That's why it's happening. More and more, I'm afraid to admit. We've been working almost two years on...Abi, I think it's best I don't tell you any more. For your own good."

"Don't pull this secret cop stuff on me. I'm a big girl and I'm involved, whether I want to be or not. If I'm going to protect myself and Kelly, I need to know the truth." She waited while Miles struggled whether to confide or not.

"I'm not so sure, Ab."

"What if something happened to you? I wouldn't have any idea who to or not to trust. I don't know who the enemy is. I trust you, period."

"Well, I have to admit you make a strong point. You ever think of becoming a lawyer?"

"No, but if it'll convince you to tell me what on earth I'm up against, sure, I'll sign up for classes today." A slight smirk edged into his otherwise somber expression.

"Skab has developed a regular drug underground railroad. He's every bit as powerful and ruthless as any drug lord in South America. Trevor must not have known what he was getting into when he got mixed up with that bunch. Thing is, they don't let you quit. My guess is they want his cooperation or they'll kill his family."

"Does that mean he tried to get out? Maybe he's following us to warn us or to protect us from this Skab." She really didn't believe that for a moment. Trevor would be more worried about his own ass, not hers.

"Is that what you want?"

"What?" she asked, unsure what Miles was asking.

"Do you want Trevor to come and rescue you from the bad guys? Is that what you're hoping?"

Abi closed her eyes a second, tossing his comment around her brain like a boomerang. "You aren't serious, are you? Let me make this clear to you, Miles Rutledge. I do not want Trevor Madden in my life. I do not love Trevor. Other than Kelly, I wish my relationship with Trevor never happened. My life will be so much better, the moment that man is out of my life. Have I made myself clear?" she asked, watching him digest the barrage of statements.

"Hang on, Abi!" Miles shouted.

She clutched Kelly to her chest, immediately chastising herself for being in such a hurry that she had not grabbed Kelly's safety seat and strapped her in. The Jeep swerved to the right, nearly sliding into the ditch. Miles's corrections caused them to slide sideways down the road, then snap back to the right, spinning them in a circle. Abi held her breath and clutched Kelly with protective arms.

She wasn't sure when they entered the ditch, but they seemed to be picking up speed as the Jeep tilted down the steep embankment. Snow pounded against the windshield and she forced herself not to scream.

Abi clutched Kelly, leaning over her protectively. The weight of Miles stretched around her, as he shielded her with his body. She clung to him, sandwiching Kelly between them. A sudden jolt caused her to scream. Glass crashed and the sound of metal against stone told her they'd reached their destination. Snapping back against the seat, Abi prayed, then silence settled in. Black, frightening silence.

Chapter Thirty

Chyna woke alone. She looked around the quiet room, searching first the small kitchen, then living area before turning toward the vacant pillow beside her.

She picked up the yellow paper and read: *I posted a car outside the apartment building. I hate leaving you alone. I had to go to the office. Business as usual. I'll be back in about an hour, hopefully before you wake. I left you a pill and glass of water on the nightstand. Be sure to take it when you wake, doctor's orders. Thank you for the snuggle last night. Harry*

Chyna smiled. "You're welcome," she whispered, then wondered what time he left. She was sick of being in bed. If there was ever a time she needed to toughen up, it was now.

Easing herself upright, Chyna slowly pulled herself toward the headboard until she leaned her back against it. A good start she thought, panting slightly from the effort.

She reached over and pulled out the drawer on the nightstand, hoping for at least a book to read. A packet of pictures seemed the only item of interest. She hesitated, afraid she might be infringing on Harry's privacy. Minutes passed as she held the unopened packet.

"This is ridiculous," she said, tossing it back into the drawer, then slamming it shut. She took a good look at the large room that created kitchen, living room and bedroom. It suddenly occurred to her that it appeared impersonal, almost sterile. Something didn't feel quite right. Why hadn't she noticed before?

She glanced at the pill, then without giving it much thought, Chyna opened the drawer and grabbed the packet of pictures. She opened it quickly, before changing her mind.

Nothing could have prepared Chyna for the picture in front of her. She shook off the lingering fuzziness, clearing her mind before looking at the picture again. But her mind hadn't been playing games with her. Why would Harry have a picture of her observing Trevor's house?

The second picture clearly caught Trevor walking toward Abi's shed. He carried enough supplies to set her place off with a boom.

The next picture caused Chyna to gasp. Abi, Kelly, and Miles Rutledge walked toward a car. Why would Harry have that?

Chyna paused and confusion grasped her. She paged through the remaining pictures. One after the other exposed Trevor's actions over the past month, or maybe longer she really didn't know.

The final picture caused a lump to swell in Chyna's throat. Harry and Trevor were shaking hands.

"How could that be?" Chyna asked in a whisper. It didn't make sense. Then Lord, Trevor probably knows she's alive. Was he the one who tried drowning her? She'd have recognized his voice had he said anything. But why would Harry have helped her from the wreck, if he was working with Trevor?

"To gain my confidence?" she answered herself. What could he possibly think she knew? Did Trevor have something Harry wanted? Maybe incriminating pictures or evidence, of what? Why would anyone think Trevor would confide or give her anything? They hated each other.

Chyna wondered what exactly she'd discovered. What was Harry doing with these pictures? Were the police watching Trevor? Why? What was he involved with? Chyna thought about when she'd observed him, and wondered what she'd missed. She didn't recall seeing anyone else watching Trevor, or herself.

Staring at the pictures, Chyna began to realize the depth of trouble she'd found herself in. Was Harry really who he said he was? His name probably wasn't even Harry.

The sound of a key unlocking the door caused Chyna to jump. She stuffed the pictures into the packet, tossed them into the drawer and closed it. The white pill caught her attention and she grabbed it, leaned against the headboard and quickly closed her eyes.

It became a struggle to slow her breathing and appear to be deep in sleep. She listened to Harry's footsteps and the rustle of what sounded like grocery sacks.

Chyna eased her lids open a crack, allowing her limited view of Harry. He seemed intent on putting groceries away. It sickened her to think she let him kiss her and hold her. She'd trusted him and now realized she may have been a complete fool.

The phone rang and Chyna jumped. She moaned softly, then adjusted her head, then let it drop sideways as though consumed with sleep.

"Yeah?"

"I told you not to call me here. Yeah. I went there this morning. Shit, he's dead? Whose brilliant idea was that? I'm getting nowhere here. I don't think she realizes she knows anything. It's just a matter of time before she remembers where he put the damn camcorder. What do you mean they can't find her? I should have taken care of that myself. No one just disappears. I don't give a shit that there's a snowstorm. You get back there and find them."

Chyna felt her stomach turn sour. So, it was true. Harry, or whatever his real name was, had kept her alive only to find out some information. Why would she know where Trevor put his camcorder? Oh, no, she did know.

"No. I don't want you moving any shipments until I get things setup on this end. Listen you idiot, I've worked too damn hard for you to screw it up now. Two weeks and

we'll have everything in order. Find Abi Madden and that cop. Find out what they know, then get rid of them."

It took all of Chyna's nerves to keep from reacting. This couldn't be the tender, loving man that snuggled against her last night. Tears threatened, she fought them back.

The more time that passed, the more the medicine wore off. Chyna realized she felt considerably more lucid and stronger. She couldn't help wondering how seriously her legs were actually hurt. She hadn't talked to a doctor, nor had she seen or spoken to anyone but Harry since the accident.

"I see you've managed to pull yourself up. That must have taken just about all the energy you had."

She heard Harry's tender tone and wished he'd stayed in the kitchen. With an attempt to appear groggy, she opened and closed her eyes several times before making an effort to appear awake.

"Hi. I'm feeling stronger, I think." She struggled not to shrink from the kiss he lowered his head for. She responded, hoping he wouldn't sense her resistance. "You hear anything more about Trevor?" She watched Harry's expression tighten slightly. She wouldn't have noticed it before.

"Well, it seems Trevor Madden is dead."

"What? Trevor is dead? How on earth did he die? I didn't like him much, but I wouldn't have wished him dead. Well that's not exactly true. Maybe I did a little, when he was giving Abi so much trouble. I guess I did a lot, after he sent me crashing down that embankment. What happened?"

"He was doing drugs and deep into kiddy porn. He was found in a hotel room dead from an overdose. There's speculation he'd been molesting his daughter. I heard some talk about a dead fetus found in his garage. Needless to say, that's one jerk you or your sister won't have to deal with anymore."

"I never, geez Louise. I wouldn't have guessed even him to be that low. I'm glad he didn't have a chance to hurt Kelly. I'm glad Abi is free of him." She watched Harry pull off his shoes and sit on the bed. Chyna pressed her back against the headboard. "Anything new about John?"

"John, his wife and the kids are together in Austin, Texas, where he's working. They're renting a house. They weren't anywhere near here when someone tried killing you."

"Then who do you suppose wants me dead?" she asked, watching Harry's every expression.

"You think of anything Trevor might have told you? Anything Abi might have mentioned? You probably know something, you just don't realize it. Did Abi say anything about Trevor's dealings? If he was doing drugs, you hear of him dealing?"

"Abi never said a word. I've tried to think, well, you know. When I was following Trevor I..." she paused, realizing Harry clung to her every word. She rubbed her forehead, then continued, "I'm so groggy, and it's hard to concentrate. I'm sure Trevor had some —"

"Yes? "

"New deal going on. For some reason I don't think it was for selling drugs. It seemed he had something big coming down. I think his parents were clueless to what Trevor was up to."

"What makes you think that?"

She looked at Harry and wondered how long it would be before he decided she was no further use to him. "Trevor said something about going to his folks with the truth. I still don't know what he meant. I've tried understanding that comment."

"Did he talk to his folks?"

"I don't think so. He was too busy trying to make Abi's life miserable. He was a jerk. I wanted to get something on him so that I could blackmail him into leaving Abi and Kelly alone." She watched Harry digest her words.

"And?"

"I didn't get a chance. He ended up in the ditch and I rescued him. He thanked me by sending me crashing down that embankment. Some detective I turned out to be." She watched Harry. "I...something he said about not worrying. I don't know."

"Try! Not worrying about what?"

"He was so cocky. He knew I was going down that embankment and it would kill me. I told him I wish he'd have a close encounter with a tree. He said something like he had the best insurance policy anyone could have." She wondered if Harry could tell her words were as empty as the air in a balloon.

"That's it?"

"Well, not exactly. He said he..." Chyna paused, again, knowing Harry waited for her next words. She yawned and leaned back on the pillows. "I'm really tired. Maybe I'll remember more later."

"No, I think you're on a roll. Try harder."

She paused as though in deep concentration, then said, "I asked him what he meant by that." She closed her eyes and melted into the pillow.

"Chyna, what did he answer?"

"Um," she answered sleepily. "Said something like his insurance came in living color. I think that's how he said it. It doesn't make sense, but that's Trevor for you. There was something that Abi mentioned, something about Trevor's new friends."

"What new friends?"

"I'm not sure. Could we talk later. I'm exhausted." She watched Harry snap a towel, in frustration she was certain.

"Take a nap. I'll get some supper going. You want me to help you slide back down?"

She didn't want Harry two feet near her, but she knew if she denied his help, he'd wonder why. "That would be nice," she murmured, closing her eyes.

"I think you're getting stronger. I'll get you a pain pill as soon as we get you settled."

Chyna didn't answer. She'd trustingly taken so many pain pills, now she understood the depth of the situation. She'd have to think of some mighty interesting details to keep alive.

"Here you go."

She glanced up to find Harry sitting on the edge of the bed, handing her a pill. She took it and the glass of water he offered. "Thank you, Harry. I don't know what I'd have done without you." She noticed his smile had a slight sneer to it. Or was she imagining it? She allowed the pill to slide into her cheek, then took a gulp of water, giving the impression both went down her throat with ease.

"Sweet dreams, love."

Coughing into her palm, she spit the pill into her hand. She gulped more water. "Went down the wrong pipe," she stated in a raspy voice. She nestled into the pillow, eyes closed, ears on alert.

She could feel Harry's stare, but he remained silent. It seemed like hours before he slid off the bed and headed for the sparse living room. She heard the beeping of the touch-tone phone.

"She's starting to remember a few things. I don't know. If she knows anything about the video, she'll tell me. She doesn't suspect a thing. Of course she's in my bed, where else would you expect a woman to be?"

Chyna wanted revenge. He'd attempted to seduce her, lied to her, and deceived her. She would make him pay, one way or another. She pushed her anger aside and listened.

"Give them a hand at finding Abi Madden. No, I don't want her touched until she talks. No, are you listening to me? I'm telling you, she could be the key here and without her we could all go down. One more thing, you stay away from Trevor's folks. You heard me. I don't think they know a thing. We can buy the place from them without causing any suspicions this way. I'll check with you later tonight."

Chyna's heart beat hard and fast. How would she ever get free of Harry?

"After you find the camcorder, you can take care of Abi Madden and her lover, but don't hurt the little one. My wife wants a kid, just doesn't want one to ruin her figure. Take the kid to your wife and have her get rid of that red hair. Blonde like my wife would be a good choice. I'll call you later and make arrangements to pick the kid up."

There seemed no end to the horror of Harry Lindquin. He wouldn't touch one hair on Kelly's head. Chyna would see him dead first.

Chapter Thirty-One

Miles' first awareness came from the throbbing pain in his skull. He moaned, then realized that made it worse. He struggled to clear his vision and mind. Cold. He was extremely cold.

Although he stared in every direction, his surroundings were black, pitch black. Nothing like a dark night or unlit room, but void of the slightest light. It was as though he had been swallowed whole into the bowels of the earth.

Silence. Complete silence. Something was terribly wrong. Miles moved, realizing he lay on his back on the roof of the Jeep. He felt movement on his stomach and realized he held Kelly tightly in his arms.

It came back to him; the speed of the Jeep, ice, snow, spinning, the steep decent, and his sudden decision to unhook his seat belt and crouch over the girls, cradling Kelly between them. Then, the final jarring stop.

"Abi?" he called out. He gently moved his hand over Kelly's small body. She seemed perfectly okay. Her babbling told him she seemed content in his arms. "Abi?" he called out again.

"Yes?"

"Are you all right?" The question sounded lame.

"Kelly! My, God, I don't have Kelly!"

"Shhh, Abi, its okay. I have her and she's fine."

"I'm hanging by my seatbelt. We flipped, didn't we?"

"I'm afraid so. It's so dark, I have no idea where you are." He placed Kelly down behind him, then got to his knees. "I'm going to feel around for you, so if I touch inappropriately, don't slap me." He hoped she heard the humor in his tone.

"Now I get it, back to games are we?"

He chuckled even though nothing in their situation was humorous. "I've found the shift and now I'm waving my arm...there, a foot. Please tell me this is your foot, Abi."

"And who else could it belong to? You detectives do impress a girl."

"Oh, you do not want to insult the man who is going to get you down from there."

"Well, I guess you have a point. So, let me guess...you're going to release the seat belt and let me drop into the darkness?"

"I should after that last comment, but it wouldn't be exactly gentlemanly. So, the plan is I'll let you hang on to me as best you can, then I'll release you from your seat belt. How does that sound?"

"Well, let's get it done. I'm not exactly comfortable hanging up here."

"It's cold and too dark for my tastes," he said, moving in close. He held still while she slid her arms around his neck. "I'll take the pressure off and what I want you to do is slide your arm above the shoulder strap." She'd become too quiet, it worried him. "Okay, I'm going to release the belt on the count of three. One...two...three." The moment he pulled the release, she melted into his arms. He wasn't sure when the tears started, but she crumbled and shook like a kitten rescued from a tree top.

"We're going to be okay, Abi." He guided her off his lap, to the Jeep roof. "I'm going to put Kelly in your arms," he said, lifting the precious bundle. "You have her?" he asked, into the darkness.

"Yes. Oh, thank you, Miles. I don't know what I'd have done if—"

"She's fine, let's leave it at that. You have any injuries?" he asked, afraid she'd say yes.

"I think that jolt snapped me so hard in the seat belt that it knocked the wind out of me. I'm actually not hurt at all. Maybe a bit shaken. How about you?"

Miles half-listened. The bitter cold and pitch dark had him worried. "I took a bump to the head, but that hasn't hurt me any. You stay put, I'm going to..." he slid toward the passenger side and felt the edge of the window. "I'm going to punch through the snow. The glass is broken." Scraping at the snow with his fingers, Miles pulled snow into the vehicle and shoved it to his right, away from the girls. Making a straight tunnel as best he could out the window, he pressed it firmly, making a flat square. He prayed they weren't buried too deep all the while he pulled snow from above. An avalanche of snow dropped into the well and he scooped it out as fast as he could. His hands burned from the cold.

Early morning light welcomed him. He smiled and drew in cold, clean air. "I'm through, Abi. We're going to be just fine."

"Is it still snowing?"

"That it is. Wind is blowing, but, we're alive," Miles said, sliding back into the vehicle. "I'm going to step out and find out how deep it is. Now that I can see—"

"We're in trouble, aren't we?"

"Nothing we can't handle." Not wanting to waste any time, he turned his back to the opening, then arms first entered the snow well. He pushed through the passenger window and up through the narrow opening, finally stopping to sit on the edge, his head pushing through the snow top.

"Miles, what if we're hanging over a drop? I mean, you don't know what's below all that snow, do you?"

"True, but there's enough light to get a good feel for our situation." He pulled himself out of the Jeep and dug a wider area free of the window for Abi and Kelly. "We can't sit here and wait, Abi. "Hand me a blanket through the window."

"Give me a minute while I find...got it."

Miles reached down and pulled the blanket up to the surface. Quickly he folded it in half, and then again in half before placing it on solid ground away from the buried Jeep.

"Hand Kelly up to me."

"What?"

"It'll be easier to help you up if Kelly is already safe." He was ready for an argument when a wiggling Kelly emerged through the opening.

"I got her, Abi," he said, pulling her into his arms. "Come, little trouper," he cooed, before placing her on the blanket. The wonder of children was they had no fear in the light of danger.

Rushing back to the Jeep, Miles returned to his stomach. "Okay, Abi, time for you to come on up and join us. Grab that other blanket, if you can find it."

"Well?"

"Well what? Oh, I was expecting that to take you a couple minutes," he said, reaching for her extended arms. "Be prepared, it's damn cold out here. We are beyond lucky none of us were hurt."

"At least something has gone right. I was starting to worry."

There was no mistaking her tone held a lighter edge to it. "Come on, we need to find shelter."

"Oh, my God, Miles, your head, it's bleeding. You're hurt."

"It's nothing, really. I have a headache, but it's nothing serious," he said.

"My word, the snow is up to your waist. How are we going to walk through that?"

"We're lodged in a coulee," he said. "Just a few yards ahead . . ." he pointed east, "it won't be more than ankle deep."

"You sure?"

"Have I steered you wrong yet?" he asked, realizing how ridiculous the question sounded.

"Other than down this ditch, you mean?"

He couldn't help chuckling. "Yeah, other than that." It surprised him she found humor under the circumstances. He liked it. The moment she was clear of the buried Jeep he pulled her into his chest. "We're going to beat this, you hear me? Placing a firm kiss on her lips, he stepped back and gathered Kelly into his arms.

"I'd say under the circumstances, you've handled things quite well. Where to now?" she asked.

He noticed she made no attempt to take Kelly back, so he adjusted her under his jacket and zipped it higher. "You realize what's happened here, don't you?" She stood looking around.

"Not exactly."

"We've disappeared. There's no way they'll be able to tell our Jeep slid down this embankment until the snow melts. The dang vehicle is covered in snow and by the time we find shelter, our tracks will be a thing of the past. We wanted to hide away, well, we have the perfect opportunity to do just that."

"You're right. But, what if we can't find shelter? What if there aren't any cabins along the way? What if...God, we could freeze to death—"

"We're not going to freeze to death, I promise you," he said, moving his arm around her and pulling her close. "Come on, let's get moving." Her silence bothered him. She was right, but he couldn't let her know he had the same thoughts. They could work their way up the embankment and wait for another kind trucker to rescue them, or one of Skab's men. No, they couldn't take that chance.

Leading the way, Miles held Kelly to his chest with his left arm and slipped his right under Abi's left arm. The going was slow but their body heat built as they used energy to push forward.

He'd noticed Abi had slipped her coat edge over her nose, breathing warm air instead of the crisp, mountain air that nearly put a person's lungs on fire. He's taken the blanket and covered her head and wrapped it around her, tying it in place. She didn't voice a complaint. He admired that.

He'd used the second blanket across his own head and shoulders. They walked in silence. He didn't miss the numbness setting in. Kelly was warm against his chest. He wondered if Abi's feet were prickling stumps as his were. They'd been walking for close to an hour, the wind nearly stopped, for that he felt grateful.

Glancing across the white, peaceful terrain, Miles couldn't help admiring nature's beauty. Large, white snowflakes floated down in a soft, cascading shower. Virgin snow stretched in every direction. He acknowledged how small they were in this vast, cold, and even violent land.

Lost in thought, he nearly missed the stark brown building merely yards ahead of them. He wondered how he hadn't noticed it before. It blended no better than a match in the night.

"Up ahead," he stated in a calm voice.

"I see it."

Abi's voice held hope. He admired her strength. He couldn't express his own relief. Each step brought increased throbbing in his head. The cut had stopped bleeding. It froze to his forehead.

"There could be animals in there," he said, heading toward the side window. "We'll take a peak before charging on in."

"Good idea."

He noticed her conversation had stilled to a few words and he wondered what she'd been thinking. It couldn't be easy for a mother and her three-month-old.

Each step seemed to take more effort, Miles found himself nearly stumbling as he approached the cabin window. He peered through the icy glass, unable to see anything.

"Well, I guess we're going to have to take our chances. If we don't get out of this cold and get a fire going, we're going to be in some serious trouble." Again, his words met silence.

Miles approached the front door and read: "Help yourself, leave as you found it. Please close door. -Dewey Lake."

"That's sure nice," Abi stated between shivers. "Hope we find an address inside for Dewey, I'll send him a thank you when this is all over."

"Nice thought. I guess it's something a woman would think of."

"Meaning?"

"Nothing. I like it. I just wouldn't have thought of it, that's all." He pushed open the door and stood motionless. It creaked wide, revealing a spacious, welcoming cabin. "Guess we'll check it out," Miles said, stepping forward. "Dang, this is nice," he added, closing the door quickly behind them.

"I'll say. We have a stove, wood and even a bed to sleep in."

"We might check it for, well, I'll shake the blankets out later. I'm itching for that fire right now." Miles left Kelly snuggled inside his jacket while he worked on the fire.

"I don't see a refrigerator."

"Check the cupboards, maybe, if we're lucky, there'll be some canned goods. If so, remind me to restock it once we get out of here."

"Now that's a nice thought. Something a man would think of doing."

"Touché," he said, smiling to himself.

"Oh, this is great! Look!"

He turned to find Abi holding two large cans of Dinty Moore Stew in the air. "My mouth is watering just thinking about it," he said, anxious for the fire to stoke up.

"You don't think we're too close to the highway and someone will see the smoke and find us?"

He noted fear in Abi's tone. "We walked at least a good hour before we got here. I don't think we need to worry. I'm sure our tracks are gone by now." He could see her physically relax. He only hoped those words were true.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Chyna observed Harry through guarded lashes. Every morning at this time he put his jacket on and left for almost two hours, then again around three in the afternoon. Of course he did that just after he'd fed her another pill. This time, as last, she faked swallowing the white pill. She had to clear her mind. She slept too much from the medicine. More and more she had lucid periods. Unfortunately, at those times she worried how she'd manage to stay alive, as well as protect Abi and Kelly.

Harry strode her way, with every fiber of her being Chyna forced herself to relax and allow him to kiss her forehead. She wanted to gouge his eyes out, but refrained. She'd get even, no, she'd see he paid, with his life if necessary. He moved away and she mentally breathed a sigh.

The front door clicked shut and Chyna remained in her feigned slumber. Harry might have left. He might be standing outside the door, too. She waited...and waited...and waited. It seemed an hour had passed, but a peek at the clock radio told her that he'd closed the door merely ten minutes ago.

A slight squeak of the door caused a shiver to travel the length of her body. In all his carefulness, Harry's footsteps sounded like base drum beats to Chyna.

"Chyna?"

She mumbled a heavy breath.

"Chyna, are you awake?"

She felt the weight of him sitting on the edge of the bed. She wondered if Harry truly had something to talk to her about, or was he testing the effectiveness of the pill. She felt his palm brush gently across her cheek. She forced herself to lean into it, breathing deep as though unable to wake from the heaviness that gripped her senses.

"Sleep well, love."

Chyna wanted to scream, I'm not your love, you bastard. Instead she nuzzled into his palm. The mattress rose as he stood. He removed his sweaty palm. She listened to footsteps until the front door opened, then snapped shut once again.

As before, she waited. Every nerve ending seemed stimulated by the time fifteen minutes had passed. Chyna finally decided she'd used all the patience in her being and sat, then pulled herself toward the headboard and leaned against it.

She'd quickly made a decision. The casts were coming off. At times like this...she nearly laughed. When had she ever encountered a time like this before? Pulling on the Velcro tabs, Chyna eased her right leg from the confining cast. Expecting excruciating pain, it surprised her to find a leg that only needed shaving. She wiggled her toes, then her ankle. No pain. She replaced the cast on the leg.

With slow movements, Chyna slid the cast free from her left leg. A simple wiggle of her toes caused a shot of pain to travel the length of her leg. Chyna winced, then quickly slid the cast back in place.

One good leg definitely changed things. Since she'd stopped taking the medicine her thinking cleared. She had to form a plan in her mind, then the next time Harry left, she could either follow him or she could make her escape. Both decisions would be chancy. Either decision could cost her life. If she faced the truth, no action was most likely going to get her killed.

"Abi, I sure hope you're safe. Take care of darlin' Kelly." Chyna felt better saying the words out loud. "I won't let anyone hurt you, I promise."

"Now, don't you think you're promising something you're not capable of delivering?"

Chyna jumped and glanced up. Harry stood, arms crossed. She stared into dark, expressionless eyes. He glowered at her and she shrunk. "What?" she stammered, allowing her lids to slide downward.

"I think our little game is over, don't you?"

Chyna wondered how to react. "I don't know what you mean," she answered, yawning deeply.

"You know more than you're telling, don't you? You can either tell me the easy way or the hard way. I don't care which you choose, but you will be talking."

"I don't know what you want me to say. I've tried to remember everything. You must believe I'd do anything to protect my sister and niece. I don't know who's trying to kill me. Why don't you ask me what you want to know?" She watched his expression relax a fraction.

"All right, I'll ask you what I want to know. Did Trevor give you or Abi a camcorder?"

"A camcorder? Geez Louise, is that all you want to know? Why didn't you just ask before? Men!" She hoped she sounded relaxed and unsuspecting to Harry. Her performance would decide her fate. If Harry could play the game, so could she.

"Well?"

"Impatient today, aren't you? You sound angry with me, and I don't understand why." She mustered a few tears, then stifled another yawn.

"I'm sorry, love. It's just that we're no closer to discovering who tried killing you, and it's getting on my nerves."

Chyna closed her eyes, mainly to camouflage the raging feelings that surfaced. Love? What endearment did he call his wife? "Maybe we're looking in all the wrong places?"

"Meaning?"

"You're the detective, you tell me. If the angle of my husband wanting to get rid of me isn't panning out, then maybe he isn't the one. Trevor is dead. He wanted to kill me,

yes, but I don't think it has anything to do with this sudden interest in me. There has to be more of a reason than my wanting to protect my sister from Trevor. So, where does that leave us?"

"One of my detectives spoke with an informant, he heard there's an incriminating video on drug trafficking and kiddy porn right here in Great Falls."

"You've got to be kidding!" Chyna stated with innocence. She watched Harry pace across the room, as though deciding how much he should confide in her.

"If we can find that tape, then we have the key to who's behind this underground network. It'd be a big coup for me."

"But what have I to do with this? Why does someone think I know where this video is? Trevor? Trevor got his hands on this video and that's what got him killed, not a stupid overdose. Am I right?" She hoped she sounded convincing.

"That's my guess. You were tailing him. Maybe your surveillance wasn't exactly professional, but someone knows you were watching him. My guess, is that someone believes you saw what he did with the tape."

"That doesn't make sense."

"Why not?"

She saw the confusion in his expression. "Think about it, Harry. Why kill me? Wouldn't they try to find out where the tape is, before they kill me? I mean, what good am I dead?" She noticed his pacing increased.

"You're right. We have to outsmart them. Did you see Trevor go anywhere he might have hidden that video?"

"Like?" She prodded him, noting his impatience grew.

"Like a bus locker, a safe deposit box at a bank or credit union. Hell, I don't know. Think, Chyna, this is important."

"Well, I wasn't good at following him, you know that. I first started tailing him right after Abi's hotel room burned. I observed him watching Abi's house when the shed was set to blow. Little Kelly was moved from her room and placed in Abi's car. I'm sure Trevor thought he was being clever and his stalking tactics were driving Abi near the brink of panic."

"You think he could have put the tape in Abi's car? Maybe putting the kid in the car was his hint."

"What do you mean, hint? Kelly is safe, and so is the information? You might have something there. Worth checking out." Chyna closed her eyes, hoping Harry believed she'd become exhausted by all the effort.

She remained silent as he pulled on his coat, then sat down on the edge of the bed. She allowed him to pull her hand into his. He placed a soft, warm kiss across her palm. She struggled with her emotions, forcing herself to appear to be swooned by his attention.

"It won't be long and we'll have this matter cleared up. Then, I hope you'll allow me to be a part of your life. I know you're married on paper, but you realize in the eyes of the law, you aren't. I'll stand by you and help you take that jerk to the cleaners. I love you, Chyna."

She closed her eyes and he drew her into his arms. His kiss belied his outward lie. She returned his kiss, as though he'd awoken the dormant sexuality of her body.

"We don't have time right now, Love. Tonight we'll finish what we've started here," he said, between hot, wet kisses trailing down her neck.

"Then I'd better store up some energy while you're gone," she answered brazenly. She pressed her breasts against his chest and moved her palm down his jean thigh.

"You have no idea how much I don't want to go. Duty calls. I'll give you a pain pill and return as soon as I can. Let me help you snuggle down," he said, sliding her body flat on the bed.

"Thank you, Harry. Don't be too long," she said, through increased breathing. She reached up and pulled him toward her. She kissed him deep and long. "That should hold you for a while," she teased.

"Woman, you're making this difficult."

She closed her eyes and sighed deeply.

"Here, swallow this and I'll be back before you have time to cool down."

She smiled up at him, took the pill, then a drink of water. "You be careful," she whispered. He didn't answer, just headed for the door and left without a glance back.

Once again Chyna spit the pill into her palm and slid it into the deep recesses of the pillowcase. Closing her eyes, Chyna remained still, certain Harry stood listening on the other side of the front door.

Having no intention of just running, Chyna sat quickly, striped off the cast on her right leg, then reached for a pair of sweatpants, sweatshirt, socks and tennies that were discarded on the floor. None of them fit, but would do in a baggy, rapster sort of way. Spotting a packer jacket, she quickly zipped it on. She stuffed her short hair under a packer stocking cap.

With considerable effort, she hobbled over to the mirror that hung on the bathroom door. If someone had shown her a picture of herself, she wouldn't have recognized the young man.

She'd wasted enough time. She had to get away from Harry before he killed her.

Chyna glanced around and finally spotted a money clip on top of the Chester bureau. Without taking time to count the stash, she shoved it into her pocket. In a quick motion she slipped a gold, diamond studded Gucci watch on her wrist. If things got desperate she could always pawn it.

There seemed only one door out of the apartment. What if Harry had someone watching it? Chyna hobbled to the windows on the far end of the room. It would be difficult and even dangerous with her injured leg, but the fire escape seemed the best choice of exits.

The window gave her no trouble and within minutes she found herself hopping on her right foot, descending what seemed to be an endless cold, metal stairwell. By the time she reached the last step and touched ground in the alley, Chyna struggled for breath and the strength to go any further.

Revenge

She had to, she knew there wasn't a choice. With no idea where she was, it seemed impossible to decide which direction to head. Although she considered herself to be an intelligent woman, a sense of direction didn't compute in her mental computer.

Chyna hobbled down the alley. A car turned her way and she quickly ducked behind a garbage bin. It came closer and closer. Her breathing increased. It became nerve wracking to stay put. She'd have no chance to get away if it was Harry or one of his men.

The car sped past her. Chyna closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She pushed on, knowing the further she got the less likely she'd be caught.

The back end of an Indian Taco truck caught Chyna's attention. The driver had just gone inside with his load. She painfully hobbled forward, sat on the truck bed edge, then with her palms flat, pulled herself into the depth of the truck. Drenched in perspiration, she kept at it until she reached the front corner of the truck. Chyna leaned against a stack of heated delivery boxes.

The slamming of the truck door and sudden darkness nearly caused Chyna to scream out. Her heart pounded and her body shook. More from fear than exhaustion. Geez Louise, she'd actually escaped. Chyna smiled to herself. She could only hope the driver's next delivery took her miles away from Harry.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Miles placed wood into the rock fireplace. It snapped, crackled, and popped immediately. She wanted to comment about his skills, but remained silent.

Her feet were numb, as were her hands and face. A thud caused her to look down. She'd dropped the cans of stew. Glancing up, she noticed Miles had pulled the quilt off the bed, shaken it in the far corner of the room, and then hurriedly placed it on the floor in front of the glowing fireplace. He added both pillows, then walked toward her.

"I'm sorry, Abi. Thawing is going to hurt."

She nodded, allowing him to guide her to the makeshift warming area. She sat on the pillow, then pulled off her mittens. "How's Kelly doing?"

"Believe it or not, snuggled against my chest, sleeping sound. I think I should have let you carry her, she would have kept you warm."

"I don't think I could have. My hands, I can't feel them."

"They'll thaw. It won't be pleasant, but we're damn lucky to have found this cabin. It's about time something went our way."

Abi sat, nearly falling over in the attempt. She stared at the orange flames, then smiled. "You're right. I shouldn't be complaining."

"Woman, you're about the least complaining female I've ever met."

"Thanks. I...dang, my fingers are starting to burn. Maybe we should stick our hands and feet in cold or is it warm water? I think I've heard that's a better way to thaw."

"You try and shed your coat and those boots. I'll get some snow melting in a pot and we'll have water in no time."

Abi smiled. Miles seemed too good to be true. Maybe he was. What did she know about him? That he saved her and Kelly's life. That surely was all she needed to know. Removing her boots seemed the hardest task she'd faced all day. By the time Miles had water melted, she'd freed both her feet. "How's that for timing?" she asked, proud of her accomplishment.

"Not bad," he answered.

He unzipped his jacket and lifted out a sleeping Kelly. She appeared oblivious to their ordeal. Abi smiled. "Thanks, Miles. I don't know what we'd have done without you."

"Once your hands and feet start thawing, you won't be so grateful."

"Then I'll reserve my thanks 'till later." Abi placed both her hands into the cold water, closing her eyes to the immediate burning. She clenched her teeth, tears rolled down her cheeks. There weren't words to describe the searing pain. Abi bit back the moans that threatened to escape her lips.

Miles sat behind her, his chest snuggled against her back. He lowered his hands into the water with hers. His arms brushed the underside of hers. Somehow she felt comfort and strength from his touch.

"If I kiss you...here," Miles asked, pausing.

She welcomed his warm lips against her jaw. "What?"

"Will it make you warmer?" he finished his question.

"It might."

"How about here?" He placed a lingering kiss behind her ear.

"Mmmm, it might be helping."

"Might? Woman, surely kisses as hot as mine must warm you somewhere."

Abi giggled. "You're—"

"What? Fun? Spontaneous? Handsome? Endearing?"

"My, you do have a high opinion of yourself. I wasn't going to..." she paused, enjoying the nibbling trail he blazed across her bare shoulder. "How'd you manage that with your hands in a bucket of water?" she asked, amused.

"Don't underestimate the talents of a man challenged. We become very resourceful when we have a goal."

Although her hands still burned, the severity had lessened. Miles distraction helped bear the pain. "Miles, do you think I'll ever be free of—"

"Shhh. I'm confident this whole ordeal will pass. Soon it'll all be forgotten. I've considered trying my cell phone and checking in, but I have an uneasy feeling about calling anywhere."

"Uneasy feeling? What do you mean?" she asked, turning around to look at him.

"I follow my instincts. They haven't steered me wrong in the past, matter-of-fact, I think they've saved my hide a time or two. Something tells me there's a leak in my department. If that's true, it would explain the—"

"What? You think of something?"

"How could I have been so stupid? You would think after all this time it would have occurred to me."

Abi glanced back at Miles. "What?"

"I should have checked for a bug."

"Bug? You mean tracking device?" she asked, uneasy with the cloak and dagger atmosphere.

"Yup, old fashioned bug. Someone has been on our tail every step of the way. So, what do we religiously take with us, no matter what?"

"Oh my God!"

"What? What Abi?"

"Kelly's pacifier. Trevor knows I always make sure I have it for Kelly."

"Where is it? Let me check it out."

"I literally forgot it when I rushed out in that blizzard with Kelly and all those quilts. You really think they bugged her pacifier? Who? When?" The thought caused Abi to shiver. She welcomed Miles tightening arms.

"Who and when exactly. Tell me something, Abi. What do you have on you or in your pack that you usually don't have with you? I mean, something that belonged to Trevor or something you don't know how you got it?"

"Why don't we look through my stuff when we're done. Oh my God, I know! I know what they might be wanting!"

"Well, tell me, Abi."

She pulled her hands from the water and wiped them dry on the inside of her jacket. She grabbed her backpack and unzipped the small, outside pocket. "It has to be this," Abi said, handing over a palm-sized video camera.

"When did you get this?"

"It was stuffed into the back pocket of Kelly's car seat. I thought Trevor might have dropped it in there so it wouldn't get stolen or lost. I put it into the backpack several days ago."

"Why didn't you say something? This could be it!" Miles said.

Abi recognized the excitement in his voice. He wiped his hands dry and she noticed him wince from the effort. They'd both come close to severe frostbite. "You can try the power button, then rewind, if it's still charged. It'll allow you to preview," she explained, then leaned toward Miles as he pushed several buttons. She stretched out in front of the fire, alongside Miles as he pushed the play button.

The picture wasn't all that clear. Abi struggled to make out the dark figures. "What is this?" she asked.

"Look over there," Miles said, pointing to a man standing toward the back of a dimly lit room. Although the man's face was hard to see, the gun he held wasn't.

"It's, oh my God, it's you! Miles, what is this?" She looked over at the man she thought she could trust. The man she felt eternally grateful to. A man she was falling in love with.

"I'm undercover. The man behind the desk," Miles pointed, "is an underground drug and kiddy porn king. He goes by the name Skab."

Abi took a closer look and shook her head. "The name Trevor said on the phone. I've seen him someplace before."

"Where?"

"I don't always remember a name, although a name like Skab one can't help but remember, but I compensate because I never forget a face." Abi stared at the man behind the desk, then allowed her gaze to settle on the emblem on his shirt. "That's it!" she shouted, pointing to his pocket.

"What? Let me in on it!"

"I only saw him for a brief moment, but I did see him."

"Where?" Miles asked.

"At the hospital. I woke to find Trevor in the room. Yes, that's when he must have put the camcorder in the baby seat. I saw him checking it over, or that's what I thought he was doing. Then this guy came into the room. I was really tired, so I dropped off slightly. They talked kinda hushed—"

"You hear any of their conversation?"

Abi tried reliving the scene in her mind's eye. "I was so hurt by Trevor's lack of attention and his deserting Kelly and me. I wasn't too interested in his friends. I'm not sure. He said something like, Give Trent the day and time."

"You sure he said Trent?"

"That's what I heard, I'm sure of it because my old boyfriend from high school was a Trent—that's how I remember. Does it mean anything?" she asked, watching him.

"Damn right. Trent has been working the case since the beginning. I knew my cover was blown, but I didn't know where I'd slipped. Now I know, I hadn't slipped at all, Trent must have told them who I was."

"Why didn't they just kill you?" she asked, watching the video continue playing on the recorder. She stared in shock as Miles raised his gun toward a man standing to his right. "What are you doing?" Abi asked.

"Protecting my ass."

"What?" she asked, staring at Miles, seeing a side of him she didn't know. His posture stiffened and his expression turned icy.

"What I can't figure out is who's taking the video? I was there and I don't recall...he must have been behind the wine racks. The way they're chasing you and Trevor—"

"Trevor took the video. He jeopardized our lives for this stupid video? What does it prove—" Abi gasped as the popping sound of gun fire and the flash of shooting sent Miles to the ground with three holes in his chest. "My Lord, Miles. He shot you," she stammered.

"Damn straight. I was wearing a vest, but it hurt like hell, let me tell you. Unfortunately—"

"Oh!" Abi moaned as the camera now zeroed in on a man with a bullet hole in his head. She watched Skab turn and laugh at his accomplishment.

"I can see why Skab is hot to get his hands on this tape. First degree murder carries a mighty stiff slap on the wrists."

The person taking the video seemed to be scrambling from his hiding spot, unaware the camera still recorded his moves. Several seconds of ground, then racks of shipping boxes, tables stacked with videos, then daylight. When the man holding the camcorder turned to look back at the building, she quickly recognized Trevor's equipment storage shed.

"I would never have believed Trevor was knee deep into this. Illegal activities, drugs, and then, why would he have camcordered it?" She stared at a now black screen.

"Life insurance."

"But why would they come after me? Wouldn't they fear Trevor would release the video?" she stared at Miles, exhaustion setting in.

"They could have been threatening to kill you and Kelly if he didn't turn the tape over. When he refused, they had no other choice but to call his bluff. Strangely, they had no way of knowing Trevor didn't care one way or the other."

Abi felt a sting of renewed betrayal. She'd been a good wife to him, yet he chose to throw it all away. No man would ever...she paused in her thoughts and glanced at Miles. Could she trust him? She hoped to God she could. Her faith had been her strength her whole life. If it came right down to it, Abi wondered if she'd be able to protect herself and Kelly if need be.

Kelly's hungry cries abruptly brought Abi from her reverie. She reached for Kelly and the diaper stuffed into the backpack. "One diaper left," she mumbled absently.

"Come morning, I think I'll call for a chopper to come get us. We have the video, meaning we hold the high card. We stay here too long and we could be asking for trouble."

Inching a nipple toward her daughter's anxious lips, Abi watched Miles through lowered lids. He ejected the tape from the camcorder and slipped it into his breast pocket. She wondered why that gesture made her uneasy.

"Did the bullets that hit your vest bruise your chest?" she asked.

"I was black and blue for weeks. It's an experience a guy doesn't care to repeat too often."

Silence settled between them. Miles tone seemed strained. Abi closed her eyes. Somehow she got the feeling Miles knew about the tape. "Trevor must have decided to get the goods on Skab and his operation and that's why they turned against him. Get rid of Trevor, his wife, just in case she knows anything, and destroy the tape. Problem solved." Abi said absently.

"It does make sense," Miles managed to say while yawning.

She had to be objective. Could she believe that Miles was part of the whole scheme and all he wanted was the tape? She was a trained therapist, surely she could recognize a pattern of untruths, if she separated herself from the emotional baggage.

"Miles?" Abi asked, her voice calm and somewhat distracted. "When did Trevor camcord that scene?"

"Several months ago, I guess."

"Why hadn't you mentioned it to me before? I mean, it might have jarred my memory if I knew you were looking for a video."

"Didn't know a thing about it 'til now. I didn't have a clue Trevor, or anyone for that matter, camcorded that meeting. I had to drop out of my involvement with Skab and take on your protection. They believed I was dead. We had no idea the two were connected."

"Maybe they know you're alive and they're after you, not Kelly and me." She stated, watching him mull over her comment.

Satisfied with lunch, Kelly wiggled and smiled. Abi marveled at her daughter's innocence. "Is this Trent a friend of yours?"

"I'd trust Scott with my life. Have several times actually," Miles said, moving to lie opposite Abi, sandwiching Kelly between them. "It's hard for me to believe Trent is involved in this. He'd be the last man I'd have guessed to be on the take."

Abi noticed the sober expression on Miles' face. "Maybe he isn't."

"What?"

"Well, if he was, then they'd know you're alive, since I'm sure Trent knows the truth. If he's moved further up the trusting ladder, they do believe you're dead. If that's true, your friend has moved into a dangerous position. If he's still on the case—"

"Then he's still undercover. Why wouldn't he have confided in me?" Miles asked.

"Maybe he wasn't sure what side of the law you were on," Abi blurted, without thinking.

"What?"

"I'm sorry, but think about it. He doesn't know who to trust. He doesn't reveal your position or your faked death. That says what?"

"He's still my friend and someone else told Skab I was undercover. But who? Trevor! Of course!" Miles snapped.

Abi thought for a moment. "Why Trevor?" she asked, totally confused. She glanced over at Miles and realized he looked as exhausted as she felt. Abi closed her eyes. "How could Trevor be so hateful?" She opened her eyes and glanced at Miles. Strawberry hair hung over one eye, dark lashes fanned across his skin. She paused to stare at his full, soft lips. She liked his kisses, strong, demanding, and sensual. She found him extremely handsome and wondered if it was just her need to feel attractive to a man, or was it indeed more, the beginning of something special. His deep breathing told her he slept soundly.

She watched him until her lids grew heavy. She couldn't help wondering if any of them were going to get through this alive.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Chyna shook from the cold, the dark, and fear. The trucker had few boxes left in the truck and they slid around at each corner, telling her they were empty. He would be heading back to his distribution center. She could only hope that was across the city.

The effort to escape had filled her with energy and drive, now, sitting still and calming down brought piercing pain to her left leg. Every inch of her body cried for mercy. Chyna realized it took effort just to think. The motion of the truck soothed her fears. She closed her eyes and offered a silent prayer to God. "I'm coming Abi and Kelly. Hang in there," she whispered, then gave in to the wave of exhaustion.

Awareness of being carried caused Chyna to stiffen.

"Whoa, little lady. I'm not going to hurt you. If I'm right, you've been hurt enough. Just relax and Two Hawks will take care of you."

The deep, calm voice somehow seemed sincere and protective. But then, so did Harry, and where did that trust get her? Her lids and body grew heavy and she allowed it to conquer her.

She became aware of a moving vehicle first, then thoughts of running, hiding in a truck, and finally a man carrying her, promising he'd take care of her, came to mind. She slowly opened her eyes and glanced around. Was she safe and really in the back seat of a car, a warm blanket tucked around her?

Through her muddled thoughts, Chyna recognized the music of Douglas Spotted Eagle playing on the radio, one of her favorites. She couldn't see the man driving, other than the back of his dark hair.

"Who did you say you were?" she asked. Her voice sounded raspy and strained to her own ears.

"Two Hawks. And who are you?" he asked.

She smiled, liking the simplicity of his response. "Chyna Brown. You were driving that truck and found me?" She struggled to shake off the fuzziness that muddled her thoughts. A shiver gripped her, causing her stomach to cramp. "What's wrong with me?" she asked, fear of the truth just beneath the surface.

"My guess would be withdrawal."

"Geez Louise, withdrawal!" she repeated, shocked by the suggestion. "Harry gave me pain pills. They..." Another shiver interrupted her words.

"How long did you take drugs for pain?"

"Heck, I don't know. It must be..." she thought, wondering how long she could have been at Harry's apartment. Time didn't seem to register. "I'm not sure. Harry helped me from the accident and...I don't know. I stopped taking them two days ago."

"It does not matter. You might be in for a rough time. I will help you. You will not like me for a while. Then it will get better."

Chyna pushed herself up, fighting the nausea that assailed her senses. She glanced into the rear view mirror and got her first look at Two Hawks. He looked as though he'd stepped out from 1801. Two Hawks fit this Native American man. Bronze skin, high cheekbones, dark, penetrating brown eyes, thin lips, proud jaw, and long braided black hair. "Where are you taking me?" she asked, dropping back down on the seat.

"I have a place in the mountains of my people. We will not be interrupted, and you will get well. I will help you."

"Why?"

"You came to me. I am a medicine man for my people."

"You drive a taco truck, for God's sake," Chyna snapped, fighting another fit of shivers and cramps.

"I own an Indian Taco company, and we deliver."

"If you own it, why would you deliver? Wouldn't you have hired people for that?" She accused in a prove-it tone.

"My brother, Buffalo Man, was not feeling good today. I delivered his orders so he could rest. He has MS and some days are good, others bad."

"I'm sorry."

"Why? He is a good man. He is happy with what he can do, not what he can not do. He is an inspiration to our people. He is a good teacher and he works hard to bring the buffalo back to the people."

"Is that why he's called Buffalo Man?" she asked, finding Two Hawks a very interesting man.

"He got his name two summers ago when the white buffalo calf was born to his herd. It is an honor and a sign that our people will remain strong and that Napi is pleased with his people."

"You believe that?" she asked, surprised at hearing such pagan ideas.

"You believe in your God, do you not? How different is he than Napi? If you were to compare them, your God and mine, you would find many similarities, so many in fact that you would wonder if they are not the same one."

"I would be interested in comparing..." she paused, as a sharp pain stabbed across her abdomen. "...them with you some time," she managed to add.

"We are here. Now I will only help you. What I do is for your own good."

"Thank you, Two Hawks," she answered, relieved the motion of the vehicle had finally stopped.

"You will not thank me for a few days to come. But, when you are cleansed, you will be well in body and spirit."

"What's wrong with me? Those pain pills couldn't have caused me to be this sick."

"You have the signs of drug withdrawal."

"I don't believe that. Maybe it was something I ate. Like food poisoning. Good thing I didn't eat any of your Indian tacos while I was in your truck or I'd be accusing you of poisoning me." She heard him chuckle.

"I would say you were taking some kind of sleeping pill. Too much is not good. You will be okay in a few days."

Chyna didn't care what he did, as long as he stopped the pains that tore her stomach in half. Two Hawks lifted her into his arms. She didn't offer any resistance, since she feared she didn't have strength to walk anyway.

She glanced around and found they were amidst trees, snow, and in the distance she saw rugged mountains. She gasped as Two Hawks opened the flap of a tipi and carried her inside with him. "Geez Louise, you live in a tipi?" she asked, unsure what she had gotten herself into.

"You will find it very comfortable, warm and accommodating to our needs. My people, the Blackfeet tribes, existed as a powerful force, we were the Pikun or Piegan, the Kainah or Blood, and the Siksika or Blackfoot, which the white man changed to Blackfeet. In seventeen-eighty the three tribes of the Blackfeet numbered over fifteen thousand people. Now, we are less than half that number and many of our people have intermarried with other races."

Chyna listened to Two Hawks, allowing him to distract her from her discomforts. He made a pyramid of sticks and blew into the mound. A small fire took life. She watched as though in a dream. His movements were that of a wise, old man, yet he looked about thirty-five, like her. She closed her eyes and listened.

"When our people started trading with Napi-kwan, the white man trader, they started losing their independence. No longer could they say they could make everything they used from Mother Earth. While taking guns, kettles, knives, and other useful things from the trader, they abandoned their native skills to make what they needed to exist. They became more and more dependent on the trader."

She nodded, and mumbled, "I can see how that could happen."

"This tipi is more useful and fulfilling than the white man's house. It is not drafty. I do not need more room to heat than space I require to live. There is no noise, like in the white man's town, to fill the ears with. Here I can listen to the thoughts that go through my head. I can listen to the wind and hear the owl at night or the hawk in the sky during the day."

A forceful pain gripped Chyna, she cried out. "It hurts. Can't you give me something to make it go away?" she asked, afraid the answer was 'no'.

"I am making you a drink of Buscuit-Root, which will help make you strong. I will add a little Mullen root. It is good for cramps. That is all I can help with."

"I'll take anything," Chyna said, pulling her knees up to her stomach. "Tell me more about your people, it takes my mind off my misery." Two Hawks took a pinch of herbs from a small leather bag and sprinkle them into a black kettle.

"Since prehistoric times, the buffalo had been the staff of life for the Blackfeet. In eighteen-seventy-four, the northern buffalo herd was estimated to be four million. The center of its range was the Sweet Grass Hills, a hundred miles east of the Rockies. In the middle of the eighteen-seventies, commercial hide hunters, with repeating rifles, entered the Montana buffalo range. By eighteen-seventy-nine, the buffalo had virtually disappeared from the country. This happened so fast that the Government was not prepared to cope with the problem of feeding Indians. The winter of eighteen-seventy-seven through eighteen-seventy-nine a great many Blackfeet died of starvation. Others were forced to eat dogs, horses, poisoned wolves, and soup made from old buffalo bones gathered on the plains."

"That's awful. I heard about some of this in history class, but it didn't seem as awful as you tell it. Maybe I wasn't listening before," Chyna said, reaching for the cup Two Hawks handed her. She sipped the hot drink. It tasted somewhat like potatoes. "Did the government feed them, then?"

"The rate of the buffalo extermination in Montana was reflected in the figures of shipments of robes and hides by I.G. Baker and Company at Fort Benton. They shipped seventy five thousand in eighteen-seventy-six, twenty thousand in eighteen-eighty, and only five thousand in eighteen-eighty-three, and none at all in eighteen-eighty-four. Indians on the Blackfeet Reservation were destitute in the winter of eighteen-eighty-three through eighty-four. More than a quarter of the Piegan died of starvation."

"I guess the buffalo was their way of life. Without them they didn't know how to live." Chyna offered.

"You're right. The eradication of the buffalo marked the end of the most tragic thirty years in Blackfeet history. In eighteen-fifty-four, they had been the most powerful people of the northwestern plains, dominating the entire region from the North Saskatchewan to the present Yellowstone Park in Wyoming."

A warm tingling flushed through Chyna. She relaxed some with the easing of the stomach cramps. "It's hard to believe that could happen," she admitted.

"The Blackfeet lost the greater part of their lands. Large numbers of their tribesmen died in war, from epidemics, and starvation. They also lost the opportunity to make a living for themselves by hunting. In eighteen-eighty-four, the Blackfeet had become dependent upon the Government for even the bare necessities of life; food, clothing, and shelter."

"I hate to say it, but I guess that was the fate of all other tribes, too."

"That it was. For so many years my people were forced to forget the ways of their ancestors. They nearly lost the language, the medicines, and the religion. Now we are reviving our ways. It is important to know where our roots in Mother Earth are."

Chyna smiled. She liked Two Hawks. "Are you a chief or something?"

"I am descendant of Lame Bull, Piegan Chief. He, I am sad to say, was the first one to sign the Treaty of Eighteen-Fifty-Five. But, that is another story. One that, if you want, I will tell at another time. You need to rest. Close your eyes and sleep."

Chyna wanted to ask a million questions, about the Treaty of Eighteen-Fifty-Five, about his ancestors and what happened to them all. "I'm sure I'll want to hear about Lame Bull," she mumbled, closing her eyes.

Sleep didn't last long, between stomach cramps, alarming bouts of the shivers, then fever. Chyna fought the drug that Harry had fed her.

"You are doing good, Wo'-ka'hit."

"What did you just call me?" Chyna asked, fighting an onset of shivers.

"Wo'-ka'hit, it means listen. You are good listener."

She smiled, then moaned as a less severe pain gripped her stomach. "I hope this will ease up pretty soon."

"You are over the worst. It soon will be over."

She wiped her palm across her moist upper lip. "Wo'-ka'hit, I like the sound of it," she sighed, drifting back to their former conversation. "I'm not usually a good listener, I usually talk too much. But you're so interesting, I couldn't help but want to listen." She sipped more of the drink Two Hawks made.

"We will soon go to the sweat hut. It will help cleanse you inside and out. But we will wait until your stomach is better."

"Two Hawks, do you hate white people for what they did to the Native Americans?"

"It is a sad thing when a people is nearly destroyed. When a bird or animal species is nearly extinct, there are groups of people alarmed by such a dreadful thing to happen. Yet, many tribes of Native Americans have already or are becoming extinct, and no one notices. No, I hate no one. It was inevitable that it would happen, but unconscionable the way it happened."

She leaned back and watched the handsome man sitting next to her. The light from the fire gave him an aura of mystery. She reached up and placed her palm across his cheek. "You don't have whiskers, do you?" She snatched her hand back, embarrassed by her brazen action.

"No. Many of our men who have had parents or family that one time intermarried; they have hair growth on their face and body. My relatives have stayed Blackfeet, we remain as our forefathers."

"You married?" she asked, then shivered uncontrollably.

"No. I have been busy with my work and lectures. This has left no time to have a wife and family."

"You lecture? No wonder you have so many dates and history about your people. I'm impressed. Where do you lecture?" she asked, watching him blush. She found the gesture surprising on such a viral man.

"I speak at colleges, museums, Native American pow-wows, fund raisers for Native American education, alcohol rehabilitation facilities, and drug abuse foundations. Our people have a long way to go to find the pride of our ancestors."

"You're an impressive man, Two Hawks."

"Thank you, Wo'-ka'hit. Now I must go and get the sweat hut ready. You rest."

"Two Hawks, what if Harry realizes your truck was delivering around the time I disappeared? Your family and employees could be in danger. They wouldn't even know why." Chyna wondered how that popped into her head.

"My brother will tell them, if you did hide in the truck, you would be long gone after it had been parked. I told no one about you. I often come up here for solitude. It is not strange."

"Maybe they'll ask your brother where you are and he'll tell them how to get here. I know Harry will find me somehow." Renewed fear filled her.

"My family would not tell anyone about this place. It is sacred. This is the land of my ancestors. This Harry would not come here. You are safe."

Two Hawks stood, then put on a fringed leather jacket. She closed her eyes, he left the tipi. The sounds of his footsteps in the snow grew faint. She listened to snapping wood, then the crackling of the beginning of a fire. Two Hawks was right, one could hear from a tipi.

How long she slept, Chyna wasn't sure. The gentle shaking of her shoulder roused her from a near peaceful sleep. The sudden thought of Harry caused her to bolt upright.

"Shhh, Wo'-ka'hit, it is only me. I will take you to the sweat hut now."

"Oh, I thought...oh," she finally settled down. She found herself in Two Hawk's arms again. He carried her as though she weighed nothing. He wrapped a blanket around her, and she clung to him. "I've decided that while we're cleansing, I'm going to tell you everything that's been happening. When I explain it all, you'll see, I need your help."

"You are in trouble with this Harry?"

The cold air burned past her nostrils. The tipi had been so comfortable, she forgot about the winter outside. "Yes. I didn't do anything against the law. Neither did my sister and her baby."

"They are in trouble, too?"

She nodded, then gasped as a blast of hot moist air enveloped her. Two Hawks sat, then settled her back into his chest, holding her up. He removed his jacket and shirt, and then removed the blanket from around her.

"This is a good thing. You talk and I will be wo'-ka'hit."

She remained still when he grabbed a dipper and poured water over the hot rocks at the center of the hut. An avalanche of steam hissed and sputtered, while filling the confined space with a haze of steam. She closed her eyes. "You do this often?"

"No, it takes preparation and there must be a reason. It is a ceremony."

She leaned against Two Hawks, comfortable and unafraid. "My story won't be as interesting as yours, I'm afraid," she said, wondering how she'd ever tell him about the past several weeks of chaos.

"The beginning is a good place to start."

She smiled. "That it is." Chyna licked her lips, then said, "My sister, Abi, and her daughter, Kelly, are the only family I really have. I guess I'm all they have, too." She paused, yawned, and then nestled into his bare chest. She thought about what to say, breathing deep, her body and mind relaxed. She had nothing to fear.

Steady breathing told her Two Hawks slept peacefully. She'd told him her whole story and he'd been a good wo'-ka'hit. She smiled at the word.

It quickly dawned on her that she no longer experienced stomach cramps or nausea. She felt incredibly good, in fact. A little weak, but better than she had for a long time.

"Wo'-ka'hit wake?"

She smiled. "Yes, thank you. I feel great. I don't know what you did, but it sure worked."

"You must take it easy for a while, make your body strong. We will eat roots from Mother Earth, they will make you strong."

"What kind of roots?" Chyna asked, turning to face him. His bare, muscular chest shone from the water and firelight. She couldn't help staring. No man excited her as this one did.

"A good one is the Indian Breadroot or turnip. It is a good root for nourishment. The early French napi-kwan called it white apple or apple of the prairie. John Colter, a member of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, later subsisted on these roots for about a week after he fled from Blackfoot Indians."

"I remember that story. He was stripped naked and was given a head start to run. He hid under water in a beaver dam and he actually escaped."

"That is right. We will also eat Yampa or Indian carrot roots. They have a sweet, nutty flavor without any bitterness. They taste very much like napi-kwan carrot."

Chyna felt mesmerized by Two Hawks. His gentle, deep voice drew her into his stories and information, she couldn't get enough. She reached over and touched his necklace, allowing her fingers to linger on his skin. "What is that?"

"It's a grizzly bear claw. My father and I were hunting when this bear attacked my relative. We killed it and each of us wears a necklace."

"Did your relative live?"

"Most proudly. It has been a long time for a relative to carry the name of Kills Bear. It is a great honor. He has changed since he received his proud name. Once he lost himself in the white man's fire water, what my people call uskiti waubu."

Chyna settled down and placed her head on Two Hawks thigh. "He doesn't drink anymore?" she asked, looking up at Two Hawks.

"He believes he was chosen to help our people stay away from the drink. He works with our warriors and with the young people. He has done good for our people."

Chyna didn't move when Two Hawks pulled his fingers through her hair. He worked his fingertips to her scalp and scratched and rubbed. Nothing could have felt better. She softly moaned with pleasure.

"It is time to go back to the tipi. Take wet clothes off and wrap body in blanket. I will turn my back for you."

Chyna smiled at his decent proposal. She stared at his back while stripping down and wrapping in the blanket. Did it seem his breathing had increased, or was she imagining it? "I'm ready," she said, realizing her own voice sounded breathless. He pulled on his shirt and then jacket.

She said nothing as he whisked her into his arms and carried her outside. The brisk, cold air sent her snuggling closer into Two Hawk's body. By the time they reached the tipi she shivered uncontrollably.

"You will be warm in a short time," he said, dropping to his knees on a thick blanket of rabbit hides.

Chyna clung to him. "Would you just hold me for a while? I've been afraid so long. It feels good not to be cringing in fear. I feel safe with you." She felt foolish for sounding like a child, but she couldn't help herself.

"It will give me pleasure to hold you," he said, his voice husky.

He sat and pulled her onto his lap, holding her close to his chest. She clung to him, drawing warmth and comfort. A single tear streamed down her cheek and the weakness angered her.

"I make Wo'-ka'hit sad?"

"No. It's not a tear of sadness." She looked into the eyes of Two Hawks and felt an intense flush. "Would you mind kissing me? Just once?" She held still while he stared at her. She shouldn't have asked him to kiss her. She didn't even know him. Yet, it felt right to be in his arms. Just one kiss couldn't hurt.

He said nothing. Slowly he lowered his head until his lips barely brushed against hers. She moaned. She allowed him to slowly taste her lips, soft, warm and sensual. It was a kiss for her tired soul to melt into.

She expected a mere kiss. He pulled her lips into his once again. This time she breathed between parted lips. He freely moved his mouth over hers, devouring its softness. She felt the intimacy of his kiss, realizing no man had ever kissed her with such compassion.

When he did end the kiss, Chyna felt breathless. She smiled to know his breathing came in quick gasps, too. He held her against his chest. She smiled, feeling warm and content. She hoped this was the beginning of something special.

Chapter Thirty-Five

"Abi, wake up."

She bolted, ready to grab Kelly and run. "What? What? Did they find us?" she asked, looking around the room.

"I didn't mean to startle you. I called Warrett and well, it seems...Trevor is dead, Abi," he blurted out.

"Dead? My word, how? Who?" She looked over at Miles. Did she see tears in his eyes?

"He was found in a hotel room dead from a drug overdose. They found kiddy-porn videos and little girl panties in his room. I guess you won't have to worry about him anymore."

"Dead," Abi repeated. "I wanted him out of my life, and Kelly's, too. But...dead?" She patted the bed and Miles slowly made his way toward her. "There's more, isn't there?" she asked, flicking a tear away. His silence filled her with fear. "What is it? You're frightening me, Miles."

"I didn't mean to do that," he said, sitting on the make shift bed, facing Abi. "I told you there was something I needed to tell you, from my past? I should have told you sooner, but it's not easy."

"Miles, it doesn't matter."

"Hear me out this time. You remember when I told you about Lana and me?"

"Yes, of course. Miles, it doesn't matter if you were really the father of her baby. We all make mistakes." Abi said, placing her palm on his arm.

"No, the baby wasn't mine. It was Trevor's baby."

Abi stared at Miles. "You said your half-brother stole Lana from you." Abi pulled her hand free from Miles. She sat up and leaned her back against the headboard. "You're telling me that you and Trevor are brothers?"

"Yes, half-brothers. My dad died in Vietnam when I was two. Madden married Mom, but he didn't want me. He made it clear he wanted his own son. He made it damn hard on me. As soon as I was old enough I just took off. I've never gone back. I've spoken with my mother only a few times since."

"My Lord!"

"I'm sorry, Ab. I wanted to tell you. But, you hated him so much and I—"

"You wanted to take me away from him, like he took Lana away from you! Is that it, Miles? I'm a get-even conquest?" Betrayal and hurt surfaced.

"See, that's what I was afraid you'd think. All right, I agree, I should have blurted the whole thing out right from the start, but I was doing a job. My past relationship with Trevor had nothing to do with protecting you."

"Of course it did. Why would they even put you on such a case?"

"I requested it, because I know the sick way Trevor thinks, and I was the best equipped to protect you from him."

"Then you did know he was into something. You were using me to find out what." She cried, and then grit her teeth together.

"Not really. I mean, yes. There was a possibility. Abi, I didn't want him hurting you and Kelly any more. My mother called me, which was a first. So I knew what she had to say was serious. We met and she told me Trevor was into something awful. That Ambur told her he was touching her in private places."

"What?"

"It gets worse."

"How could it possibly get worse?" Abi asked, staring at the stranger in front of her.

"Mother said my half-sister, Diane, had a miscarriage at home five months ago. She told no one else. Mother said she helped Diane place the fetus in a water-tight container and they buried it."

"What does this have to do with Trevor?" Abi asked, more confused by the minute.

"The police searched Trevor's property and found a dead male fetus in a black plastic bag in his garage."

"My Lord! It was Diane's baby? But who put it in Trevor's garage?" Abi asked.

"My mother did."

"Why?"

"Because she knew he'd been doing bad things to Ambur. She believed it was the only way to protect both Ambur and Kelly. She'd always protected Trevor, no matter what his trouble was. I always paid the price."

"Well, I would say this time Trevor has paid the price."

"Yes, I guess so. But, if I lose you and Kelly, then I've paid the price, too."

"Are you sure we're what you want? Maybe it's sweet revenge for having lost Lana to Trevor," Abi suggested, watching his expression.

"If that were true, then I wouldn't have to admit I'm in love with you, would I?"

Abi stared at the man in front of her. Dare she hope? He could have easily admitted to playing the game, and let it end. "Kelly and I need some time."

"You can have all the time you want. All I ask is that you let me come see you both. Let me get to know you. And if it's not too much to ask, have you love me back someday."

Abi leaned toward Miles, paused, and then slid to his side. "I want to believe you. Kelly wants to believe you." She moved closer, then brushed her lips across his, pausing

at his right cheek. "You would have to wine and dine us," she said, moving her lips back across his, pausing at his left cheek.

"I could do that."

"You'd have to take us for walks, hikes, and trips to the park," she added, lightly kissing his bottom lip, then quickly releasing it.

"I could to that, too."

"We are partial to church and breakfast after on Sundays." Abi informed him, before showering kisses around his lips and along his jaw.

"I could get use to that."

"We aren't in any hurry. We may experience some insecurities and need for a lot of reassurances," she whispered. She waited for him to close the distance between them, and welcomed his lingering kiss, savoring every moment.

"I can handle that," he said, his voice husky.

"Are you sure?" she asked, watching him closely.

"I've never been more sure of anything in my life, Abi."

He kissed her deep and possessive. When he stopped it left her mouth burning with fire.

The sound of a helicopter alarmed Abi. She bolted from Miles's arms. "They've found us?"

"No, I asked Warrett to send someone to come and get us. We have a tape that needs to see a judge."

"Phew. I thought I'd finally found love and was doomed to die before I got a chance to enjoy it," she said, grabbing her sweatshirt and pulling it on.

Miles laughed. "You're a marvel, Ab. You have no idea how wonderful you make me feel. I haven't laughed in years. I haven't looked forward to a weekend for so long, I can't imagine what it'll be like to make plans to enjoy them. I haven't been this happy, ever."

He lifted her off the blanket and swung her around in circles. Abi laughed. "Let me get dressed before they come barging in here with me half-naked."

"Right," he said, setting her down. "I'll get Kelly all bundled up —"

"Well, now, ain't that a pretty picture. Miles, I wouldn't have figured you for the father type."

"Trent, what the hell you doing here?"

Abi stared at the man in the doorway as they spoke. He closed the door and it dawned on her. She didn't recognize his face, but she did recognize the voice. "Miles, remember that phone call I got at the hospital?"

"Yes, matter of fact, I do."

"Well, that's the voice I heard," Abi whispered, watching the man take several steps toward them. It was then that she noticed the gun in the man's hand.

"I didn't want to believe it, Trent. Abi and I gave you every benefit of the doubt. Warrett hinted he suspected a leak, but he couldn't locate it. I'm disappointed, that much I'll say. We've been friends a long time. Why?"

"Money! Damn, it's always money and you know it."

"Lost big at the tables again? You'd throw away friendship, family, and a fine career for gambling? Scott, you're in bed with the bastards that make your skin crawl. They killed your brother. What does Skab have on you?" Miles asked.

"Always looking for an angle, right? Okay, Skab is my wife's brother. I thought if I stopped him, then we'd be okay. But Skab is just the surface. There's a whole cartel of them heading this thing in Washington. They have connections in every state. We don't have a chance."

"I don't believe you."

"I don't give a shit what you believe. Well, maybe I do. You remember Alex Weldron?"

"Maybe," Miles answered, taking a step back toward Abi.

"He shot my brother right in front of me. Said either I cooperate or he'll shoot my younger brother, and so on."

"You could testify to that, Scott. You know how it works. We could put them all away for life," Miles pleaded.

"Not on your life! It'll take more than my testimony to get them convicted. We need proof. We need a way to incriminate Harry Lindquin, Skab's right-hand man. Then there's Arch Dumoor who makes the kiddy porns and Guy Marlo who gets the kids for Arch. How about Randy Keeper who gets and distributes the drugs? Don't forget their hit man, Bugs Farley, he's out of Tempe, Arizona."

"You have the goods on all of them. Turn States Evidence, Scott. You were undercover. You're still on our side of the law. Don't turn tail. It won't be worth it. Go into headquarters with Abi and me," Miles pleaded, handing Kelly to her mother."

"If I do that, I sign a death warrant on my family. I can't do it."

"But you're willing to kill my family," Abi asked.

"They have your sister, Chyna. She's alive."

"What? Chyna's alive? Dear God," Abi said, tears of joy stinging her eyes.

"All you have to do is turn over the video tape to me, and they'll free her. You're free to go, too. You might consider yourselves lucky to be alive, you can thank me for that. Keep your mouths shut and you'll stay that way."

"Scott, this is a mistake, you realize that, don't you?"

"Yeah, but it's the only choice I've got. Give me the tape and I'll be outa here," Trent said, extending his palm.

Abi placed Kelly on the blanket, then reached over and grabbed the backpack. She unzipped the side pocket and produced a tape in a plastic case. "You realize that once they have this, you're of no use to them anymore. They'll probably kill you, as well as us. We're too much of a liability. A loose cannon and all that."

"Little lady is right," a man said, pushing the door open, stepping past Scott Trent. "Nice little conversation you got going."

A larger man followed the first, then closed the door. "Getting awfully crowded in here, don't you think?" She glanced at Miles, then handed him the tape.

"Sweet Jesus, you do have it. Now isn't that what I've been telling those thugs all this time?"

"Care to enlighten us on who you are?" Miles asked.

Abi sensed Miles had something up his sleeve, yet she hadn't a clue what it was.

"Harry Lindquin. You're nothing like your sister, are you Abi?"

Abi stared at the man. "You know Chyna? What has she got to do with any of this?"

"I know little Chyna quite intimately. Slipped out the back on me yesterday, so you might say I'm one pissed off guy right now. Nothing was going right until your lover here called his captain. We figured Trent would lead us to his buddy. Mighty nice of him, if I must say so. The trust between partners is a touching thing."

"Cut the crap," Miles snapped. Miles opened the cassette and sliding the tape into his palm. "You came for the tape. Once you get it, I want assurances that you'll leave without killing us."

"What possible reason would make me decide that?" Harry asked.

"Knowing that a copy of this tape has been dropped in the mail to a very reliable attorney, to open in case of my death, Abi and her daughter, or Scott Trent here."

"Why you anxious to save his skin? He's turned on you."

"When I mailed the tape I didn't know that. It doesn't matter. We do have one other option," Miles baited.

"I could pull this tape out and destroy it, leaving you with nothing to take back to Weldron. Where does that leave you?"

"I'd shoot you all and take him what's left of the tape."

"My attorney would be obligated to turn his copy of the video over to the FBI. You're still dead."

"Think you got me in a corner, don't you? I'll just get Weldron on the phone and we'll see what he wants. Give me your phone," Harry said, extending his hand toward Scott.

Abi noticed Miles and Scott exchanging looks. Harry press several buttons, then wait.

"It's Harry. I found them. They have the tape. 'Cause there's a bit of a problem here," he said, then paused. "Sandler made a copy and sent it to his attorney, in case he, the woman and kid get killed. Shit, how would I know? He's threatening to destroy the original if I kill any of them. Trent is here. Uh, well, she somehow...she got away. Hell, I don't know. What do you want me to do?"

Abi sat on the blanket beside her wiggling daughter. The one sided conversation didn't sound too promising. She grabbed the baby wipes and powder from the backpack. No one seemed alarmed by her gesture. She stayed attentive to the task, not calling any attention to herself. She removed the old diaper and taped it shut, then placed the new one beneath Kelly, along with a healthy sprinkle of powder.

Finished, Abi calmly stood behind Miles, as before. She clung to his arm, moving it slightly behind him. She placed the baby powder container into his palm.

"This whole thing has gone sour. I told you we never should have gotten Trevor Madden involved. Well, we wouldn't be in this jam otherwise. No...no, I'm not criticizing you. I just think we need to think this through. We can do them all, but I don't have a fricking clue where Chyna Brown is. She could put the whole operation in

jeopardy," he paused. "What do you mean, keep them on ice? Where? I don't like this. Yeah, we can trust Trent," Harry injected. "Damn it, I told you, she just disappeared."

Abi knew they were back to discussing Chyna. Leave it to her to cause a disturbance.

"Well, she couldn't go far with a broken leg and concussion. She's incredibly weak, too. If she does hide somewhere, she'll be going through the jitters pretty bad. Hell, how would I know? Okay. I'll find her. Haven't let you down yet, have I?"

When Harry hung up the phone, Abi glared at him. "What exactly did you do to my sister?"

"Nothin' she didn't want me to do. I'll find her and when I do, she'll be sorry she ran and caused me all this grief."

Without thinking, Abi grabbed the rolled-up baby diaper and tossed it at Harry. He defensively flexed his hands upward causing him to fire his gun at the ceiling.

Abi grabbed Kelly and sat on the floor against the wall. Trent shot a single bullet into the head of the large man standing behind Harry.

Miles had dived at Harry, getting him in the eyes with a good shot of baby powder. She cringed as Miles caught a fist to the lower left jaw. She nearly cheered as he answered the blow with a punch to Harry's stomach, causing him to momentarily fold. A smart upper cut caused Harry to stumble backwards, then drop like a water balloon. She said nothing when Scott and Miles cuffed Harry's hands behind his back.

"I hope you had Warrett listening to this whole damn thing," Trent said to Miles.

Miles rubbed his jaw and headed straight for Abi and Kelly. "You girls okay?" he asked.

Abi nodded, and welcomed Miles help getting them off the floor. Abi sat on the bed, shaken, yet relieved. "What does he mean?" she asked.

"Hang on a second," Miles said, grabbing his cell phone off the nightstand. "You get all that? I know, it was tense, Sir. You get the number Harry called? Good. You know anything about Chyna yet? Keep us posted."

"He got it?" Scott asked.

"Every last word. Your brother and his wife are in a safe house. They have your wife and daughter at headquarters. They aren't expecting any trouble. They have every man you named arrested, except for Skab, here."

"Skab? He's Skab's right-hand-man," Scott said, pointing at Harry. "I couldn't get to Skab."

"You're looking at him, Scott. That's his way of protecting himself. Skab's man wouldn't have called Weldron, only Skab himself would have known that number. We got him."

"I'll be damned! It's over then. I never would have believed this would work."

"You two were...he really was undercover?" Abi asked, staring at the two men. "It was ingenious, I didn't have a clue."

"Your reaction helped convince them we were sincere. You do have that tape, don't you," Trent asked. "Did you really send a copy to your attorney, Miles?"

Abi paused, glancing at the two men. She noticed Miles laughed, and patted Scott on the back.

"Would you believe there never was a video tape?"

"No shit?" Scott responded.

"Trevor was more stupid than smart. He threatened the entire organization with a tape that didn't exist. What I can't understand is how we didn't realize it."

"What do you mean?"

"I was there. You were there. Some guy who implied he was Skab was there. I actually thought that Skab shot me. Now I realize that's wrong, since old Harry Lindquin here is Skab. So, what was on this supposed tape that had everyone chasing everyone else in circles?"

"I don't know. I saw you go down and not much else registered. I knew if I went along, they'd trust me even more."

"Who was the bald guy?" Miles asked.

"Butch Waters. Guess he was FBI."

"I never heard that. Shit! So, what are we missing here?"

"I haven't a clue. But, if there's no tape, then what are we worrying about?"

"You know me, always worry about loose ends," Miles said, checking on Harry Lindquin, then picking up the man's gun. "Scott, tell me why you never drew your weapon at that meeting?"

"What the shit you talking about? I had my gun aimed right at Skab, or the guy I thought was Skab, from under my jacket. I could have shot him, but how would that have led us to all the others?"

"You got a point there. We did get them all, didn't we?"

"You damn right!"

Miles moved over toward Abi and smiled. "I heard wind that you really are in hock at the gaming tables again. Tell me I didn't hear right, Scott."

"Shit, you know rumors. I haven't had much time for gambling these days."

"I'll just bet you haven't, Skab," Miles said, raising his gun toward Scott.

"What the hell is this? I just saved your life, buddy," Scott snapped, his tone agitated.

"Don't play the game, Scott. It's over."

"How'd you know?" he asked, apparently surrendering to the truth.

"I wish I hadn't, but not for one little mistake, you'd have gotten away with it."

"What mistake?"

"The phone. Harry asked for your phone."

"So, why's that such a mistake?"

"He didn't dial a number. He pressed the dial tone, then an autodial button and a two-digit number. You had Weldron's number on your autodial. What does that say, Scott?"

"Shit. Listen, Miles, we go way back. We're partners, for God's sake. No harm has been done here. I gave up the entire organization. What more could you want?"

"Skab. He shot a FBI agent in cold blood. I didn't get it the first time I saw the video, because I was seeing how I thought it went down. Now I know what happened. The guy I thought was Skab shot me three times, and while I was preoccupied you shot

Butch Waters. He guessed you were Skab, so you had to silence him, is that right? I was too close and I didn't see shit. You used me and everyone around you."

"I thought you said there wasn't a video," Scott said, moving his hand toward the inside of his jacket.

"Don't do it, Scott. You do and so help me, I won't hesitate to shoot you."

"I know you, and believe me you'd never do that."

"You're wrong. Oh, maybe there was a time I couldn't have, but I can today. I know a wonderful woman and precious, little girl that need my protection. I won't let you hurt them, Scott."

"Miles, I can't go down for this. It'll just kill Molly and Janet to go through a trial. You know what happens to cops in the joint. God, Miles, just let me go. I'll disappear for good. At least you won't have to live with the fact you brought your own partner down. We've been like brothers."

"You should have thought about that when your men were tracking Abi, Kelly and me down. You should have thought about that when your man mistreated Chyna. You'd better hope we find her alive and well. Nothing you could say at this moment would make me put my gun down," Miles said, holding his cocked gun at Scott.

"You can't do this to me, Miles."

"Put your hands behind your back, Skab," Miles said, reaching into his pocket to retrieve a pair of handcuffs.

"Okay," Scott said, holding his hands behind him. "You know I'll get off. I do have connections. I'm a cop, for Christ's sake."

"You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. If you can't afford an attorney one will be appointed to you by the court. Do you understand your rights as read to you?" Miles asked, snapping the handcuffs in place.

Chapter Thirty-Six

"That really is a nice rock," Chyna said, then took another mouthful of chicken salad. "I can't believe you made him wait two years before you said yes. Miles is so head over heels in love with you and Kelly. I can't tell you how happy I am for you all."

"Thanks, Chyna. He took Kelly to the park so you and I could do lunch. It does both of them good to be together, just the two of them, bonding."

"I agree. With their red hair, no one would ever guess he wasn't her father."

"Did I tell you Hoss and Anne said they're bringing the whole family for our wedding? Little Abi and Kelley are going to be our flower girls."

"I think it's incredible they asked you and Miles to be Little Abi's Godparents. That's so sweet. You guys have really become close friends, haven't you?"

"Yes. Miles and I feel we owe them so much. They feel they owe us. Can't beat that for a solid friendship."

"Well, Anne is good for you," Chyna said.

"She'll never replace you, and you know it! I've been meaning to ask, would you be my maid-of-honor?" Chyna's high-pitched squeal embarrassed Abi. Everyone was staring at them as Chyna bolted toward Abi with a sisterly squeeze.

"I thought you'd never ask! You bet I will. When are we going to look at dresses? Oh, you are going to wait until I get my shape back, aren't you? I mean...ugh, I can't be dressed in a tank." Chyna paused, then took another forkful. "I don't think anything has ever tasted so good. I'm starving."

Abi laughed. "Of course we'll wait. The wedding won't be for another eight months," Abi said, then laughed. "You're going to be a house if you don't stop eating so much."

"Two Hawks said every pregnant woman in his family delivered eight or more pound babies. I'm starting to worry. Did I tell you that John was found guilty of bigamy? Of course I didn't! Harry actually told me one truth and it had to turn my life upside down at the time. I don't know if John will get sent to prison or receive years of community service. All those years with a man I, oh heck, why am I going over that? It really doesn't matter anymore. I think I've had enough excitement to last me a lifetime. I've never been happier."

"I can see that, and I'm happy for you both. Are you going to Arizona for the big powwow next month? Two Hawks said he's giving a blessing and is speaking to the young people. He's doing so much for the Native American people. I'm sure you're proud of him."

"I am going and I'm so proud of him. I told him about my dream when I was hurt and that old Indian man that helped me. He said it probably wasn't a dream. I don't know how those casts got on my legs, so it does make me wonder."

Abi smiled at her sister. "I have something to confess to you."

"You do? What? You've got my interest."

"You're a hopeless gossip."

"So, tell me!"

"All right! When you were missing, I had a dream, too."

"Oh, big confession."

"Be patient, Chyna. An old Indian man came to me and told me you were hurt and in danger. He said he was our great-great grandfather, Akatsis. I asked him what it meant, and he said rain roper or as the white man called it, rainbow."

"Naw, you're feeding me a line, aren't you?"

"No. I told Two Hawks this and he said it was real. He told me to tell you and that you'd be happy to know about your ancestors."

"Naw, you made it up and Two Hawks put you up to it, didn't he?"

"Nope. Great-Great Grandfather said you prayed for help and he answered your prayers," Abi explained. "Oh, he said he was Blackfoot."

"Did he say Blackfeet or Blackfoot?"

"He said Blackfoot. Why?"

"The old ones were Blackfoot and then later on the US Government changed their name to Blackfeet."

"So you believe me?"

"What can I say? Someone put those casts on my legs. Someone pulled the thorns and needles from my arms and bandaged them up. Someone made a fire to keep me warm and sang songs to help me sleep. Yes, I believe you, sort of."

Abi smiled. "I still can't believe that money clip and watch you grabbed off Harry's dresser became the key evidence in that whole trial."

"I'm still shocked by that one, too. You know how close I came to not grabbing them? I still don't know what possessed...wait, do you think Great-Great Grandfather guided me? I mean, maybe he knew that money clip had Harry's fingerprints on it. He might have known it had an engraving on the back to implicate his friendship with Alex Weldron. Maybe Great-Great Grandfather knew Trent grabbed that watch off the arm of that FBI agent, Butch Waters, and gave it to Harry, and that both their fingerprints were on it. Being a spirit he would know and see so much."

"Are you going to start attributing everything that happens to Great-Great Grandfather Rainbow?" Abi asked, giggling at the sound of it.

"I can't imagine a rough, tough Indian being named rainbow. I would rather he had a name like Bear Hunter, Great Eagle, or Running Buffalo. But, Rainbow?"

"Chyna, you're not looking at this the right way. His name truly means rain roper. He had to have been a great medicine man, like your Two Hawks. Maybe you should ask him to see if he could find out more about Great-Great Grandfather Akastsis."

"I like how it sounds in Blackfoot. I'll ask Two Hawks about it tonight. Now, you feel like pie when we're done? I think coconut cream sounds good."

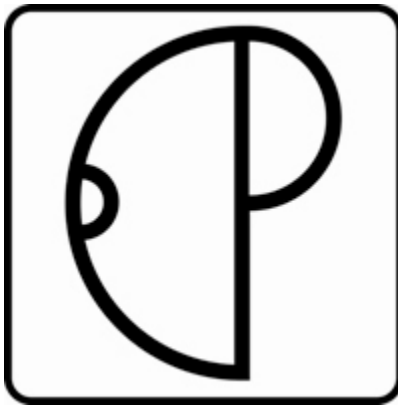
"You're hopeless Chyna," Abi said, glancing down at her beautiful engagement ring.

About the Author

Rita Karnopp has been writing for over fifteen years. Although originally from Wisconsin, she and her husband have lived in Montana for the past thirty-two years. She's drawn to the history of the Native American and strives to bring alive the authenticity of a time past. When writing suspense or contemporary romance she enjoys bringing excitement and the enduring power of love to her stories. Prior to the release of *Revenge*, her Eternal Press releases are *Wind Song*, *Dark Spirit*, and *Ransom Love*. Coming in January 2009 Eternal Press will release *Kidnapped*. When she isn't reading, writing or doing research, she enjoys making dream catchers, gold panning, crystal digging, rafting, fishing, canoeing, and spending time with her family.

She invites you to visit her website at...

www.ritaritr.com.



Rita Karnopp

Available now from Eternal Press

Dark Spirit

by Rita Karnopp

Fear and loneliness control Blackfeet historian, I-nis'-kim's life. Each lecture produces another death, for which he isn't guilty, and is only steps ahead of the police. He isolates himself. until he meets the beautiful, intriguing Skyler Grinnell.

Skyler's quiet and lonely world is turned upside down by the handsome and mysterious I-nis'-kim. But is this man what he says, or is he a clever killer? Could she not only be in danger of losing her heart but her life as well?

The killer is quick, relentless, and frighteningly efficient. In spite of the suspicions and danger, I-nis'-kim and Skyler are drawn together with a force that ignites their passion. Yet, that promise of love is threatened by deadly secrets and a killer who wants them both dead.

In'is'kim grimaced in pain. The loss of blood had taken a considerable toll on his strength. He struggled with his emotions. He couldn't fail Skyler now. He'd promised her and himself he'd protect her. He wouldn't let the killer get her.

She was off on her own. In danger. Possibly at the mercy of the killer, while he hid like a rabbit. He shamed himself as well as his ancestors.

With effort, he tore the jean material back from the wound on each side and laid it back to expose the deep gash. He'd have to cauterize it shut, removing the danger of it bleeding again. He lifted the poultice of ek-siso-ke. His grandmother had long ago told him that bear grass roots placed on cuts would stop bleeding and help any inflammation.

In'is'kim decided to chance making a small fire, getting it quickly red-hot to eliminate smoke.

"What the blazes are you doing?"

A backpack-laden Skyler stood before him. "Getting ready to fix my wound." He held his knife over the flames.

"Don't tell me you're going to. God, I can't even say it."

"Cauterize? No choice."

"That'll hurt like hell. You can't possibly think you're going to do that to yourself, do you?" She dropped to the ground and slid out from beneath his heavy pack.

"Dang, you carried that here? I'm impressed."

"Didn't do it to impress you. Just thought we'd need the contents to survive."

He couldn't help admiring her. "Why don't you turn your back and I'll get this over with."

"Not likely. Can't say I have the stomach for it, but you'd better let me do it."

In'is'kim stared at her. Could she be serious? "You don't have to. I can?"

"What? Can't accept my help? We'd better get it done with and get this fire out before our shadow notices."

He knew she was right. Once the pain gripped him, he might not even stay conscious, then what would happen with the hot knife. "Here," he said, clenching his teeth. "I'll press the skin together. You place the hot knife right across it. Do it quickly-now!"

Hellfire tore into his thigh. Burning flesh and hair, his flesh and hair filled the air. Bile rose in his throat. He fought it down. He fought the dark wave that assaulted his awareness. He blinked hard, again and again. He shook his head and Skyler's shadow came into view.

"You okay?"

Her words seemed far away. He wanted to answer but his mouth didn't seem capable of working. Heaviness weighed him down, and he couldn't fight it.

Rita Karnopp

Available now from Eternal Press

Ransom Love

by Rita Karnopp

Montana Territory-1868.

After spending four years as a captive of the Blackfeet, Jennie Proctor must decide whether to trust the handsome white man who has come to rescue her, or spend the rest of her life a Blackfeet.

Cody Larimer has one goal in life: to rescue captive women from Indians. When he finds the beautiful and haunted Jennie Proctor, the last thing he expects is for her to tell him to leave her with the Blackfeet!

However, Jennie's situation soon changes, and she and Cody must struggle together if they wish to survive. Feelings of anger and mistrust soon develop into mutual respect and love, leaving both of them with something neither believed possible.

A'hwa Waki noticed the women were settling down on the grass just beyond the cluster of cottonwoods, facing the ancient ceremonial site. Laughs Behind Hand stood chatting with her mother, pointing in A'hwa Waki's direction.

Could they have noticed the white man in the tree? She felt her muscles tense.

A group of warriors, their faces painted black with red lightning streaks, beat rhythmically on drums, chanting. Many women sang in shrill harmonizing voices. The atmosphere was one of anticipation... not fear.

No, A'hwa Waki finally decided, if the women had noticed the white man, things would be in an uproar by now.

"Kai yiwahts, A'hwa Waki?" Mahkwoyi called out to her.

Revenge

She glanced toward the warrior and found him watching her. His expression asked what troubled her. If only he knew, she thought, leaning against the cottonwood. If only he knew a white man sat above her, wanting to take her away. A'hwa Waki smiled in an attempt to appear relaxed. The handsome warrior standing within the white-painted rock circle had become her confidante, her friend, her... soon-to-be husband. Instincts warned her not to reveal the white man's presence, yet a nagging feeling of betrayal existed.

Rita Harnoff

Available now from Eternal Press

Captive Angel

by Wendy Stone

When a young and beautiful doctor is kidnapped from her hospital parking lot, she finds herself fighting for more than just her own life. There is a gorgeous specimen of a male who also needs her expert, healing touch. Can this Angel of Mercy find a way out for the two of them?

With a suddenness that startled a shriek out of her, he turned, pressing her against the wall, his hand grabbing her other wrist and holding them pinned beside her shoulders. His body leaned against hers, his lips holding her mouth captive while he feasted on her flavor.

She tasted of coffee and mint, and dark passion that enticed him to explore further, his tongue rubbing against her own with an intimacy that had her heart pounding and her head swimming. Her breath came in harsh pants against his skin, her hands fighting his grip, wanting to touch him, to stroke all that male flesh that had been driving her mad this past week. But he wouldn't release her hands, instead, rubbing against her, spreading her jean clad thighs with his leg until he could push against her sex with his knee. He found the seam of her jeans, using it to stimulate her until she moaned under his lips.

He tore his mouth from hers, staring down into her half open, sleepy green eyes. "I want you," he growled, pressing his groin against her to emphasize the statement.

"Yes," she managed to whisper before his lips were on hers again, but this time, he released her wrists, his hands going to her waist, holding her against him, pulling at the long sleeved T-shirt that she had tucked into her jeans. He pulled it out slowly, seeming to tease her with his movements, causing her stomach to flutter in delight.