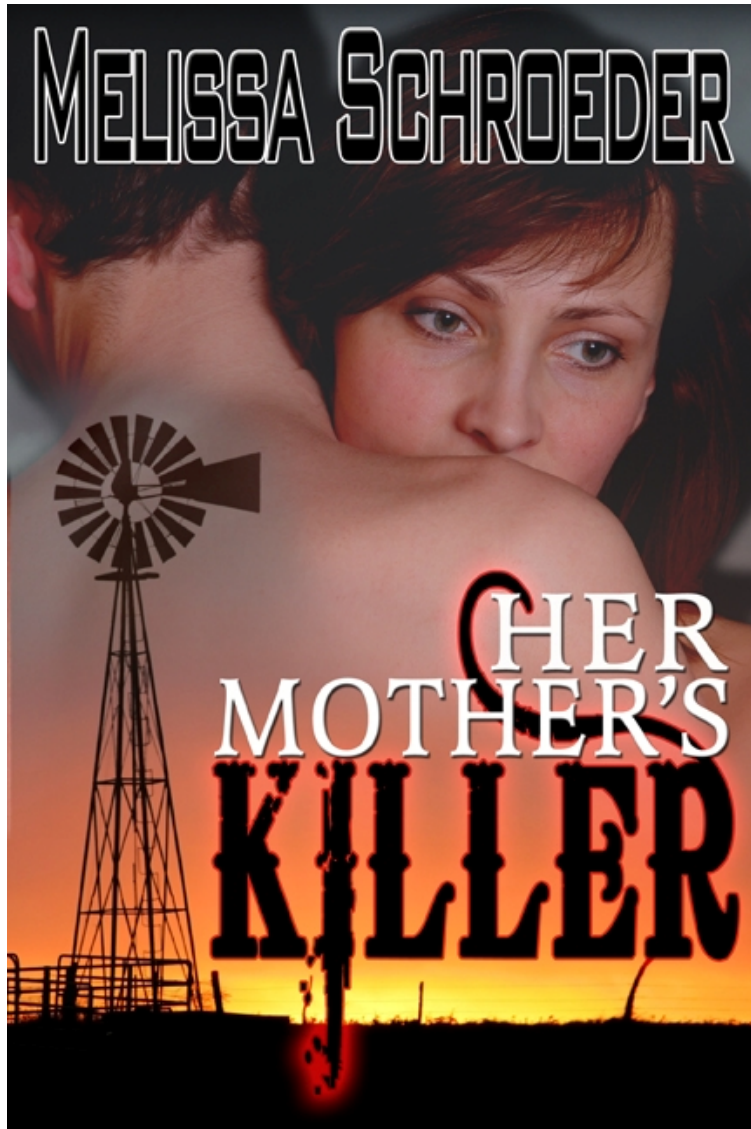


MELISSA SCHROEDER



HER  
MOTHER'S  
**KILLER**

# **HER MOTHER'S KILLER**

by

**Melissa Schroeder**

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***The Hired Hand***

Marlow Smith never expected a gigolo for her birthday present, and she definitely didn't expect to use his services. When business consultant, Liam Campbell, her "gigolo" shows up at her family business as their hired consultant, Marlow has no idea the moment he sees her again, Liam has plans for not only her body but also her heart.

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## **Dedication**

To Les and the girls, for everything you three do.



## Prologue

A flash of light in Thea Warren's rearview mirror sent her stomach tumbling.

*There isn't anyone following me.*

Several strange letters and a few hang-ups late at night didn't mean anything. Neighbors from her small subdivision in a rural suburb of Atlanta frequently used this road late at night. No reason for the chills racing down her arms.

She gripped the wheel tighter, her knuckles aching from the pressure. The car drew closer, and she slowed her pace thinking he would pass her. Praying he would. He matched her speed. Panic snaked down her spine.

*At least five more miles.* She scanned the side of the deserted road. No shoulder and no turnoff before she reached her subdivision.

*No one to witness an accident, no one to testify in court.*

She shoved those thoughts to the back of her mind.

The light reflected in her mirror brightened then dimmed. He flashed his brights. She sped up. If he wasn't going to pass her, she was going to try to put some distance between them.

He kept pace, inching closer to her bumper. Sweat gathered between her shoulder blades and dribbled down her back.

If she could keep him away from her bumper for a few more miles, she'd be safe.

"Just a few more miles." She repeated it over and over like a mantra.

A moment later, the driver slowed down. She sighed but kept her hands tight on the wheel. The wooden fence surrounding her development came into view. A small trickle of relief relaxed the muscles in her shoulders.

Lights flashed in her mirror as the car sped toward her. The bump jolted her. Her tail end fishtailed. Terror screamed through her system. *Avoid the brake and turn into the spin.*

The moment she straightened the car, the other driver jammed her bumper again. A spike of fear spread through her as the car spun out of control. This time, her whole body flew forward, her hands losing their grip on the steering wheel. She closed her eyes against the dizzying landscape soaring past her window. The car crashed into the mud wall of a ditch. A shard of pain radiated from her forehead after it hit the steering wheel. She blinked, bright stars flashed in front of her eyes. The squeal of the other car's tires sounded and then everything faded into darkness.



## **Chapter 1**

Thea jerked awake.

*Where am I?*

She sat up. Sitting on the unfamiliar bed, fear slithered down her spine, paralyzing her. Then the scent of stale cigarette smoke filled her senses.

*The motel in Vicksburg.*

The last cobwebs of the nightmare drifted away. She sighed as the terror drained from her mind.

There was something new about the dream. She could still hear the screams, taste the fear she felt that night. But the dream was sharper than it had been in years. Since her accident six months earlier, her fear achieved a higher level. Somehow, the night of her accident and the night of her mother's murder had melded together in her subconscious and terrorized her in her dreams. She shivered as a trickle of sweat dripped down between her breasts. She licked her lips, her mouth as dry as cotton.

Thea shoved the covers aside, rose from the bed and padded barefoot to the vanity and flipped on the light, wincing at the harshness of the glare. Her red-rimmed eyes spoke of her lack of sleep and her hair looked like a rat's nest. She rubbed her temple trying to grasp what the dream had been about.

*Screams, yelling, blood-chilling terror.* Nothing new.

Every night for months after her mother's murder, she woke, screaming, her hair soaked with sweat and the stench of death fill-

ing her senses. She never remembered what had happened that night almost twenty years ago, but the dreams still haunted her.

Eventually, time had withered the sharpness of the memory, and there were times when all she could remember from the dream were shadows and assumptions. But lately, especially since the letters began arriving, the fog surrounding her memory seemed to be evaporating.

It was one of the reasons she decided to return to Texas after her divorce had been finalized. Going home just might put it all to rest or it could cause her another whole multitude of problems. Either way, she couldn't sit around waiting for the next incident to occur. It would've really driven her insane.

As she undressed, she remembered her ex-husband's reaction to the letters that had begun arriving five years ago. Jason had accused her of sending the letters to herself for attention. Then about two years ago, she started receiving hang-ups at home. The number had been blocked and she never had any proof of anyone stalking her.

So, she'd tried to ignore it. But during the past year, every now and then, the hair at the nape of her neck stirred as if someone's gaze followed her every move. She'd made the mistake of telling Jason her worries. Not only had he proclaimed her insane, he'd spread it around work that she'd become delusional. Two weeks later, her one-car accident confirmed everyone's suspicions.

She sighed once again, shaking free of the morbid memories. Living in the past was what got her in this mess. Stepping into the shower, she allowed the hot water to relax her muscles and numb her mind. She'd worry about the past once she got back to Crocker.

\* \* \* \*

Duncan Perry did a double take at the ruby-red SUV that pulled into the gas station. It wasn't familiar to him, and neither was the curvy brunette who stepped out to fill it up. In a town of

less than five thousand, he knew most everyone, especially the curvy brunettes. Figuring his job as sheriff gave him the opening he needed, he pulled in opposite her on the other side of the pump.

He watched, bemused as she dropped her credit card and cursed. The particular word had him raising his eyebrows. She bent over to pick up the card drawing his attention to the denim material drawing tight over a well rounded ass. He sighed in appreciation and stepped out of his patrol car.

She turned around just as he straightened from the car. The moment their gazes met, she smiled and for a second his mind stopped working. Full, red lips, porcelain skin, marred only by a rash of freckles over an upturned nose and the most amazing green eyes he'd ever seen. He found himself responding in kind.

"Hi." Her husky voice had a hint of Texas twang.

Heat raced along his nerve endings. "Hi, yourself."

Her eyes widened slightly at his flirtatious tone, then she laughed. And not a simple little giggle, a flat-out belly laugh.

"I've been accused of having a sense of humor from time to time, but I rarely get that kind of reaction from saying hello."

"I'm sorry, this is just too funny." She snorted a few times and visibly tried to get her mirth under control. "Wait until I talk to Jed. He'll get a real kick out of this."

The mention of his lifelong best friend had his mind reaching a conclusion his body didn't want to accept. He shook his head. "Thea?"

"In the flesh." She stepped forward and gave him a quick hug. The feel of her warm curves pressed against him had his blood heading south before she broke the brief contact.

He cleared his throat trying to get his hormones back under control but didn't have much luck. "I had no idea you were back in town for a visit."

She cocked her head to one side. "I never said I was here for a visit."

Oh, yeah, now he could remember that smart mouth. It'd gotten her in more than one argument in school, and with her brother. And if she thought someone wanted something from her, she would make dang sure they didn't get it.

"Jed didn't mention you were coming into town."

She snorted. "Sorry. I forgot to check in with my warden, but Jed doesn't know. I mentioned I was moving back to Texas, I just hadn't said where." She shrugged. "When I decided, he was unreachable."

On assignment undercover for the Texas Department of Safety is what she meant. "Yeah, he said something about being gone for a while the last time we talked."

"Anyway, I gotta get going. I'm staying with Gwen Childress and I want to get there before she has to run out for some parent's meeting or something at the school."

"Thea, it's Friday night, in October." When she looked at him strangely, he said, "Football, darling."

"Oh, yeah, well they have that in Georgia too, but when you live in a big city...it's just a little different. And I know Gwen doesn't like to miss any school events."

She leaned up on her tiptoes, brushing her lips against his cheek. For a moment, his heart almost stopped at the soft feel of her mouth against his flesh, the spicy scent of her clogging his senses. When she stepped back, he drew in a deep breath, trying to calm his reaction.

"See ya around, Duncan."

A moment later, he was watching her taillights as she drove down the street. He rubbed the tight ball in his stomach and willed away the attraction. It wasn't that dating a sister of a friend was that off limits, but seeing that he practically grew up as Thea's surrogate older brother, it seemed somehow...well, not right.

Sliding into his car, he decided to head back to the office to see if he could locate Jed. It'd be interesting to find out if Jed had any ideas why his sister might be back in town.

\* \* \* \*

Thea dropped the last of her three suitcases on the floor in Gwen's guest bedroom and then collapsed on the bed closing her eyes. She wasn't unloading all the pots and pans she'd brought. Those dang things weighed a ton, and even if they were her pride and joy, she figured it wouldn't hurt to leave them in her vehicle until she moved to her rental house.

God, she was tired. It wasn't enough that she'd driven the six hours from Vicksburg and looked horrible, she had to run into Duncan Perry. She sighed.

"From the sound of that sigh, you could do with a good cup of coffee."

Opening her eyes, she smiled at Gwen. A few years older than Thea, Gwen had been one of the few people Thea had kept contact with over the years. Tall, almost six feet, she had the lanky build of a swimmer, lean, muscled, but feminine at the same time. At one time, Gwen and Jed had been a pretty hot item. Everyone had assumed they'd marry, but after their parents' murders, Jed had broken things off. It had been his last serious relationship.

"Coffee would be fabulous." She stood and gave Gwen a hug then released her. "It's good to be back."

Gwen turned, leading Thea back to the kitchen. "Tough day?"

"You don't know the half of it. I get here, and the first thing I do is pull into that new convenience store. You know the one Old Man Myers used to run?"

Gwen nodded as she retrieved a couple mugs. "He sold out about three years ago when he decided to retire. Moved down to Corpus Christi."

Thea took her mug and poured her coffee. As she doctored it with sweetener and lots of cream, she said, "Well, there I was,

picking up my credit card, my big butt in the air, and guess who drives up?"

Gwen's eyes widened as she took a sip. "Who?"

"Duncan Perry." She snorted. "Just what I needed. The only consolation I have is he didn't recognize me at first."

"How do you know that?"

"He was flirting with me."

There was a beat of silence and then Gwen started laughing. "Oh, my, that must have thrown him for a loop."

Thea chuckled herself when she remembered the expression on his face. "Yeah, he was mortified."

"Hmm, mortified is one expression I've never seen on his face."

"Anyway, he tried to find out what I was doing here."

Gwen laughed. "Yeah, like it's a big secret. Did you tell him you were moving back?"

"Not in so many words. He said something about talking to Jed, and that just irritated me. I'm almost thirty, I shouldn't have to check in with my brother."

"I agree." Gwen studied her. "You did tell Jed you were moving here, didn't you?"

"Yeah, well, I said Texas. At the time, I wasn't sure. Then he went undercover."

"He isn't going to be happy."

"Jed's never happy. Especially where I'm concerned."

Gwen didn't say anything to that as she emptied the rest of her coffee in the sink.

"I have to get changed and get back up to the school."

Thea nodded. "I figure that Yardley's Grocery will be dead tonight so I'll probably run by there and pick up a few things." When Gwen opened her mouth to argue, Thea stopped her by raising her hand. "No. I need a few things, and really, Gwen, you

have...*margarine*. My little chef's heart almost died when I saw that."

She smiled, as Thea had hoped. Stepping forward, she embraced Thea again. "It's so good to have you back."

After Gwen released her, Thea watched her walk out of the kitchen. She sighed, thinking of Jed and Gwen. It was always a touchy subject. Thea knew her brother and Gwen still had feelings for each other, but they were too stubborn to change their present course. Everyone had thought they would be married, the date had been discussed, then Jed and Thea's mother had been killed and her father disappeared. Everything fell apart for both of them at that point.

Gwen had tried marriage once, divorcing after a couple years. There was something about the way she avoided the subject, the sad look in her eyes that told Thea it hadn't been a pleasant marriage. But knowing how much Jed irritated her when he butted into her life, Thea had decided not to interfere. Even if her heart ached for the two people she loved most in the world.

She shook herself and decided to make a list and head to Yardley's. As tired as she was, she would be lucky if she stayed awake long enough to put the groceries away.

Fifteen minutes later, she slipped into her SUV, her mind still on the things she needed to buy. It wasn't until she pulled out of the drive and was heading down the street that she noticed the piece of paper sitting on the passenger's seat.

Her heart stuttered then dropped to her stomach as she pulled over to the side of the road. Fingers trembling, she unfolded the paper.

*Thea, my love, you have returned. I'm watching over you.*

*I am the only one who understands you.*

Even as fear coiled at the base of her spine, her mind shifted through the evidence. Carefully, she folded the note and dropped it into her console storage. There wouldn't be any fingerprints and

no one really knew she was there, not yet. Only people who'd seen her come into town, would have known.

Or someone who had been watching all along.

\* \* \* \*

Happiness warmed him as he thought of her.

*My Thea, my love.* She'd finally returned to him. He shivered as he thought of the way she looked at the gas station. So beautiful...so pure.

Of course, she didn't understand. He knew she didn't. But he would make her see. She would realize they were meant to be. No one stood in their way. They would be together for eternity. Nothing would touch them. And she had returned to him. It was a sign.

But until she understood, until she accepted her destiny, he had to satisfy this need, this lust.

A young woman, cute, dark-haired stood by the side of the road. He slowed down and she ran to catch up to him. He rolled down the window and she leaned into the car. He smiled when he saw her green eyes.

*Oh, she'd do just fine for now.*



## **Chapter 2**

Duncan walked into the office. After taking off his hat, he tossed it on the rack and then glanced around the room. As usual for a Friday afternoon, it was slow. The calm before the storm. Friday nights always kept the crew hopping. The time before the game started was a pleasant lull.

Gina, his secretary slash dispatcher, sat at her desk, painting her nails, again. Five-nine, built like Marilyn Monroe, she never lacked attention from her favorite passion—men. Her natural blond hair and her baby blue eyes, not to mention the sweeter than cream skin, attracted all types of men. She'd been married and divorced three times before the age of thirty.

Duncan had always been thankful they'd never dated. After she dumped each man, she spent the next few weeks disparaging everything from their lack of attention to their lack of cock size. Thanks to her, he knew more about the male population of Crocker and exactly what they did or didn't do in bed than he wanted to.

"Gina," he said with a sigh, "could you at least pretend to have something to do?"

"I do. I have to get ready for my date tonight. Oh, and..." she stopped her task and carefully lifted a fax between the palms avoiding her nails, "this came in. Seems they found a woman, murdered, no ID in a ditch off of I-20 west of Abilene."

Although he gave her a hard time about her work, Gina was the most efficient clerk they'd ever employed. In fact, the office

would be lost without her. He knew Richard and Lou would never be able to work the fax machine.

He glanced over the fax realizing the woman had been found less than an hour's drive from Crocker. He made a mental note of the incident and set the fax on the counter. "Pin that up on the bulletin board if you can find the time. Who are you going out with tonight?"

"Mike Newhouse." She blew on her freshly painted nails.

"The produce manager at Yardley's?" He thought of Mike, with his horn-rimmed glasses and quiet ways. Not her usual type, but he wasn't sure she had one. She'd probably demolish the guy.

"Yeah." She looked up at him, her eyes narrowing as she studied his face. "You met a woman."

Damn, he hated when she did that. It was kind of creepy the way she could know what was going on with him. He was pretty sure she paid for spies all over town.

With what he hoped was a casual shrug, he said, "I've been on patrol."

She snorted. "That's never stopped you before. Spill it, Perry."

"She's not a woman, she's Thea Johnson."

Gina cocked her head to one side. "I didn't know she was back in town for a visit."

Duncan remembered Thea's comment. "Didn't say it was for a visit."

Her eyes alit with interest. "What do you think she's doing here? What did she look like?"

He should be used to the sick fascination that Crocker residents had with the Warren family. If he looked at it objectively, he could say he understood it to a degree. But the idea left a dirty taste in his mouth. He still considered Jed his best friend even if he did disappear for huge chunks of time thanks to his job.

Realizing Gina was staring at him waiting for an answer, he said, "She looks a lot like her mother."

Gina's chair squeaked as she leaned back. "I remember her. Margie was hot."

"Why I had no idea you swung that way, Gina."

She offered him a smile that was all teeth and no warmth. "I should, figuring I've reached the end of the line going out with Mike."

"If you don't like him, why are you going out with him?"

She shrugged. "He asked, and I have a feeling it probably took him three weeks to work up the nerve. I didn't have the heart to turn him down. And don't think I can't tell you're trying to change the subject."

He offered her an innocent smile. "Would I do that?"

"Without a second thought. And that tells me you're hiding something."

Nothing other than the momentary spurt of lust he'd felt for Thea. Granted, any heterosexual man with his head screwed on tight would be attracted to her, but it didn't erase the fact he'd always felt like her brother. Until this afternoon.

"I'm an open book."

She snorted and opened her mouth but the ringing telephone stopped her comment. Knowing he'd been given a reprieve, he ducked out of the reception area and into the safety of his office. After closing the door behind him, he settled in the chair behind his desk and thought about his encounter with Thea. Not like he'd thought about much else since she'd left him at the gas station. It was decidedly uncomfortable that every time he thought of her, his blood heated. If he'd known from the beginning it was her, he probably wouldn't have reacted the way he did.

He closed his eyes as he leaned his head back. The image of the faded, worn denim stretching across her full ass. He could imagine slipping his hands over her flesh, the way it would pinken after he

smacked it. His cock jerked at the image and he opened his eyes. Okay, so maybe it wouldn't have mattered if he'd known who she was. He wouldn't let it bother him, or affect him in any way. It wasn't like he would act on the attraction.

Thinking of her at the gas station brought back to mind the conversation and her evasion of what she was doing there. With that, he decided to give Jed a call and see if he knew or if he had any idea just what the hell Thea was up to.

\* \* \* \*

Thea stepped out of her SUV in the parking lot at Yardley's. She'd predicted correctly when she said it would be dead. Football season in the small towns of Texas left very few people out on the streets. As she watched the tan sedan park in the front row, she thought it a shame not everyone followed that tradition.

She didn't fight the irritation or the groan when she recognized Richard White. Five years older than Thea, and a football buddy of her brother's, Richard had tormented her endlessly whenever they had crossed paths. His favorite taunt was usually calling her tubbo. Richard wasn't known for his witty humor.

He stepped out of the car and waited for her to gain the sidewalk. When she did, he stepped into her path. She looked up at him noting the changes in him, none of them in his favor. Any remaining evidence he had been the starting center for the Crocker High School football team that had won the 2-A championship twenty-one years ago had vanished. Gone were the muscles and the good looks. Before he had put on his hat, she'd seen the balding head where there had once been thick wheat-colored hair. His physique suffered from a beer gut that threatened the durability of his belt and the buttons on his shirt.

He licked his lips, and asked, "Can I help you with something?"

"No. Just picking up a few things."

"I know just about everyone in this town, but I don't recognize you." His pale blue eyes narrowed and then lit with recognition. "Thea Johnson? Holy shit, I had no idea you were back in town."

"Well, now you do." She moved to brush past him but he slipped into her path.

"Last time I saw Jed, he didn't say anything about you coming back."

Considering that Jed didn't talk to Richard, he wasn't exactly lying, but she figured she wouldn't mention it.

"It's been nice talking to you."

He took a menacing step closer, his body within inches of hers and she fought the urge to move back. He licked his lips again and then they turned up in a mocking smile.

"So, I see you finally went on a diet."

Facing him, her stomach roiled as the scent of onions and cheap aftershave mixed with sweat drifted over her. She clenched her fists and took a deep breath. She would not lose her temper or back down. She forced herself to smile.

"You know, once again I'm amazed at your quick wit, *Dick*."

His smile faded, his nostrils flared. The familiar unease she'd always felt around him settled in her belly churning the little bit of coffee she'd drank at Gwen's. It was always like this with Richard. He'd never been anything but a bully. Still, whenever he got within five feet of her, her skin crawled.

Before he could return the jab, someone called his name. She watched the inner struggle between answering the summons and blasting her. After a few seconds, he clenched his jaw, spun around and walked over to the older gentleman who'd called him.

Seeing this might be her only chance to escape, she hurried into Yardley's. Twenty minutes later, she turned down the pasta aisle and silently bemoaned their selection. For a small-town grocery store, it was well stocked, but she'd known some items would have

to be shipped in. And, as she looked over the well organized pasta section, she realized she might need to do quite a bit of shopping online. As she bent to look at the lower shelves, footsteps sounded behind her.

She turned and smiled when she saw Chase Perry, Duncan's little brother. A couple years younger than Thea, they'd never been really good friends in high school. He'd looked her up when he moved to Georgia to attend the University of Georgia. They struck up a friendship and he'd even been out to her house a few times for dinner.

Just an inch or two shorter than Duncan, Chase had sparkling green eyes and a constant smile. Lean, with the streamlined body of a swimmer, he rarely lacked dates, especially with his expertise at flirting. The four years he lived in Georgia, she'd never seen him with the same woman twice.

"Thea," he said, his voice filled with genuine surprise and delight. "I had no idea you were here. Are you in town for a visit?"

Without waiting for her answer, he pulled her into his arms for a hug.

"No. I assume you haven't seen Duncan this evening."

He released her, but slung his arm over her shoulders in a brotherly fashion.

"I haven't seen Dunc in a couple of days. I've been out of town on business."

"I'm moving back."

His eyebrows rose to his hairline. "And?"

"And what?"

He rolled his eyes. "And what about Jason?"

"Do you and Duncan ever talk?"

"Well, not much. Like I said, someone kept me out of town last night."

She laughed. "I thought it was work."

"She was. You don't know how much work she was. Now, tell me that you'll go out to dinner with me tonight. Or maybe, you could cook for me." His cheek dimpled.

"Chase, I just got into town tonight. I'm not cooking for you."

"How about some Frito pie then?"

For a second, her mind didn't adjust. "Frito pie?"

"You know, open a small bag of Frito chips, pour the chili on, cheese on top of that."

"Oh, the game." She made a face. "No way. I hate football."

He leaned back and gave her a look of mock horror. "I don't think that's allowed in Texas. I'm sure there is a state law against the hatred of football. Actually, there might some kind of fine for just saying it out loud."

She laughed again. "Chase, I just got back into town today. I still have some of my cookware in the car. I'm not in the mood to do something I like, let alone go to a Crocker football game."

Without missing a beat, he suggested, "I could help you unpack."

"I'm not cooking for you and that's final."

He sighed. "Well, a man can dream."

With any other man, she would have been irritated. Chase had a way of putting people at ease. The teasing wasn't so much sexual as it was just natural to his character.

"So, what's a hot commodity like you doing alone on a Friday night?"

"Trying to convince an attractive woman to cook for me."

She opened her mouth to respond when a deep, rich male voice interrupted her.

"I see you've already fallen into the company of unsavory characters."

Duncan's mind couldn't function. The red haze of anger still pulsed in front of his eyes as he watched the two of them turn to face him. He couldn't believe his little brother was putting the

moves on Thea less than twenty-four hours after she arrived in town. He understood completely. Wearing a tight red sweater that accentuated the golden undertone of her skin, not to mention the generous curve of her breasts.

"I take offense to that comment," Chase said, but the smile belied his statement. "How's tricks tonight, Dunc?"

He rocked back on his heels trying his best to fight the rising tide of jealousy coursing through his blood. It was the only word to describe the emotion that had him contemplating ways to tear off his brother's arms and beat him over the head with them.

"Not much going on tonight. I got Michael and Richard covering the game."

"I just saw D— Richard out front," Thea said.

"Yeah, I sent him on his way."

"Always the sheriff," Chase said, though there was no heat in his words.

"More like a den mother," Duncan said with a wry grin. "Not like there would be much there tonight, but there's always some fight over a woman." He turned his attention to Thea and tried to ignore the bolt of lust that sizzled through him. "What are you doing here?"

The narrowing of her eyes was the only indication he'd irritated her. "What do most people do in a grocery store?"

He didn't miss the sarcasm in her voice. "I thought you just got into town."

"Which would mean I would need groceries," she said in a tone he'd heard his sister use with her three year old.

He shrugged off her comment because responding to her would cause him to look like more of an idiot than he already did. When he glanced at his brother, he fought the cringe at Chase's raised eyebrow. "How did the meeting go in Dallas?"

"Fine. We now have Pendleton Advertising representing us."

"I'm sure that has nothing to do with Carrie Pendleton?"



"Of course not. I'm trying to get Thea here to cook for me tonight."

She snorted. "Yeah, and when I told you no, you offered me Frito pie. Not very enticing."

His brother's lips curved. "That's a Texas delicacy, Thea."

Thea made a face. "Filled with all kinds of preservatives and I am sure nitrates. All horrible for you."

"But it tastes so good."

She opened her mouth to argue with Chase but Duncan stopped them with a comment. "I tried getting hold of Jed today."

She sent him a frown but he would rather she be mad at him than paying attention to Chase. It was juvenile and made him feel like a kindergartener with a crush on his teacher. There was nothing he could do to stop it. Something deep inside of him wanted every bit of her attention, good or bad, on him.

"Why?"

He raised one eyebrow. "Why do you think?"

She shrugged off his brother's arm and took a step forward. Her body vibrated with irritation. "Because you're just as nosey as he is. I take it you didn't talk to him."

He smiled but said nothing. Mainly because he knew it would aggravate her.

Anger sent an attractive flush to her skin, creeping up her neck and then into her face. Her eyes narrowed, darkened. Duncan wasn't sure he'd ever seen that particular shade before. They weren't completely green, nor totally blue. He'd give anything to see what they looked like as passion took over.

That thought had him taking a step back to resist the temptation she presented.

"No, I didn't talk to him. I left him a message."

"He hasn't contacted me in several weeks, so I'm not sure how long it'll be."

"I can sometimes get a hold of him faster than you with my contacts in Texas." He glanced at his brother and inwardly cringed at the considering look he was giving the two of them. "Have you talked to Mom about that new company you signed?"

Before his brother could answer, Thea said, "Listen, it sounds like you two have some things to discuss."

"Oh, hey, don't let big brother run you off." Chase was already reaching for her and Duncan couldn't quite stop a growl. The smile Chase tossed in his direction told Duncan he'd heard it but Thea gave no indication she had.

"No, really. I'm exhausted from the trip. I just want to get back to Gwen's and collapse in bed." She gave Chase the same sisterly peck on the cheek she had given Duncan at the gas station and said, "Tell Jed I do have the same cell number."

As they watched her leave, Chase said, "She's too young for you."

Duncan snorted. "She's too old for you."

His brother glanced at him. "I doubt that. Besides, I know her better than you do. And I know this isn't the time to be hitting on her."

The steel he heard beneath his brother's usually affable tone caught his attention. "Just what the hell are you implying?"

"That you have your eye on Thea."

He snorted. "And just what were you doing?"

"We're friends."

"Friends? You barely know each other."

Chase shook his head. "I got to know her and her husband—"

"Ex-husband."

Chase acknowledged the correction with a nod. "He was an asshole, but for some reason she stuck with him. I'm assuming she loved him, why I will never know."

"So you met him?"

"Yeah. Jackass doesn't cover his personality."

"I know Jed didn't like him, but I just assumed because she married him without Jed's consent. Either way, I gotta get back to the department. I'm manning the phones."

Something caught his brother's attention behind Duncan and he turned to see Miss Petrie, the retired science teacher who had taught both of them in high school, studying the selection of pasta sauces. "I have to go now." He waited for Duncan's nod and headed down the aisle after the teacher. "Miss Petrie, don't tell me you're walking by without saying hello. It'd break my heart." A little tinkle of a laugh floated toward him and Duncan smiled. The man could charm a woman out of her clothes in a minute.

By the time he returned to the office, Gina was fuming.

"It took you long enough."

He grunted. "I could make you work every Friday night for the rest of the football season."

With a toss of her head, she turned to leave. "Just remember I know most of your ex-girlfriends. One of them has to have something incriminating."

Because it amused him—not to mention was probably true—he said nothing as she slammed the door behind her. He settled down with his sandwich and soda. Before he could take a bite, his cell phone rang. It was Jed.

"What the hell was so important that you bothered my supervisor and got my ass chewed out?"

There wasn't much bite in his best friend's voice only the bone-tired wariness of an undercover cop. It was one part of that job Duncan didn't miss.

"Hi, Jed. How're you doing?"

"Listen, jackass, I've had two hours of sleep—"

He broke off and covered the mouthpiece. Duncan could only hear muffled conversation before Jed got back on the phone.

"Sorry about that. The doc needed to ask a question."

Worry churned in his gut. Working narcotics undercover wasn't the safest job. "Doc? Are you at a hospital?"

"Yeah, bad bust."

"Jesus. Have you spoken to Thea?"

"No, I'll call her later." Jed sucked in a quick breath loud enough to hear over the phone. After several seconds of silence, he continued, his voice tight with pain. "She won't hear about it any-time soon. Not like Atlanta news is going to cover something like this. And the DPS is trying to keep it under wraps so I figure it won't hit any national news for awhile."

"Uh, Jed, she's not in Georgia."

There was a pause before he asked, "Where the hell is she?"

"She's here in town."

Another pause. "Town? Crocker?"

"Yeah."

"Well, what the hell is she doing there?" He yelled the question so loudly that Duncan had to hold his phone away from his ear.

"She's your sister, ask her."

"Damn it to hell! I don't have time to track her down. Do you know where she's staying?"

"Apparently with Gwen."

Another beat of silence. Duncan could just imagine the thoughts going through Jed's mind.

"Since this bust's over, I guess I'll make a trip up there. I should be there by one a.m."

"Oh, no you won't," an unknown person declared in the background. Jed covered the mouthpiece of the phone then returned.

"I'll be there by Monday at the latest. Apparently they don't want me driving for a few days, although that might change." Which meant that Jed would be there by the end of the weekend at the latest. "Do me a favor and keep an eye on her until I get there."

"She's an adult. She can take care of herself."

*Her Mother's Killer*

“Just do it.” Then he clicked off the phone.  
*Watch Thea.* He sighed. Jed was just asking for trouble.

### **Chapter 3**

The bright light of the Saturday morning sun peeked through the curtains and scalded Thea's eyeballs the moment she lifted her lids. Immediately, she snapped them closed, knowing she couldn't go back to sleep. The nightmare had returned again, it was there every night. But she could possibly doze, maybe drift for awhile.

She frowned at the deep rumble of a male voice that drifted back to her room, ending any hope she had of getting any more rest.

With a wince, she stood. Her muscles protested, her bones actually creaked when she straightened. The last few months had taken their toll on her body, in more ways than one. She moved her head from side to side trying to work out the kinks.

She paused, trying to discern the voice but gave up. After a quick trip to the bathroom, she pulled on a pair of sweats and a t-shirt and went in search of coffee.

As she approached the kitchen, she heard Gwen laugh. Truthfully, she should be appalled she was so in need of caffeine that she didn't care who was there or why. She almost turned to go back to her room, but the scent of coffee was just too much to ignore. *And really, who the hell cares?*

When she turned the corner and stepped into the room, she realized her mistake. Sitting at Gwen's small kitchenette table, looking almost too big for the chair, was Duncan. Gwen's back was turned but Duncan noticed her immediately. He'd been raising a cup of coffee to his mouth, but he paused before continuing the ac-

tion. His gaze moved down her body and she was suddenly very conscious of her lack of a bra. By the time he made eye contact with her again, Thea knew her face was bright red. The smirk curving his lips had her curling her fingers into her palm to keep from hitting him.

Gwen must've noticed that his attention had moved to Thea because she twisted in her seat and smiled.

"Thea. Were we too loud? I'm sorry."

Knowing there was no graceful way out of it, and needing the infusion of coffee to be able to answer the question—hell, just think about the question—she shook her head and headed for the coffeepot.

"Well, aren't you bright-eyed and bushy-tailed in the morning?" Duncan asked, but Thea ignored him. Coffee was more important than arguing with him, and seriously, there was no way she would be able to fight with him without it.

After doctoring her morning drug, she turned and leaned back against the counter. "Is there a reason you've subjected us to your presence so early in the morning?"

"Doing my mama's bidding. She wanted to invite y'all over for a cookout tomorrow."

"Are you sure it was for both of us?" Gwen asked.

"I'm positive. Mom insisted and most of the family will be there. We might even get Uncle Chris to show up since Thea is here."

Thea smiled. "Chris is here? I thought he'd moved to Austin," Thea said.

"Actually, he just moved back, well, from Houston. Divorce number three." Duncan shook his head. "Austin was divorce number two."

"That truly is a shame, if you ask me. I never understood why he has such a problem getting a woman. I know Mom thought the world of him."

Duncan laughed. "Well, Chris has no problem getting women, it's holding onto them that is the problem for him. Although, I'm sure he'd tell you that it had more to do with putting up with them."

"Duncan, you shouldn't talk about your uncle that way," Gwen admonished. "Is there anything we can bring?"

"Nope. Mom said to just bring yourselves."

He rose from his chair and walked toward Thea stopping just short of bumping their toes together. His expression didn't tell her what he was thinking. As he continued staring at her, her blood heated, her pulse tripped a beat. Laughter danced in his eyes.

Irritated by her reaction, she finally asked, "What?"

His lips curved. "You're in front of the sink."

He was so close she could feel the warmth of his body, smell the scent of him on his skin. No aftershave for Duncan. Just clean, musky male. She would not sniff, no matter how much she wanted to. Hell, he smelled so good, smelling wouldn't be enough. Licking would have to be involved for her to be satisfied.

Something of what she was thinking must have registered because the heat in his eyes flared and his smile turned downright carnal. She wanted to throw it back in his face, to stand her ground. But first, it would be stupid. Just what the hell was she trying to prove? That she could stand in front of the sink? And secondly, she was afraid both Duncan and Gwen would hear the arousal in her voice.

Her cheeks still burning, she broke eye contact and slipped past him. In the process, her unbound breasts brushed against his chest accidentally. Already hard, her nipples tightened further. Almost silently, he sucked in a quick breath. She couldn't bear to meet his eyes, afraid of what she would find there, but she did notice his jaw clench twice. She tried to swallow but found her mouth dry.



With what little dignity she had left, she wiggled away. Her hormones bounced to attention. Having Duncan in close vicinity was bad enough, but actually touching him was a whole other kettle of lust. It had been a long time since she'd been with a man and having one in such close proximity, especially one who had a body and reputation for sin, was what she was reacting to. What she needed was a bout of sweaty sex, but Crocker had little to offer her in that department. And it would quickly get around town if she picked someone up and slept with him. She really didn't give a damn, but if she was planning on starting a business, it would be a bad idea to begin with everyone in town thinking she was a skank. Especially since Crocker was a tad on the conservative side.

A quick glance in Gwen's direction told her that her friend apparently hadn't noticed. Gwen, thank the good Lord, was looking out her front window as if she hadn't noticed. Thea plopped down in the seat Duncan had just vacated and took another sip of Gwen's glorious coffee.

"I have another errand for my mother to run today," Duncan said. When she glanced at him, she realized his intent gaze had focused on her.

"What?"

"Mom wanted me to show you the house."

"What house?" asked Gwen.

Thea winced at Gwen's suspicious tone. She turned to her friend and saw that same suspicion mirrored in her gaze.

"I rented a house from Mrs. Perry." Gwen opened her mouth to argue, but Thea plowed ahead. "You know I can't stay in your house for long. I need my own space, my own kitchen."

Gwen frowned. "But I wanted you to stay here."

Thea tossed Duncan a nasty look and found him grinning. He'd known she was going to have a problem with Gwen and was enjoying it a bit too much.

She set her coffee down and slid her hand across the table to cover Gwen's clasped ones. "I know you wanted me to stay here, but you know me, Gwen. If I have to deal with someone...even someone I love...I go a little crazy."

Gwen held her gaze for one tense moment then looked away. Thea hated the hurt she saw in her friend's gaze, but she knew this was for the best.

"If I stayed here, I would be up all hours of the night, and I'd throw out all your margarine."

Gwen sighed, the tension dissolving from her rigid posture. She looked at Thea, a rueful smile curving her lips. "I like having you here. You just got here yesterday and now you are already moving out."

"Good lord, Gwen. It's Crocker. It takes ten minutes to drive from one side of the town to the other."

Gwen chuckled. "Okay. I'm not happy about it, but I'll let it go." She glanced at Duncan. "I take it she rented the old Miller place."

"Hey, don't talk about me like I'm not here."

Duncan ignored Thea. "Yeah. How'd you know?"

Gwen smiled. "I know Thea and the old Miller place has a fantastic kitchen." She looked back at Thea. "I expect your chicken enchiladas for dinner the first Sunday you are in that house."

\* \* \* \*

Duncan pulled into the driveway of the rental house and released a sigh of relief. His companion had been silent and moody for the five-minute ride, leaving his mind to conjure up all kinds of fantasies. Seeing her this morning, her hair all rumpled and sleep still fogging her voice, had taken every ounce of his control to allow her to wiggle away from him at the sink. His libido was still in overdrive and it didn't matter that the woman was irritated with him. Hell, if he were truthful with himself, even that was turning him on.

Without saying anything, she slipped out of the truck and slammed the door behind her. And damn it, it sent another spike of annoyance and lust rushing through his blood. The feelings he was having for her were odd and a little bit disconcerting. He'd convinced himself before going to Gwen's that his reaction had been off the day before. But the moment she'd walked into the kitchen, most of his blood drained to his groin. Duncan drew in a huge breath trying to bring his head back to the present. Unfortunately, he'd drawn in her scent, that apple and cinnamon with a little bit of sass thrown in.

He closed his eyes trying to calm his raging libido. When he opened them, he saw Thea standing at the front of his truck, her arms crossed and that same scowl on her face. A man was in trouble when even a woman's scowl was a turn-on.

He unfolded himself from the truck and thanked God for the rush of west Texas air. Maybe that would help cool his arousal.

Nothing was said between the two of them as he led her to the front door. After unlocking it, he stepped back to allow her to go inside. He closed the door and waited for her response. When she said nothing, but walked around, checking out the windows, the furniture, he asked, "Well?"

She glanced over her shoulder at him. "Nice. Of course, the most important part of the house is the kitchen."

He waved his hand toward it and she followed his direction. If it had not been so quiet, he would not have heard her sigh of pleasure the moment she stepped into the kitchen.

Duncan had to admit the kitchen was probably one of the best they had in their rental homes. A six-burner stove, enough cabinet and counter space for a professional kitchen, it had to be a gourmet's dream come true. He watched Thea as she skimmed her hand over the island that had slate-colored granite and an extra sink.

"This is fabulous." She turned and smiled at him, her eyes dark with pleasure. "Seriously, who would have thought this treasure would be found in Crocker?"

Wanting to shift closer, pull her to him and kiss that smile off her face, Duncan shoved his hands into his pockets. "All the rooms are furnished."

She nodded as she examined the inside of the French door stainless steel refrigerator. "Your mom told me that. I didn't come with furniture, just my pots and pans."

"So, Jason got the furniture but you refused to give up your pots and pans?"

She laughed and let the door shut. "The furniture was ugly. But my pots are worth a fortune. And knowing Jason, the whole damn set would be ruined within a week. The man couldn't boil water."

"What made you divorce him?"

The happiness faded from her face and he regretted the question. "Jason and I had some disagreements."

"Disagreements?"

"Yes. He thought he could fuck every badge bunny he wanted to, and I should just ignore it. I disagreed."

"Ah." That was all he could say to that. Jed hadn't told him what went on, or why she was so sick by the end of the marriage. Or, what the hell that wreck was all about. But since her brother would be here soon, Duncan didn't see the reason to pry. The scary thing is that he wanted to. He wanted to know just what the hell was going on with her, to know why she had that haunted look in her eyes.

He cleared his throat. "Do you want to see the bedrooms?"

She nodded and walked to the stairway. As she reached the top step, she tripped, falling forward slightly, losing her balance. Without thinking, Duncan reached for her, pulling her up and then against him before stepping up onto the floor. And as simple as

that, his body heated again, his cock thumping against the zipper of his jeans. All those curves he'd been admiring since the day before were now plastered up against him. He had his hands around her waist.

"Whoa, sorry about that," she said, a hint of amusement threading her voice.

"No problem." Duncan was amazed he could even speak. Right now, he was fighting the urge to slip his hands up to her breasts.

They stood like that for a few moments, the silence stretching out. Something changed in the air, the tension started to mount. Duncan closed his eyes and leaned closer to her. Apples and cinnamon.

"Duncan?" Her voice had deepened and the low murmur sent another rush of hormones pulsing through his blood.

"Yes?" He whispered the question, his lips inches from her ear.

"You can let go now."

"Yeah?" He nuzzled the back of neck, nipping the sensitive flesh just behind her ear. Thea drew in a shuddering breath and relaxed against him. She wanted him, or was at least attracted to him. He wanted nothing more than to strip her of those tight jeans and sweater, put his mouth on her.

"Duncan? Do you think we should be doing this?"

He slipped his hands up to her breasts, and sighed when he felt her hardened nipples stab the palms of his hands.

"Nope." God, her skin tasted good. Sweet and hot, just like the woman. He could just imagine what it would be like to settled between her legs and taste her core. *Would it be as sweet?*

She moaned, the sound of it vibrating through him. He hadn't gotten hot this fast since he was seventeen. He shifted his weight, pressing his shaft against her full ass. Need poured through him, as he slipped his hand up her sweater to cup her breast.

Thea said his name, just a whispered breath, filled with the same need and want he had coursing through his veins. Without another thought, he turned her around then crowded her against the wall. Immediately, he pressed his mouth to hers. He slid his hands down to her ass, lifted her and pressed her against his groin. Thea lifted her legs and wound them around him. As she moaned into his mouth, he ground his cock against her. Even through their layers of clothing, he could feel her feminine heat.

He slanted his lips over hers, stealing into her mouth for a taste. Just like her flesh, she tasted of sweetness and desire. He was seriously considering which bedroom to carry her to when a car horn sounded outside. They broke apart, both of them breathing heavily. A delightful blush crawled up into her cheeks.

After several moments of silence, she asked, "Could you just let me down?"

His fingers tightened on her rear end and for a split second, he thought about denying her. Of coaxing her into a kiss then taking her into one of the bedrooms. But this was Thea, his best friend's little sister.

Ever so slowly, he slid her down his body. He couldn't hold back a groan as she pushed away from him. She inched around him then stepped back away from him.

"What the hell was that about?" Her voice was still husky from unfulfilled passion.

Still frustrated, he said, "If you don't know what that was, I know why your marriage failed."

The moment he said it, he regretted the words. He turned to face her, hated the hurt that now darkened her brown eyes. "Thea—"

She held up her hand to stop him. "I don't want to talk about it. You aren't in the right frame of mind and I'm not in the mood." He stepped forward. "For anything."

He offered her a scowl, but said nothing. Truth is, he didn't know what to say. He'd been an ass in the way he had handled her and what he said afterward. It was just too new an experience to be lusting after a woman whose shoes he tied when she was a little girl. Granted, now the six years of difference didn't seem so significant, but...the memories were there. And he would have kicked his own ass for his comments afterward because he wasn't mad at her. He was mad at himself.

"Let's just forget that ever happened."

He wanted to argue, because while he didn't know what the hell to do about it at the moment, there was no way in holy hell he was going to forget about it. Hell, he could still taste her in his mouth. But he granted her wish and nodded, mentally telling himself that space might be all they needed. Then, if he still wanted her, he'd deal with that later.

## **Chapter 4**

As she and Gwen stood talking to Mrs. Perry, Thea eyed her surroundings. It was innocent enough, or seemed that way. Kids, friends and family gathered in the backyard of the Perrys' huge home. It should be relaxing but something in the area had her instincts on guard.

Even after ordering herself to calm down, the hairs on the back of her neck stirred. This was the familiar sickly feeling that had her taking another long look around the group. There wasn't a person here who wasn't either related to or a good friend with the Perrys but something wasn't right.

Something bad was about to happen, that or someone was watching her. But the months leading up to her accident had left her confused, and a little out of practice in trusting her instincts. She'd felt that same tickling of the senses, a warning of a threat in the area. The fact Jason had never taken it seriously made her question herself. Even knowing he'd been wrong didn't help.

A gust of wind had her pulling her collar closer as a bead of sweat rolled down her back. Goosebumps rose across her flesh. The other women were preoccupied talking gossip about neighbors she didn't know, so she felt free to look around again. She didn't see anything out of the ordinary. Kids of all ages ran freely around the yard, men stood, beers in their hands, discussing the latest Cowboy game. Duncan was playing with what she assumed was a nephew, holding the boy upside down as he giggled.



It was normal, sedate even. Remembering the drink in her hand, she took a healthy sip of tea. The sweet beverage slid down her dry throat. There was nothing that should make her uneasy, but a shiver of awareness slipped beneath her skin. The memory was too close to before her wreck. Her belly cramped, her head pounded.

She drew in a deep breath, trying to ease the tension. Using the techniques her therapist had taught her, she counted down from ten. By the time she reached one, the tension had begun to ease and her muscles relaxed. As she released her last breath, a hand clamped onto her shoulder. Terror surged, her nightmares became reality. She screamed.

"Thea," Chase said. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you."

When she glanced back over her shoulder, she found him standing close to her. The apologetic smile on his face did little to ease her worry. If she couldn't keep herself together in a safe gathering, just how did she think she could accomplish her task?

With a glance to the crowd, she realized her scream had attracted attention, and her face heated. She cleared her throat and smiled.

"I was just woolgathering and you startled me."

Chase didn't look convinced but he draped his arm over her shoulders, and then turned to face his mother and Gwen. Their speculative study did little to ease her tension but for other reasons. Gwen's look told Thea she would have to answer questions about her friendship with the younger Perry brother later. Mrs. Perry's was one of casual interest.

Needing to gloss over the uncomfortable silence, Thea asked, "You know Gwen, don't you, Chase?"

He smiled at Gwen and Thea was surprised to see her friend actually blush. "Of course I know Gwen. How are you doing, Ms. Masters?"

Gwen's blush deepened but when she spoke, nothing showed in her even tone. "I'm fine. I didn't realize you two knew each other."

Chase's smiled broadened. "Not like the Perrys and the Warrens haven't been friends for years, but I attended school in Georgia."

And as easy as that, he smoothed their concern. Thea saw it and knew he was good with charm, but she was still amazed. As they continued to chat about local gossip, the fear she'd felt slowly eased away. But it was replaced by something else, something just as uncomfortable. When she turned her head, she found out why. Duncan was idly watching her and Chase, his expression void of emotion. Although his stance was relaxed, he looked like a tiger watching his prey. She raised one eyebrow and his lips quirked.

"Duncan told me he showed you the rental yesterday," Selma said.

Thea turned her attention back to his mother as heat crept up into her cheeks. Just thinking about what went on at the house yesterday had kept her up most of the night. She still felt itchy from the inside out, as if she would never find relief.

"Yes. It's wonderful."

"I told Thea I couldn't believe she drooled over the stove." Duncan's deep voice sounded as if he were a few feet behind her. She twisted around and gave him an icy smile that had nothing to do with humor.

"I didn't drool."

His eyes widened. "Really? I seem to remember something like that."

"Admired. I was admiring the kitchen."

He quirked an eyebrow. "So that's what they call it these days."

Irritated with him, she offered him her back and now found everyone—including Chase—watching the byplay with avid inter-

est. When she glanced at Gwen, she inwardly cringed at the knowing look in her friend's blue eyes.

Wanting to deflect any speculation, she asked, "Do you mind if I use your bathroom, Selma?"

"Not at all, hon. Go down the hall off the living room, first door on your left."

"I'll lead the way," Chase offered.

"I think I can find my own way to the bathroom, but thanks."

As she walked away, she felt the interested gazes that followed, but one dark-eyed gaze in particular had her body shimmering with heat at their remembered embrace.

\* \* \* \*

Duncan wandered closer to the house, watching the back porch door, waiting for Thea to appear. He shook his head at his embarrassing behavior. All he'd done was kiss the woman, but he couldn't stop the possessive streak that reared its head anytime a man got close to her. Even his brother.

"Find something interesting there on the porch?" Chase asked.

He glanced at his brother. "Nothing in particular."

Chase tilted his head to one side and studied him for a moment before he said, "I don't think I've ever seen you behave this way."

Duncan returned his attention to the porch. "What way?"

Chase laughed. "I think I would call it smitten."

Duncan frowned but still didn't look at his brother. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"You fairly growled when you saw me touching Thea the other night, and then again today, I could tell you weren't happy."

"And?"

"You're smitten."

He glanced at his brother again. "Almost forty-year-old men don't get smitten."

"What would you call it when a man gives the look of death to any male who even glances in the direction of a woman?" Duncan opened his mouth but his brother wasn't done. "And, seriously, she's been here three days. You have seen her every day. You go hunting her up."

Duncan wanted to deny it, but he would sound like an idiot. He was the one who suggested he show Thea the house, who offered to go to Gwen's. And it was his idea to invite them. So he did the only thing he could. He shoved his brother and said, "Fuck off."

He decided he'd waited long enough for Thea and started up to the house. He ignored the interested stares and his brother's laughter. Within moments, he stepped into the house. A few more people were gathered around the TV waiting for the next football game to start. Duncan paid them no attention and kept walking, determined to get to his destination. He turned the corner and started down the hall as Thea stepped out of the bathroom. Her eyes widened when she saw him.

"Duncan—"

He ignored her, slipping his arm around her waist and pulling her around another corner for privacy. She practically sputtered and tried to dig in her heels, but he didn't slow down.

"Duncan Michael Perry!"

He stopped once he knew they were far enough away from the other guests. "What?"

She settled her hands on her hips. "What? Just what?"

He crossed his hands over his chest to keep from touching her. But it was hard to resist her. Her face was still flushed from the cool air outside and her irritation. He wondered what she would look like when she came.

"Duncan."

She never lost her Texas twang, and it deepened when she was mad. He could just imagine her moaning his name, the way her flesh would feel against his.

"Duncan!"

He shook his head trying to get rid of the image, but it just wouldn't budge. All he could think about was having her under him.

"Stop."

He focused on her mouth, the lush ripeness of her lips as her tongue darted out over the plump bottom.

"Stop what?" he asked.

He leaned closer, drew in the sweet essence of her.

"We agreed this wasn't a good idea."

He shook his head. "You said, not me."

She placed her hand on his chest and he looked down at it, then back up at her. He saw it there, the passion he felt burning in his veins, speeding through his blood like fire. He knew she felt it. Her eyes darkened, her breathing increased. The noise of the TV and the guests faded in the background.

He leaned forward. She offered him no other resistance as he rubbed his mouth over hers, the barest of touch.

"We shouldn't."

Her voice barely registered it was so low, the denial so weak. Her breath heated his lips, her tongue dipping into his mouth.

"But we will."

Without waiting for her response, he dipped his head and took possession of her mouth.

Every thought in Thea's head dissolved the moment Duncan pressed her back against the wall. Sparks of energy danced along her nerve endings, her nipples tightened, her body heated. He slanted his mouth over hers, moving his hands to cup her face.

Oh, God, she wanted this, needed this. Her head was spinning as blood rushed to her groin. She shifted closer, needing to feel him, to feel his warmth, to lose herself. Her dampened panties pressed against her clit and sent another zing of heat speeding

through her veins. She slipped her hands up and over his shoulders, molding her hands to the back of his head.

She throbbed. Every pore, every hormone, every fiber of her being. Tension gathered in her stomach, then slipped lower. Everything in her told her right now, right there. But a moment later, Duncan pulled away, just slightly.

"We probably shouldn't be doing this in the hall." His voice was hoarse, the passion he'd built vibrated in his voice.

"Hmm, no."

Still he didn't move. Instead he placed his hands on the wall and pressed his groin harder against hers. Every nerve in her body sizzled and she hummed.

He sighed, the sound filled with regret. "We have to talk about this. It's...odd."

She frowned. "What do you mean odd?"

He closed his eyes and seemed to mentally gather himself and gingerly stepped away. The moment he did, the cold air that replaced his warmth caused her to shiver.

"You're the first woman I've kissed whose shoes I tied when she was a girl."

She crossed her arms over her breasts, which was a mistake. Her nipples were hard, sensitive, and brushing against them sent a tremor of need through her again.

"I'm almost thirty."

"And you're Jed's sister."

"What the hell does that have to do with it?"

"It's...well, guys just don't do it."

With an irritated huff, she pushed past him. "Fine, then stay away from me. I don't need this crap right now."

She didn't get more than three steps away from him before fingers of steel wrapped around her upper arm and pulled her back. He crowded her up against the wall again.

"I didn't say I didn't want you."

"You just don't like wanting me."

He brushed the backs of his knuckles over her cheek. "No, actually, I'm getting to like that quite a bit." The heat in his voice shivered over her. "I'm just not sure what it means, or if we should act on it."

"What's there to think about? It's sex."

Duncan chuckled. "This would complicate things. Your brother, my family...this town."

She hated that he was right, but damn it, he was. They had a connection, one that wasn't always easy to deal with. Throw in his job as a town leader, and the fact everyone paid attention to everyone else in Crocker...even a one-night stand would make the gossip rounds. She blew out a breath.

"Fine. You don't want to even try—"

He pressed his groin against hers again, his shaft still hard. Thea shivered.

"Trying is not in question. I just think..." He cocked his head to the side listening to something in the other room. "But one of our main problems just got here."

He stepped away. Thea didn't have time to even contemplate what he meant when she heard her brother say, "Just what the hell is going on here?"

She turned in the direction of his voice and for a moment, didn't move. He looked a mess. He had a black eye and a bandage covered his hand. As usual, he looked a little banged up, a little rough around the edges. Warmth filled her chest and the stress of the last week caught up with her as she launched herself into his arms.

"It's so good to see you."

His arms tightened slightly and he kissed the top of her head. "You said a mouthful, kid."

\* \* \* \*

Duncan watched the siblings talk to each other, their heads bent together, their voices, he was sure, low.

"Amazing how much she looks like her mother," Uncle Chris said behind him.

Duncan kept his attention on Thea and Jed as they both stood in the kitchen. "Yeah. Has her mama's personality, too."

"I take it Jed didn't know she moved back here?"

"I called him."

Chris stepped up beside him and watched the unfolding scene. The warm sibling reunion was now over and she and Jed were arguing. "Maybe that wasn't a good idea."

Up until that point, Jed had been doing most of the talking, but apparently he said something Thea really did not like. She settled her hands on her hips, and started blasting her brother. Several people surrounding them turned to look, and believe it or not, Jed took a step away.

"They don't need to be fighting like that."

Duncan glanced at his uncle, who was now frowning, worry filled his expression. He knew Chris saw the Johnson kids as surrogate Perrys. He'd been their father's best friend most of his life.

"Actually, I think it is the best thing that could happen."

Chris was now frowning at him. "I think it would be best to let things lie. It's not good for either of them to get things stirred up."

Duncan turned away from his uncle and watched the brother and sister. "No. They've been doing that for too many years. They need to move on."

It was then that Jed threw back his head back and laughed, then grabbed Thea and pulled her into a bear hug.

"I think that's my cue."

Chris didn't say anything, his expression darkening even more.

"Hey, they need this, they both need to move on."



"She doesn't need him here to bother her though."

And with that odd statement, his uncle retreated to the kitchen. Maybe Chris knew more than he did. Hell, Duncan was sure of it. But he knew his uncle had little contact with either Jed or Thea since they moved away. With a shrug, he grabbed a beer out of the cooler and headed out to talk to his best friend.

As he stepped off the porch, Thea glanced at him, fire blazing in her eyes. Damn, she was gorgeous. He walked across the lawn, ignoring several people who hailed him, keeping his attention focused on Thea.

When he reached them, he offered Jed a beer and he shook his head. "Nope. Not with the pain medications." He handed it to Thea who took it and narrowed her eyes.

"And when were you going to tell me that you called my brother?"

He didn't say anything and she looked at Jed. "I hope he can put you up for the night. Gwen and I don't have the room."

With that she stomped off into the house. Duncan watched, enjoying the exaggerated sway of her hips. Damn, but she was even more attractive when she was pissed off at him. Which should warn him to stay away from her, but for some reason, it attracted him even more.

Jed cleared his throat. Duncan looked over at him with a smile. "Your sister turned into a beautiful woman."

"A beautiful woman with a whole mess of problems." He crossed his arms over his chest and gave him the same narrow-eyed glare his sister did. "And I'll be damned if you add to them, not after she damned near died."

## **Chapter 5**

Duncan's heart stopped for a second, then beat in double time. "What?"

"Damn, I'm tired." Jed scrubbed his one good hand over his face.

"I don't care. Tell me what happened with Thea."

Jed sighed. "She had a wreck."

"I heard that. When, where, how?"

"Right before she and Jason divorced. One car. There was something off though. Thea was convinced she'd been run off the road. Police said no. There were no signs of another car, no witnesses. Of course, they all knew Jason."

Her ex being Atlanta PD, that made sense. "You think he had something to do with it?"

"Nothing I could prove, but I wouldn't put it past the bastard."

"How bad was the wreck?"

"Not bad." He grimaced. "Slight concussion, bruised ribs, some scratches. But that wasn't the worst of it."

"There is something worse than being in a wreck and getting a concussion?"

Jed nodded. "Emotionally, she was a mess. She'd lost so much weight." He swallowed. "She was exhausted. Burnt out is what the doctors claimed. The divorce took more out of her than anyone knew. She gave him her restaurant."

"He's a cop. Why would he want it?"

Jed shrugged and looked over at his sister who was now talking to Gwen. "She didn't want to stay in Atlanta, and for some reason, he wanted it. I think he thought he could run it better. Why, I don't know."

"So, she just handed it over?"

Jed nodded. "I think she already knew she was coming back to Texas. She just didn't want to mess with it anymore. She wanted out of the marriage." He smiled evilly. "I actually think Jason thought he would get her to stay, or cause her grief over it. She barely blinked when he asked for it."

"But I thought she loved that place."

Jed shrugged, his gaze settling on Gwen. "Don't ask me the motives of most women. I don't know what the hell they are thinking most of the time."

\* \* \* \*

"I take it Duncan called Jed," Gwen said.

"Freaking telling on me like I'm a little girl."

She took a quick swig of beer and grimaced. She didn't even know why she was drinking the damn stuff. She didn't like it. It was the situation. Bizarre didn't even get close to describing it. She'd been ready to strip herself down and jump Duncan's bones just minutes before her brother showed up. Twice in less than two days now she had found herself lip-locked with Duncan. Not like she hadn't enjoyed herself. Just thinking about it made her blush. Jesus, in all the years she'd been married to Jason, she'd never felt that electric jolt to her system just from a kiss. Lord only knew what would happen to her if they ended up in bed together. There was a good chance they would combust.

"Thea?"

Gwen was looking at her strangely. Thea realized her friend had been trying to get her attention for some time.

"What?"

"I asked you how long Jed was in town for, but you were off woolgathering."

Thea glanced over her shoulder at her brother. He wasn't looking at them, but talking to Chris. Her attention drifted to Duncan who was the only one watching them. His heated stare drifted down her body, then back up to her face. But the time he made eye contact again, her body was heated.

"Thea!"

She swung back around to face her friend. "What? Oh, Jed. He didn't say, but I think he won't be here long. If he is banged up because of something going wrong, he will have to go back to Austin for all the paperwork and stuff."

"Did he say what happened?"

"No, and I didn't ask. I learned a long time ago not to ask because he wouldn't talk about it."

Gwen nodded and Thea noticed the sadness in her gaze as she stared at Jed. Damn her brother for being so stubborn that he drove off everyone who cared about him.

"I have a feeling he'll bunk down with Duncan tonight and then head back to Austin."

"I thought he might stay longer since you're here," Gwen said.

Thea shook her head. "He won't have much time on his hands. He took too much leave when I had my accident."

Selma walked up with a smile. "Brisket's ready and I advise you all to get in there before the men. If I know my boys and Jed, there won't be much left by the time they're done."

\* \* \* \*

"I heard Thea is staying with you," Jed said from behind Gwen.

Her heart skipped then beat so furiously she was sure everyone around her heard. It took her a minute or two to calm herself down before she could answer. She didn't look at him, but kept

concentrating on picking her drink out of the cooler. "You heard right."

When she said nothing else, she sensed Jed shifting behind her. She couldn't stand it, she had to know what he was thinking so she grabbed a diet cola and turned to face him.

*Damn it, how did he get better looking?* It wasn't fair. Not only did he look like he got the hell beat out of him, but it made him even more attractive, in a scruffy sort of way. The lines around his light green eyes added to his appeal, as did the twenty or so pounds he'd piled on after school. Men sucked. They could gain weight and it helped their looks. Gwen had to fight even a five pound gain before comments were made.

He settled his hands on his hips and gave her a nasty stare. She guessed that was supposed to scare her but it didn't. Even though she knew this wasn't the sweet boy she dated, she also knew he would never hurt her physically.

"Why didn't you call me?" he growled.

She blinked. "Call you?"

"When Thea contacted you, you should have called me."

Anger sparked through her blood. She counted backwards from ten before answering. "First of all, Thea is an adult. She doesn't need me to check with her older brother to see if it was okay. Secondly, if I wanted to, how the hell would I find you?"

"You could have if you wanted to."

His mulish expression told her that he knew he was losing an argument before it started. It was odd to know someone so well, but not know him at all.

"And just how was I supposed to find you? We've barely spoken in the last few years. I know where you work, what your job is, but I don't even know where the hell you live."

"I live in Austin."

She closed her eyes calling on the patience she felt slipping away. When she opened them, she found her ex-fiancé staring at

her, studying her like she was a case to be solved. She hated that, hated that every time she saw him, her heart broke again, and damn it, she hated that she couldn't hate him.

"What do you want?"

"What I want and what I'm going to get are two different things."

She sighed. "I couldn't get a hold of you and like I said, I don't think you have any say over what she does and doesn't do."

"You could have easily found me."

"No, I couldn't. If Thea couldn't, I couldn't. Besides, I think this is just what she needs."

"She needs not to be gawked at like a circus freak!"

"I'm not arguing this with you. You want to have it out with someone, take it up with Thea."

She turned away, but he stopped her with a plea. "I don't want anything bad to happen to her."

The concern, the outright love in his voice spoke to her. Gwen knew he wanted nothing more than for Thea to be happy, but as usual he was going about it the wrong way.

"She was in Atlanta and was run off the road. Being safe isn't about where you are."

Tired of arguing, Gwen neatly stepped around Jed. He grabbed her arm. She stopped, looked down at his hand, then up at him. The worry and irritation she saw in his eyes softened her a bit. Jed was a pain in the butt. Still, he loved his sister and worried about her. It was one of the things Gwen admired most about him.

"She's fine, Jed."

He nodded and opened his mouth to say something but Chase interrupted him. "Got a problem, Gwen?"

She looked at the younger man. He wasn't actually paying attention to her, rather he was focused on Jed. Seriously, she didn't need this, didn't want to spend her Sunday dealing with male egos.

But she also didn't want people gossiping about her. Being a teacher in a small town didn't afford her much privacy.

"No. Jed and I were just catching up."

Both men kept silent for a few seconds then Jed released her arm. Chase stepped forward to fill the void, but thankfully, Thea slipped in and said, "Hey, Gwen, Selma wanted to chat about a fundraiser idea she has for the library at school."

"If you two gentlemen will excuse me?"

They both nodded, and Gwen walked away with Thea.

"What was that about?" Thea asked once they gained the porch.

"Nothing."

Thea looked at her for a long moment then nodded. "Let's go find Selma."

Gwen smiled when Thea slipped her arm over Gwen's shoulders. "Yes, let's. I've had my fill of men tonight."

\* \* \* \*

He watched as Thea talked to the other women, his heart expanding at the sight of her. She was so much like Margie, so beautiful and full of life. She laughed at something Gwen said, the sound of it warming him, comforting him.

He could not approach her, couldn't tell her what special bond they had between them. She would need time to settle, time to understand. She looked around as if searching for him, begging for his attention. He had to fight the urge to go to her, to reveal himself to her. She wasn't ready to accept him.

But soon, she would. And then...they would be together as one.

## **Chapter 6**

The next morning, Thea drove up to her rental home and sighed. There parked in the driveway was her brother. She should have known he wouldn't leave. She'd hoped since he hadn't shown up at Gwen's, but she was sure there were other reasons he didn't do that.

She slipped out of her car and scowled at him. "What are you doing here?"

"Checking up on you."

She snorted. "You're not even trying to lie."

He shook his head and walked down the drive to help her unload her SUV. "No reason to. You know better. Besides, you'd be stuck carrying in all this crap."

She smiled and handed him the heaviest box as a car drove up to the curb. At first she didn't recognize the vehicle but as soon as Chris Perry unfolded himself from the car, Thea smiled. She found herself frowning when she noticed he brought Duncan with him. It was all she could do while her body responded to the sight of him. Dressed in jeans, a snug red shirt and a suede jacket, he looked particularly yummy. While she was dressed in sweats, looking as if she just got out of bed, which she practically had.

She watched him walk down the sidewalk, her pulse doubling. God, he was gorgeous. Long legs, trim waist, and she knew without looking, those jeans showed off a tight butt. She didn't know if she was up to facing him.



"Thea!" Chris scooped her up for a big hug then set her back down. "Doesn't she look great, Duncan?"

"Good enough to eat."

She slanted a look at Duncan but then focused all her attention on Chris. "I'm sorry we didn't get much chance to talk yesterday."

He slid his arm over her shoulders and said to Duncan, "Why don't you go and help Jed unload Thea's things while we catch up?"

She offered Duncan a smirk. "Yes, why don't you?"

"Remember, I'm pretty much your landlord now." But he did his uncle's bidding.

Chris chuckled. "Boy always had a smart mouth. I can only stay a minute, but why don't you walk me back to my car?"

Thea nodded.

"What are your plans?"

She shrugged. "The divorce settlement allows me the time to figure it out."

"I was sorry to hear about that. Divorce is never easy."

She glanced at him and found nothing but understanding sympathy in his expression. "No. Even when you don't want to be married to the person anymore."

"You're used to being busy."

"I have some things to keep me occupied. I have some old trunks of Mom's to go through, lots of interesting things there."

"Anything I can help you with?"

"No, just some old letters." Something flashed in Chris' eyes. Fear, no, worry, she was sure of it. It was nice to be home where the people she loved worried about her. "I'll be fine. I want to get the trunks cleaned out. "

He kissed her cheek. "I've got to be getting to the office. You let Selma or I know if you need anything."

She watched him drive away and sighed. It was a shame the man never settled down. Granted, he'd help raise the Perry boys after their father, his younger brother, died in a traffic accident.

But...she always felt like he did that to make up for not having any of his own.

"Earth to Thea."

She turned to find Duncan only inches behind her. "What are you doing?"

"I asked if you had anything else you needed to bring over."

She shifted away. Being this close to him was a little too much for her. "I had most of my things shipped."

"Hmmm." He stepped closer. "Are we going to avoid talking about it?"

She cleared her throat. "It?"

He moved closer, the crisp air mingling with his musky cologne. *Lord, talk about good enough to eat.*

"What happened here...and at my mama's."

"I thought women were the ones who wanted to talk about relationships."

He snorted, but he didn't get to say anything else because Jed came out of the house.

"I got everything unloaded. You have anything left at the other house?"

Because she was irritated with Duncan, she took it out on her brother. "Gwen's house. I was at Gwen's house. And no, I don't have anything else there."

His lips flattened into a straight line. "I have to get back to Austin, get things straightened out. I'll be back after that."

"Don't expect a place to stay."

He shook his head, leaned forward, and brushed his lips against her cheek. "Behave and call Duncan if you need anything."

"I can handle my life, Jed."

He leaned his forehead against hers. "Just promise me."

She huffed out a sigh. "Okay. But only because I love you."

He pulled back and looked at Duncan. "I'll blame you."

Duncan rocked back on his heels. "Of course you would."

With one last look at Thea, he headed for his truck. Duncan slid closer to her, she looked at him out of the side of her eye. "What did he mean about he'd blame you?"

He waited until Jed was driving off before he said, "If anything happens to you while he's gone, he'll blame me."

With a huff, she turned to head into her house.

"Thea."

She looked back over her shoulder. "Forget about it."

He laughed as he followed her up the porch. "Gonna be hard to do since it's all I can think about."

Although his voice was normal, the look in his eyes told another story. The heat he'd blasted her with, the things she had dreamed about since he'd touched her, were there in the flare of passion she saw in his gaze. His gray eyes darkened, narrowed. He stepped forward. She turned to fully face him and put a hand on his chest.

"Don't."

He frowned. "Why?"

"Other than the obvious complications with an overprotective brother, who is your best friend, I can't handle it right now."

Several seconds of silence pulsed between them, when he finally nodded. "Fine. For now."

With that warning, he kissed her in much the same way that Jed did, but instead of the warmth of brotherly love, lust blasted her, shocked her at such a simple touch. "See ya around."

She said nothing as he walked away until she realized he didn't have a car. "You need a ride?"

His smile turned downright naughty. Heat danced over her nerve endings. "Yeah, but not the kind you're offering at the moment."

She felt her face heat as he laughed and turned away and walked down the street.

Good lord almighty, what was she going to do about him? She'd always had a hero crush on him, one that had worn off...or she thought it had. Now here she was dissolving into a puddle of lust the moment he said something naughty to her. Just kissing him had left her mind reeling, her body aching for more. She couldn't imagine what the hell she would do if she had actually went to bed with him.

There was not a doubt in her mind that it would be anything less than spectacular. But the crash would not be worth it. She hadn't felt that kind of burning fever with her ex, the kind where she wanted to strip off his clothes the moment she saw him. She had almost not survived that relationship.

She just needed to find something to occupy her time and mind. She looked around the boxes her brother had hauled in and smiled. Thankfully, at least for today, she had something to occupy both.

\* \* \* \*

Wednesday morning, just before the lunch hour, Duncan parked his patrol truck out in front of Thea's house. She'd been pretty teed off at him yesterday when he showed up, but truthfully, he had no choice. He'd promised Jed. And, if he were honest with himself—and Duncan usually was—he had to see her.

He unfolded himself from the truck and made his way to the porch. It was starting to bother him that in less than a week he'd become attached to Thea. Not in the normal brotherly way he'd felt when they were growing up. Now, he just wanted to see her, tease her, strip her naked and fuck her until she couldn't stand straight.

He stopped mid-step and silently cursed. As usual, most of the blood in his brain had traveled south. Walking around half aroused wasn't the way to handle his job. She was there, under his skin. Hell, he barely knew her now. But after just two kisses, he was

ready to throw caution aside and toss her on a bed and make her scream.

*Jesus!* He had to stop doing that to himself. He paced on the porch, irritated and frustrated. If he was ready to jump her the moment he saw her, she'd never become comfortable around him. Usually, when he found a woman he wanted, he enjoyed the chase. Right now, just after a few days, he was starting to feel like an ogre. He wanted her now and he had no finesse to express his need.

He stopped on the edge of the porch and took a deep breath. As he calmed himself, he noticed an envelope sitting on the edge of the railing. He scooped it up and turned to go to the door when he realized Thea was watching him through the screen of the front door.

"What are you doing?"

For the first time in years, he felt his face flush with embarrassment. *Great.* He cleared his throat.

"Just stopping by."

"Yes, I noticed that about five minutes ago. So I expected you to knock on the door. Not pace my porch like a nutjob."

He shot her what he hoped was a nasty look but she laughed.

"Did you bring me a note?"

He shook his head and handed it to her. "I found it on the railing."

She paused, everything in her seemed to freeze for a moment and then she nodded.

He cocked his head to the side and studied her. "Something wrong?"

She drew in a deep breath, looked away. A gust of wind lifted the ends of her hair and he noticed she was wearing an old gray sweatshirt and worn jeans.

"Why don't you come in and we can talk about it."

He nodded and followed her into the house. As yesterday, the changes he saw in just a couple of days amazed him. The furniture was the same, but there was already so much of Thea here. Pictures on the wall, extra pillows on the couch, along with a throw or two. It felt more like a home than any of its previous occupants had made it feel.

Once they reached the kitchen, she set the envelope down on the island. Her expression told him nothing. "I have a feeling you aren't going to like this."

He had a feeling too, but he didn't say anything because he didn't want to fight with her.

"I think I know what's in the letter."

Glancing at the envelope, then back up to her, he asked, "Why don't you tell me about it?"

She sighed. "Do you want some coffee?"

He nodded, even though he didn't really want any. But she seemed to need something to calm her nerves. "Black."

She poured two cups, doctored hers the way he'd seen her do it at Gwen's, and then brought them to the counter. After taking a sip, she said, "It isn't the first one I've gotten."

He paused in taking his own sip of coffee. "And?"

She set down her mug then scrubbed her hands over her face. While watching her, he noticed things he failed to see before. Dark circles marred the delicate skin beneath her eyes. He sensed she was tired, but he had thought it might be from getting the house set to rights. But at this moment, with her eyes closed and her face so pale, she looked fragile, in a way he'd never seen her before.

"Thea."

She opened her eyes and sighed. "This is only the second one I've gotten since I got back, but if it is what I am sure it is, I was getting them in Atlanta."

Keeping his gaze on her, he picked up the envelope and ripped it open. He quickly read the three-lined note. By the time he fi-

nished, anger boiled in his belly, rising up, almost choking him. He carefully set it down on the counter realizing he'd contaminated evidence.

"Explain."

It was not a question and the quick anger he saw in her gaze told him that she understood.

"About two years ago, I started getting letters." She shrugged. "I didn't think much of it at first because Jason didn't make a big deal out of it."

*Jackass.* "And you never went to the police?"

She threw her hands up in the air. "I was married to a police officer, Duncan. If he thought it was nothing, why would I worry?"

"Okay, so he ignored it, which tells me he sucks as a cop." Her lips quirked at that. "How often did they come?"

"Not that often and sometimes they would show up at the restaurant. They were spaced so far apart, it didn't hit me at first that I had more than one. It was when they started showing up every week that I realized how long it had been going on."

Fury boiled in his belly. The only thing keeping him from going after her ex was the fact he was in Atlanta. A police officer who took such threats to his wife so lightly should be kicked out of the service. He flexed his fingers thinking of wrapping them around the man's neck.

Some of what he was thinking must have shown on his face.

"Listen, I know it was stupid, but I really didn't think. Jason and I were already having problems and I was working seven days a week at the restaurant... I just didn't have time to think about it."

"You shouldn't have been the one thinking about it." He took a couple moments to calm his anger. It wouldn't do either of them any good. "So, you have received one here?"

She nodded. "The first day. In my car."

"Do you still have it?"

"Yes."

"I'll need it. Do you have any of the ones from Atlanta?"

"No. Jason said..."

"Jason said what?"

"Jason said it wasn't important."

*Bastard.* He settled his hands on his hips. "Jed doesn't know about this? Of course he doesn't. There is no way he would have headed back to Austin otherwise. Hell, he would have moved to Atlanta if he knew about them. Did this have anything to do with your accident in Atlanta?"

She shrugged. "They stopped after the accident but I assumed that was because I spent so much time in the hospital. It was as if I dropped off the face of the earth."

He nodded. "You have no idea at all who it might be? Someone who could have followed you here?"

"I can't think of anyone."

"Do you think your ex might have done it?"

"What for? He was getting what he wanted. I don't see what he would have gained from that."

He sighed. "Were you ready to give up the restaurant at that point?"

"No, but I'm pretty sure he didn't. Mainly because..."

She suddenly looked wary, her gaze straying from his to the counter.

"What?"

"Mama got them before she was killed."

Thea winced at the stream of profanity that spilled from Duncan's lips. His face was tightened in anger, a vein throbbing in his temple.

When he spoke, his voice was low and controlled, deadly soft. "Are you telling me that your mother received the same types of notes?"

She cleared her throat and knew if she didn't calm him down, he would be running to Jed. "Maybe we should sit down." He re-



leased her arm and strode over to the table. "It started about two years before...before Dad went missing." She sat down and he slumped in the chair next to hers, his elbows on the table. "I remember something about Mama talking to Sheriff Daily, but I don't know what came of it. My father and Daily had it out, a huge fight. I didn't know what it was about at the time."

"You never told Jed?"

She shrugged. "Why? There was no way of proving who did it then. Hell, I know half the town thinks Dad killed her and ran away. The other half thinks she killed herself." He looked away and she knew she was right.

"Did you tell your husband?"

"Ex-husband. At first no, but then when I started getting the letters, I told him. He thought it was a sign of my *problems*, as he liked to call them."

His eyes narrowed into slits as he studied her for a few moments and she squirmed uncomfortable with his scrutiny. "Problems?"

"I spent five months in the hospital after the accident. Jed told you, I know, but the problems had been going on for months. My marriage had been on the rocks for months and I was working twelve-hour days. He moved out about a year after the letters started."

"Could it have been your ex?"

"Jason? No. He didn't know about my parents' deaths, and he definitely didn't know about the letters."

"Jed thinks he might have had something to do with your wreck."

She shook her head. "No, he had an alibi for that evening."

He sat back in the chair and studied her again. She realized he was doing it on purpose and lifted her chin just to let him know he wasn't intimidating her.

"We have to tell Jed."

Her blood chilled, her heart froze. "No. No way, Duncan."

"He'll kill me if he finds out I knew and didn't tell him."

"No. Think about it. He will go off half-cocked. You know he gets too personally involved in cases, and this one would push him over the edge." She pushed back from the table and stood, backing away from it and trying to put some distance between them. "I came here to put it all to rest."

He bolted out of the chair with a speed that amazed her. He grabbed her by the upper arms, his fingers biting into her flesh. Leaning down, he growled, "You will do no such thing, Thea. I see what you're thinking, and I can't let you do it."

"I can do what I want, but I wasn't planning on doing it alone. I wanted to tell you but I wanted to be sure."

"Be sure? Of what?"

She wiggled out of his grasp and stood up. She needed space, needed to be able to think straight and she couldn't at the moment. Not with him so close she could feel his heat. It made her want to do stupid things, like lean closer for comfort. That would lead to problems she didn't have the capacity to deal with.

"I wanted to be sure it wasn't all in my mind."

"What do you mean?"

She drew in a deep breath. "You don't know how bad it was before my accident. It was bad. With my problems, there were moments when I thought I might have been doing it myself. I was the only one who knew about the letters."

"Let me guess. The ex liked to play head games."

She laughed but there was little humor in it. "He was a world-class champion." She shoved a hand through her hair. "And I promise, I was planning on telling you."

He didn't look like he believed her. "Do you know what your mother's letters said?"

She nodded. "Actually, I can give them to you."

Everything in him seemed to still. "You have them?"

"Yes. I didn't know it at first. They were tucked away at the bottom of a chest. I had no idea I had them until I started moving out of my house."

"You mean you had them in the house you and your ex shared?"

She nodded.

"You know I can't let you do this."

She studied him for a moment trying to decide how much he figured out. Thea decided to play stupid. "Do what?"

He let loose an exasperated sigh. "Don't try to bullshit me. You've made yourself a target."

"I'm not any more of a target than I was before I came here."

"Okay. That's true." He looked up at the ceiling, then around the room. "We have a problem."

"And what would that be?"

"I can't let you stay here by yourself."

Trepidation danced down her spine. "I can't move back to Gwen's. That would put her in danger."

He nodded as he raised his gaze to hers. "I know that. But I can't leave you here alone."

She frowned trying to reason through his thinking and then it hit her. "I don't want protection. I don't know who I can trust. Besides, you don't have the manpower, and putting a cop out in front of my house will just draw attention to me. I'll have every weirdo in the county bothering me."

"I was thinking more of protecting from the inside."

Thea narrowed her eyes. "What do you mean?"

He leaned against the counter, crossed his arms, and offered her an evil smile. "I figured it was time the two of us became roommates."

## **Chapter 7**

Duncan shoved a hand through his hair and tried to focus on the report in front of him. He'd been trying to work for damn near thirty minutes, but his mind just refused to cooperate. This morning's conversation with Thea had him so angry, he couldn't think straight.

He blew out a long breath and leaned back in his chair. He'd chewed out both Richard and Gina. Richard deserved it for his insubordination. That was nothing new and something Duncan figured he'd have to deal with after he was through with Thea's mess. Gina, well, that had been a mistake. From the look in her eyes, he would definitely be paying for his temper for at least a month.

Closing his eyes, he tried his best to get his mind back to work but it was a wash. Granted, the problems with Thea were part of his job. That is, the ones dealing with the stalking. And that was the problem. She was now considered part of the job and there could be no...fraternization.

He opened his eyes and stared unseeingly out the window. That was it in a nutshell. Duncan wanted her, planned to have her, and now this. He couldn't very well sleep with her while he was on the case. It would fog his ability to protect her. He'd been down that road before and he didn't want to go back there.

It had been at least a year since he'd thought about Jessica. She'd been another Texas Ranger, tough as nails, a pain in the ass. He'd fallen head over heels the first time she told him to kiss her ass. And it had been his love that had gotten her killed. In a split

second, he'd froze, unable to make a decision. He'd lost her, gotten shot himself, and left the Rangers.

He shook his head, pulling his thoughts out of the past and into the present. It was going to be hard to keep it quiet that he was bunking out at Thea's. She was going to pick him up at his house, but still there were eyes around and it wouldn't take long before someone saw them together. Especially when he wasn't getting any side benefits. Granted, he didn't mind if people thought they were sleeping together. Thea wouldn't be happy, and there was a chance it could make him a target, instead of her. If this man was obsessed with her, he wouldn't want anyone near her.

His cell phone rang and he smiled when he recognized her number. He clicked it on. She didn't even say hello.

"When the hell do you want me to pick you up?"

He smiled, he couldn't help it. Call him sick, but he loved a woman with a smart mouth. "I'm about to shut down my computer and head home. Should take me thirty minutes. What's for dinner?"

She snorted. "You expect me to feed you?"

His smile widened into a grin as he felt some of his earlier irritation drain away. "You are a world-class chef. I thought I should take advantage of that while I could."

She huffed. "You'll eat what I put in front of you."

He laughed, then sobered. "No more messages."

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Listen, Perry. I'd know if I had gotten a call or a letter."

"Okay. Make sure you go straight to my house."

"Bite me." And she hung up. He knew she would. Thea was a lot of things, but she wasn't stupid. He knew she would've contacted him about the letters. She might have waited longer if he hadn't found the one today.

As he shut down his computer, he mulled over the case a bit. They were going to sit down and go over the letters tonight, but he dreaded the suspect list. It was twenty years later and many suspects might've moved, died...disappeared. It wasn't going to be easy, and he was going to have to hunt up old Sheriff Dailey for help.

But, he thought with a smile, he was going to have a world-class dinner with a beautiful woman tonight. There was one thing he could take comfort in.

\* \* \* \*

Thea moved around the kitchen, preparing a simple meal for the two of them. She wasn't truly in the mood to cook, but then again, it helped her work off some of her frustration. Duncan wasn't helping because every time she said something to him, he would just smile and answer whatever question she put to him.

It was pissing her off more.

"So what was the reason for picking you up at your house?"

He flicked her a glance, then looked back at one of her mother's letters. His lips quirked before he asked, "Do you want me to park in front of your house? Everyone in town would know."

She huffed out an irritated grunt and grabbed a package of chicken from the fridge. "Who the hell cares?"

"I don't, but it might get back to Jed."

Because she knew he was right—and that irritated her even more—she slammed the package down on her counter. "He doesn't talk to anyone but you."

"I doubt that very much, especially now that you're here. Do you really want him to come sniffing around? I thought you wanted him to stay away."

He hadn't looked up from reading and she didn't respond. Thea knew she was perilously close to sounding like a ten year old. Instead, she slid the chicken between some parchment paper and started pounding it with the mallet. She was making so much noise,

she didn't notice that he was standing behind her until he rested his hands on her waist. She stopped mid-pound. Her heartbeat accelerated, the heat in her body transformed from anger to arousal.

"Thea."

Her breath caught in her throat the moment she heard the gentleness in his voice. Shivers raced down her spine as goose bumps rose across her flesh.

"Everything's gonna to be fine."

She closed her eyes and leaned her head forward, her chin dropping to her chest.

"I know. It's..."

He pulled her back against him, using the warmth of his body to calm her. She dropped the mallet she didn't realize she was holding.

She lifted her head, then leaned it back against his chest. She could feel his heart beating against her back, feel her muscles relax.

"Nothing more is going to go wrong. We'll find out who is doing this, and who killed your mother and father."

Tears burned the back of her eyes. She blinked to hold them at bay. He used his hands to turn her to face him, but she stared at his chest. Slipping his knuckle under her chin, he raised her head. His gray eyes were filled with understanding and tenderness. Thea could no longer keep the tears from falling and felt them sliding down her face. Duncan rubbed his thumb over her cheeks then her bottom lip. As he was lowering her head, her cell phone rang, breaking the spell.

She stepped back, bumped into the counter. Duncan held her still, helping her gain her balance and smiled down at her. "Better answer that."

She nodded and picked up the phone. The moment she saw the number, she silently cursed, but answered it anyway.

Duncan watched the flush gather in her cheeks, but he knew this had nothing to do with arousal and everything to do with anger.

"Jason," she said, her voice strained. "What do you want?"

She was silent while she listened to the ex. Duncan was so close to her, he could hear the voice murmur on the other end of the line. Even though he wanted to lean closer, try and decipher what that bastard wanted, he stepped away, trying to give himself some time to think. Because he hadn't been thinking at all.

He settled himself back at the table and reminded himself that the woman was off limits. Didn't he just tell himself that not two hours earlier? But he had sensed her tension, knew it had more to do with the situation, and not them. She'd been bearing a terrible secret for years and she had looked so vulnerable, so alone. And it had been the wrong move to touch her. It didn't help as he listened to her argue with her ex, his anger started to build. He was a cop, and as her husband, Jason Warren should have protected her. Instead, he had made her feel as if she were insane, as if there was something wrong with her.

"I'm sorry, Jason. You'll have to figure it out on your own." She rolled her eyes. "Listen, you wanted Al's. You said you could do a better job than I did. It's not my fault you lost Antonio. And...no, no, Jason. I want nothing to do with that place and nothing to do with you." She clicked off her phone and tossed it on the counter.

"Problems?"

She picked up the mallet and started beating the hell out of the chicken again. "Not anything I have to worry about."

The only sound filling the kitchen was her whacking at that chicken. The smell of garlic and tomato, bread baking, everything homey, surrounded him. But the constant *thwack, thwack* disrupted the cozy feeling.

"Doesn't sound like it."



She kept pounding away.

"Thea!"

She looked up at him, irritation burning in her green eyes.

"What?"

"Tell me."

She blew out a breath. "Antonio is fantastic, but he is also loaded with old money. Mom and Dad have a very profitable olive business in Italy, and well, he doesn't need the work. I trained him myself, so I know he's good, but Jason pissed him off. He quit without notice."

"And he thought you could do what?"

"Call Antonio and get him back. Antonio hates Jason."

"I have a feeling Antonio and I would get along."

Her lips curved. "You just might. Let me get this finished then we can talk about those," she said, indicating the letters.

Because he knew there was more to the story, he'd wanted to press her, needed to know why her former chef hated her ex, but she wouldn't tell him, not yet. He watched her, enjoying the way she moved about the kitchen, humming under her breath—which he was sure she didn't realize she was doing—as she cooked their meal. Even now as she breaded the chicken and tossed it into the olive oil, his mouth watered, for the woman and her cooking.

With a sigh, he turned his attention back to the letters and pushed aside any thoughts of devouring his reluctant hostess.

\* \* \* \*

Thea took a sip of wine as she watched Duncan take another helping of her chicken parmesan.

"That money Jed put out for that fancy culinary school was totally worth it."

She smiled. "That's actually one of my mother's recipes."

"Your husband must be fat."

"Ex-husband and no. Jason never really ate my food that much."

He'd been slurping up some pasta when she said it and he stopped in mid-slurp, his eyes widened in disbelief. He sucked the rest of the spaghetti into his mouth. Then he wiped his mouth. "What the hell is wrong with him?"

Thea shrugged. "He'd eat some of my steak recipes, and a few other *normal* recipes, anything *ethnic*, wasn't his bag."

"And he thinks to run your old restaurant?"

"Yeah. And he is welcome to it. I was ready to get rid of it, leave Atlanta. I needed to come home."

Understanding filled his gaze. It was then she remembered his return to Crocker, the shootout and his hospitalization.

"So, when he said he wanted it, I gave it to him." She shrugged. "I think more than anything he wanted to piss me off."

He nodded. "Jed said something like that. Has your ex been calling a lot?"

Frowning, she said, "No. I don't know the last time I talked to him. It was before I left though."

"I need you to be honest with me...and yourself." She nodded. "Do you think he has anything to do with this?" She opened her mouth but he raised a hand. "No, think. He was living in your house where you were storing the letters."

"No."

"But he had access, and now he's calling here."

"Why? What reason would he have?"

"He wants you back."

She laughed bitterly. "No. It isn't that."

Needing something to keep her hands busy, she picked up her dish and went to clean it off. She couldn't face him and tell him about the train wreck of her marriage. Talking about it didn't hurt her as it once did, now it shamed her that she had been such an idiot.

"Our divorce decree said irreconcilable differences, but there was more to it than that. Jason...had a thing for blondes, especially

those with particular assets." Knowing she was being a coward, she turned to face him. His expression was blank. "That was his alibi the night I got run off the road. He was with one of his girlfriends."

"Thea...I didn't know, Jed didn't say anything."

"Jed doesn't know all of it. There are some things a sister doesn't want to tell her brother. Especially one trained to kill."

"That I understand, but...still, do you think he's behind it? Even the worst cop would want to investigate a threat like this."

"No way. It isn't his style. This took planning, years. Jason gets bored easily. Do you want to talk about the letters tonight?"

He nodded and rose from his chair. "Since you cooked, I'll clean up."

She smiled. "Well, I have to say your mama did teach you some manners."

"Of course she did. It's just that most of the time I forget to follow them."

"I'll take a quick shower and meet you back down here."

He nodded and she headed up the stairs, wanting—needing—some time alone. Her head was buzzing, her body humming. Just being in the same room with Duncan had her hormones dancing.

After stripping out of her clothes, she stepped into the hot shower, thinking of his body against hers, the need that had welled up so hard and fast she almost lost control right there and then. She wanted to feel his skin next to hers and she would have happily stripped down and had sex there in the kitchen.

Not that she would have objected, but...there was something different about him tonight. Yes he had offered her comfort, but it had been strained, reserved. Apparently, Sheriff Perry had a change of heart. With a sigh, she pushed the depressing thought away and got back to her shower. She didn't need him, or the complications he would bring. Although, she was pretty sure he might just be worth the trouble.

\* \* \* \*

Duncan lay in his bed, staring at the ceiling. After going over the letters, and any of her memories from that time, Thea had headed upstairs. She'd been yawning by the time they were done, and he hadn't missed the dark bruising beneath her eyes. She needed rest, and he had a feeling she hadn't been getting any. He needed sleep as much as she did. But three hours later, he still lay awake.

He couldn't let go of everything she had told him, of the resigned acceptance he'd heard in her voice when she spoke of her marriage. Or, of that moment in the kitchen when she had leaned back into him, the feel of her against him... Lord she had felt right. He had to keep his hands off her, and he had to get the job done. He would probably die from the lack of blood in his brain, but he would do it. There was no way he could protect her if he were more involved with her. It was already bad enough. Knowing she was just feet away...it was driving him crazy. He sat up and speared his fingers through his hair in frustration. With an irritated grunt, Duncan shoved the sheets off of him and slipped from the bed. He figured a cold shower might wake him up, but it would definitely kill the arousal he had coursing through him at the moment.

He searched for a pair of jeans and pulled them on. Padding barefoot, he walked to the door. He'd just stepped into the hall when Thea's scream stopped him in his tracks.

## **Chapter 8**

Duncan ran down the hall to Thea's room, his heart damn near beating out of his chest and terror coursing through his veins. In the short time it took to get to her room, he remonstrated with himself. *How had someone gotten in?* He should have stayed up, double-checked the locks...

Without trying the doorknob, he kicked open the door and rushed inside. His heart leapt to his throat as he scanned the room and found Thea laying on her bed, thrashing about. He reached the side of the bed in two huge steps and drew in a calming breath. She was having a nightmare, no one was hurting her.

"Thea?"

"No, Mama, no!"

His heart twisted at her anguished scream. The fear in her voice chilled his blood. Locked in a memory, she strained against an imaginary force.

"Thea, hon, wake up."

She didn't stop, her moans of terror growing as she struggled against the nightmare. He touched her shoulder hoping to calm her but she bolted up in bed with a scream. She blinked, then slowly opened her eyes. Her cheeks were wet with tears.

Squinting, she said, "Duncan?"

"You were having a nightmare."

She blinked, and glanced around the room. Her demeanor spoke of someone who didn't recognize their surroundings. She

shook her head, and he watched the reality of the situation pass over her face.

"I'm sorry."

He eased himself onto the mattress. "Do you remember anything?"

She sighed. "Bits and pieces. I only ever remember little parts of it, like it is all shadowed." She shoved a hand through her hair. "It's very aggravating. Sometimes...sometimes I think I recognize the voice, but then I wake up."

"Tell me what little you remember." For a second, the confusion remained in her eyes. Then, her face paled. "What did you remember?"

"Mama." Grief roughened her voice. "I remember Mama telling the man I wasn't there, then I heard his voice."

He grabbed hold of her by her upper arms and turned her to face him. She looked up at him, her eyes shimmering with tears. The need to comfort, to pull her against him and promise that no one would ever hurt her again, almost overwhelmed him. But he knew he had a job to do, and that would only cloud it.

"Whose voice?" She didn't answer, just blinked and a tear rolled down her cheek. "Whose voice, someone you know, or knew?"

She cleared her throat. "In my dream..." She swallowed. "In my dream, I recognize the voice. At first, nothing's wrong then Mama starts to argue." She shook her head in denial as if trying to clear the memory. "But it was the first time I realized I knew the person. The first time I dreamed of his voice. That night he showed up and Mama let him in."

"Who was it?" he demanded.

"I don't know. I swear I don't know." She leaned her head against his shoulder.

"What do you mean you don't know? You said you heard his voice in your dream." He'd released her arms and now massaged her back, running his hands up and down her spine.

"I heard it, but...something. I just don't know. It's all sort of foggy, muffled and I remember..." She pulled back from him and looked him in the eye. Her face was drenched with tears. "I just remember back then—when it happened—that I knew this person and why was Mama yelling at him? She told him that I wasn't here. That was I spending the night at a friend's house."

"So, anything else? Did she say anything in your dream that would point you to the person?"

She frowned and sniffled. "She said... Oh my God. Yes! She said something like 'What are you doing here this late?' Like he was there normally but not at night."

"So, we know he was there that night, and had been there before—"

"Recently. I just get this feeling the man was there on a regular basis, just not that late at night."

She leaned forward and placed her head on his shoulder again. Duncan was relieved she was no longer crying, but as she snuggled closer, his thoughts turned away from the case. He needed distance to think straight so he eased her back away from him.

"Anything else?"

She shook her head and shivered. As she pulled the sheets up to her chest, he realized just how little she was wearing. The soft cotton of her nightshirt draped over her breasts, her hardened nipples pressed against the fabric. All his worry dissolved as arousal pulsed to life.

"Well, if you're okay, I'm going to head back to bed."

He would have done just that, moved away from her, gone back to bed, and tried to forget just how she looked with the moonlight illuminating her, the softness of her skin, of the need to

touch her. But she leaned forward again, resting her head on his shoulder.

"Thank you."

Her breath spread over his flesh and he fought a shudder. His need grew, heat scorching his veins. He counted backwards from ten, trying to think of anything but the soft, warm woman leaning against him. He couldn't quite do it, couldn't convince himself that right now what he didn't need was to slip between her thighs and into her tight hot passage.

*Damn it.* He tried to conjugate verbs in Spanish to get his mind back on track. His thoughts scattered the moment her lips touched the sensitive skin just below his ear. *Maybe it had been an accident. Just an inadvertent brush.* All rational thought fled the next time it happened, this time with a bit of tongue.

He swallowed. "Thea?"

"I don't want to be alone tonight, Duncan," she said, her voice a husky plea. She nibbled on his earlobe. "I need someone to chase away those memories. I know I'm not your type, I know you don't really like me, but I know you can help me. Please, help me."

He pulled away from her and gently took her face into his hands. Her gaze was dead on; she never even flinched. "Thea, this isn't right. I need to keep everything straight, keep you safe." He swallowed again. He couldn't believe she thought he didn't want her. How could he tell her he wanted her more than he had wanted anyone in his life, more than his next breath?

"I don't want to think, Duncan. And I don't want to feel anything but good. It's been so long since I've felt really, really good."

She tucked her legs under her bottom and sat up on her knees, bringing herself eye level with him. She leaned forward, her eyes fluttered closed and she pressed her lips to his.

He still held her face in his hands, but she'd moved her fingers to his wrists. She nipped at his lower lip. Every thought, every bit of resistance melted. All his reservations disappeared in that mo-



ment, and he knew there was no going back. He wanted her and he didn't care about the complications.

He groaned and delved into the kiss. He took complete control, capturing her mouth and diving into it. He knew she was probably using him, using this to escape the pain of her nightmare, her past. All that mattered was the way she tasted, the feel of her lips against his, the scent of her flesh. Everything within him tightened.

He shook his wrists free of her hands and slipped them down her body, pulling her tighter against him. Her turgid nipples brushed his chest. The slight touch had him groaning again, his cock growing harder. He slid his hands down her delicate spine to the curve of her bottom, taking one full cheek in each hand. Gently, he pressed her back onto the bed, lying on top of her, reveling in the feel of her body beneath his.

Her legs spread, and she cradled his arousal against her sex. Even through the jeans he wore, he could feel the heat of her. He tore away from her mouth, and kissed along her jaw as her fingers speared through his hair. He pulled on her shirt, lifting it up and over her head, and then tossing it behind him. He leaned back and took in the view before him.

*Holy mother of God, she is gorgeous.* All she wore was a tiny miniscule pair of pale blue panties. Her breasts were full, heavy bottomed, tipped with gorgeous coral nipples. He rested his weight on his hands as he leaned forward and laved one of her nipples, then drew it into his mouth. He moved to her other one, while he settled on his side so he could brush his palm against her breast. She moaned, over and over, each one growing louder than the last. Soon, he was inching down her body, taking immense pleasure in the way her stomach muscles clenched as he slid his tongue across it, and into her belly button.

As he eased himself down her torso, he pulled her panties down and then off, discarding them in the same way he did her

nightshirt. She instantly tried to draw her legs together, but he was laying between them. Thea slid her hand down but he stopped it as he pressed her legs wider apart. Within the dark curls lay her pink pouty lips, wet with desire.

"Duncan." Her tone spoke of embarrassment and doubt, but he ruthlessly ignored it. She must have had one god-awful marriage if she was embarrassed. Duncan intended to wipe away any worries with knowledge, pleasure.

He settled his hand against her mound. "Ah, hot and..." he slipped a finger inside her, "wet." She moaned and her muscles relaxed as he pressed his thumb against her clit. Her legs shifted restlessly as he continued to stroke her. Wanting...no needing a taste, he leaned forward and set his mouth against her slit.

Sweet, hot, spicy, the taste of her exploded across his senses as he slipped his tongue deeper into her sex. It took one more touch against her clit and she was hurdling over the edge. She screamed his name and her body convulsed as she came. But he didn't stop. He built her up again, using his mouth, his fingers, his tongue. Within moments, she was coming again. He lifted his head to watch her as she bowed up, her mouth opened in a silent scream.

Knowing he was close, thinking he would be lucky to make it past the first few strokes, he moved up her body and tore open his jeans. He entered her in one fast hard thrust, even before she'd finished recovering from her orgasm. Her muscles pulled him in, clamped tight around his cock.

He angled her hips, his fingers digging into her skin. God, she felt good. Hot, wet, tight. He plunged once, twice, three times. His balls grew heavier, everything in his body tensed, his body preparing for the release. Slipping a hand between them, he pressed against her clit once more, and she came again, her muscles clenching around his shaft and he was lost. One more stroke and he poured himself into her.

Long moments later, he collapsed on top of her. He knew he should move, but he couldn't find the energy to do it. Her hands stroked down his back, loving, gentle. She kissed the side of his neck.

He finally gained enough energy and pushed himself aside. She protested, but he put his finger on her mouth.

"I'm too heavy for you."

She smiled. "I liked the feel of you on top of me."

He grunted, as he pulled his jeans off and then settled back against the pillows. He pulled the sheets back up over them and Thea snuggled against him. It was then he remembered the one thing he'd forgotten.

"Thea?"

"Hmm?" She slipped her fingers over his chest.

"I'm...damn, I didn't use protection."

She paused, then restarted her motions. "I'm on the pill."

He released a breath he didn't know he'd been holding. "Okay."

Duncan knew for a fact he was clean, he always wore a condom. Except tonight. It was the first time since he lost his virginity that he hadn't thought of using protection. That scared him more than the idea he hadn't used it.

But he couldn't think of that right now. He definitely didn't want to think of why he should never have taken her to bed. Right now, all he wanted was to sleep with her by his side.

\* \* \* \*

Thea woke slowly, her body coming awake, her mind adjusting to the hard, hot body next to her in bed. She smiled as she drew in a deep breath.

*Duncan.*

She'd dreamed of this moment for years, yearned for it, not knowing exactly what it would be like. Anything she imagined didn't come close to the reality. She pushed the sheet aside and

trailed her finger down his body, following the line of hair that bisected his abdomen. She reached his groin, pausing only a moment before slipping her palm over the tip. He was already hard when she took him in her hand. His indrawn breath told her that he was no longer sleeping.

She glanced up at him with a smile. "Sorry I woke you."

He chuckled then groaned when she pulled her thumb over the tip. "No problem at all. You can wake me up any day."

Thea scooted down the bed and pressed her mouth against his stomach.

"Thea..."

"Hmm?"

"You don't—"

He stopped talking the moment her tongue darted out against the sensitive skin on the inside of his thigh. Excitement surged from the power she felt over him. She'd never really gotten into power games, to playing in bed. But with Duncan, she couldn't fight the need to tease, to be the one in control. Thea inched her mouth closer to his shaft, then rolled onto her stomach between his legs. She waited a second, two, knowing her breath feathered over his cock. It twitched. His legs shifted against the sheets as she bent her head and touched the tip of her tongue against his sac.

"Holy mother of God."

She could barely hear his muttered plea, but she smiled and said, "Just call me Thea."

Then she trailed her tongue up his length, rising enough to take him into her mouth. His fingers twisted through her hair as she stroked his cock deep in her mouth. He soon picked up on her rhythm and joined in, jettisoning in and out of her mouth. It wasn't long before he sat up, grabbed her by the arms and pulled her up his body. He took her by her hips and looked up at her. But instead of thrusting into her fast, hard, he entered her slowly. Inch by inch, he slid inside, all the while keeping eye contact, his gray eyes dark,

burning. When he was finally in her to the hilt, he held still and she squirmed.

He chuckled. "Problem?"

She narrowed her eyes and knocked his hands away. Grabbing him by the shoulders, she urged him forward, so her breasts pressed against his chest. She dipped her head and captured his mouth, thrusting her tongue inside, and she began to ride him. He kissed a path down her throat, his tongue darting out against her flesh until he reached her breasts, then he took a nipple into his mouth and slid his hand down her torso, to just before he reached her mound. He caressed her clit, as she continued to rise and fall. All the tension that gathered in her circled in her stomach, then slipped down to her sex. It exploded a moment later, sending pulses of heat streaming through her blood.

A moment later, as she still shuddered from her orgasm, he followed her with a shout.

They collapsed together, still joined, their heavy breathing filling the silence in the room. Then he chuckled, his chest vibrating against her ear. She lifted her head—which took almost all her energy.

"What?"

"You can wake me up anytime you want."

She smiled and opened her mouth when a crash sounded downstairs. Quickly, he moved Thea off him, then rose from the bed, grabbing a pair of jeans as he headed to the door.

He slipped into his jeans and said, "Damn it. I left my gun in my room." He buttoned his jeans and looked back at her. "Stay here."

And with that he slipped out the door to the sound of another crash. Thea, her heart pounding, fear icing her blood, searched for her nightshirt. As she was slipping it on, she heard yet another crash. She grabbed her cell phone and tiptoed to her door. Her heart jumped to her throat the moment she heard the gunshot.

## **Chapter 9**

Thea ran out the door and started down the stairs. Waves of terror spread through her. Fear stabbed her stomach at the thought he might've been hurt because of her. Before she stepped off the last step, Duncan stopped her.

"Get some shoes."

His voice came from the kitchen.

"Are you all right?" she yelled.

"Yeah, but there's glass everywhere. And bring some towels. Ones you don't care if they get stained."

She ran up the stairs, and slipped on her Crocs when she realized she hadn't put on any panties. Now that she knew Duncan was okay, the situation hit her. She'd gone tearing down the stairs with nothing but a shirt on. She chuckled as she grabbed a pair of panties and pulled them on. It was a helluva situation when Thea Johnson went commando while barreling downstairs.

\* \* \* \*

Duncan sat down in the kitchen chair cursing his stupidity. He'd heard the glass break, but like a fool, he'd only grabbed his gun. He hadn't thought once of grabbing a pair of shoes.

Thea's light footsteps sounded and he turned to the stairs. Her eyes widened at the mess. And it was a mess. Someone had thrown a brick through the kitchen window. Glass covered the sink, countertops and the floor.

"Do you have a first aid kit?"

She looked at him and then down at his feet. "Oh, Dunc, why didn't you think of putting on your shoes?"

Because he hadn't recovered from making love to her.

He shrugged. "Wasn't thinking. Can you get something for this?" He nodded to his feet and her eyes traveled down and saw the blood.

"Yes." She handed him a towel. "What was the shot?"

"Me. I saw a figure outside and thought I saw him raise a weapon." He glanced at her and took stock of her horrified expression. "Missed him and he went running. Everything's okay."

She nodded although she didn't look like she believed him. "I'll be right back."

She turned and headed in the direction of the downstairs bathroom and he sighed. She wasn't going to like his next actions any more than he liked to be doing it, but he didn't have a choice. He'd used his service revolver, and it had to be reported.

She rushed back into the kitchen, the kit in one hand and a broom in the other. She set the kit on the table, but he stopped her from cleaning up the mess.

"I need your phone. I have to call it in."

She hesitated, then nodded. He took it from her and said, "Not going to argue?"

She shook her head. "No. I figured you discharged your service revolver, so you would have to call it in. You keep forgetting that I was married to a cop, not to mention my brother has been one."

He called it in, making sure to tell them not to use lights or sirens. After clicking the phone off, he looked at Thea.

"Come on." She yanked him out of the chair, grabbed the kit and helped him walk to the couch. "Let's see how bad they are." She sat on the coffee table and rested one of his feet in her lap. She made a few noises over the injuries, but had both feet cleaned and bandaged within a few minutes.

"So, you think this was the stalker."

"Not sure."

Her head snapped up from her task. "You think I've pissed someone else off?"

"No. I think this was just some kids playing a joke. Our guy is a lot subtler. Bricks are not his game. But I'm gonna treat it as if it were him."

She nodded, accepting his conclusions. The silence grew as she finished up her task and he knew they had to talk about what happened.

"Thea?" She gently placed his foot on the floor and looked at him. "What happened earlier should never have happened."

She cleared her throat. "I know, Duncan. Besides being completely wrong for each other, we...we need to keep our heads clear."

It was what he meant, what he wanted but all of a sudden, he couldn't agree with her. It was for the best, but at the moment, Duncan couldn't convince himself to agree with her.

Before he could answer, she continued, "I mean, I understand when two people live in close proximity to each other, judgment gets clouded. Completely understandable."

"Clouded?"

"Yes. The important thing is that we figure this out. Then we can go our separate ways."

"You don't need to tell me what my job is," he spat out.

Why the hell was he so mad? The woman didn't argue, gave in and never said one word about their lovemaking being the best she ever had. Women didn't just agree to cut things loose.

He took her hand in his and said, "I know it's wrong, and granted...I think it might be a mistake."

"Don't worry—"

"Will you shut up?" She widened her eyes and he sighed. "I'm trying to say that I don't know if I can be within ten feet of you and



forget about last night. Hell, I could be on the other side of Texas and still be thinking about it.”

She smiled. “Really?”

He gingerly set his foot down on the ground and leaned forward to brush his mouth against hers, all the while keeping his eyes open. “I know it’s wrong, but there is no way I can go back to being just friends.”

Something shifted in her gaze, her green eyes filling with a light he wasn’t sure he’d seen before. She opened her mouth to speak, but the doorbell had her snapping her mouth shut.

“I’ll get that.” She stood and headed to the door in nothing but a nightshirt.

“Thea.” She turned to look at him. “Go get dressed.”

She looked down at herself and smiled. “Yeah, that would probably be best. Can you get to the door by yourself?”

He rolled his eyes and stood. “I’ve had worse.”

“I know.” She rose up, gave him a quick kiss and headed up the stairs. He watched the sway of her ass, the soft fabric clinging to her heart-shaped bottom and sighed. *Duty before pleasure*. He turned toward the door to deal with work.

\* \* \* \*

It took less than an hour to deal with Freddy Michelson, his newest deputy. In his mid-twenties, the young officer had taken one look at Duncan’s bare chest, raised an eyebrow but said nothing. He was more than polite to Thea, but Duncan was pretty sure that most of Crocker would know by noon that he’d been at Thea’s.

“So much for keeping this private,” she said, then let out with a chuckle.

He glanced at her as she swept up the glass. “You don’t sound too worried.”

She shrugged as she dumped the last of the glass into the trash. “You were the one who was worried. I could care less.”

He wanted to argue with her, but he didn't think it would do any good, so he picked up the cardboard and tape for the windows.

"Can you think of anything, anything at all that went on right before your mom was murdered? Anyone hanging around that much?"

She bit her lip and wrinkled her brow. "Well, Chris was there, but you know how tight he and Dad were. We had some work done on our roof. There'd been a huge hailstorm the month before and some shingles had to be replaced. Other than that..." She shrugged.

Once he'd secured the cardboard, he turned back around and found her gaze had been concentrated on the area where his ass had been. She took her sweet time raising it to meet his own.

"You like the view, Ms. Johnson?"

She shook her head. "I'd rather see it without the jeans."

He chuckled as she stood. He followed her out of the kitchen and up the stairs. He knew she needed to forget, to pretend nothing was wrong and everything was normal. As she pulled off her top and jumped into bed, he decided he was the man for the job.

\* \* \* \*

He wiped the blood from his face, his hands still shaking. It had been stupid, so stupid to go to Thea's house, to watch through the windows. He had seen someone—a man—moving in that house earlier. When he searched for a car, he found nothing so he had no idea who the fuck was inside. Anger had boiled beneath his skin, the screams in his head blinding him to everything around him. He'd left, found a woman, but she had been a sorry substitute for Thea. The kill was no longer the thrill it had been, a weak buzz that diminished almost as soon as it started.

He winced as he realized the light blue cashmere sweater would have to be burned. It was splattered with the slut's blood. She'd been so easy, so willing, such a disappointment. He pulled off the sweater and dropped it into the tub. As he poured alcohol

over the sweater, then threw in a match, he thought of tonight, of his rash behavior.

First, he had gone after Chase. The man had his sights set on Thea, and he had been sure the man he'd seen tonight was Chase. But Chase didn't like guns, never had. It had been a mistake to throw the bricks, but the fury that flowed through him could not be stopped, even after killing the whore. He closed his eyes when he remembered glimpsing Thea, seeing her in just a nightshirt. Shivering with lust and need, he slipped his hand down his body, and encircled his staff. He thought of Thea, of her dark hair, those deep green eyes, so pure. She needed him, needed to understand that they would be together.

\* \* \* \*

When Duncan stepped out of the bathroom after his shower, the aroma of fresh coffee, eggs and bacon reached him. One thing about living with Thea, the woman could cook. If this investigation lasted too long, he'd be too big to fit through the door.

His feet were a little sore, but not so bad. He walked down the stairs thinking about how good it would be to wake up like this every morning. Except, he'd wake up next to Thea, all her curves and the scent of apples and cinnamon. He stopped halfway down and shook his head. He did not want to get serious. He was not the type of guy to settle down and definitely not with Jed's sister.

He continued down to the kitchen because he knew they needed to talk. He'd deal with those peculiar feelings some other time. Like fifty years from now.

\* \* \* \*

Thea knew the moment he walked into the room. The nape of her neck tingled and she turned to give him a smile. Completely false, but she needed to get past her humiliation.

The serious expression on his face stopped her for just a moment.

"Hungry?"

His lips curved. "Starved."

They sat down and served themselves. Duncan loaded his plate with a hearty helping of eggs, bacon, toast and filled both of their mugs with coffee. If the man ate like that all the time, he must have the metabolism of a fly.

As she ate, she realized Jason had never really liked what she enjoyed cooking. He went in for gourmet while she loved home cooking. Duncan didn't seem to have a problem with it though.

As they ate the silence grew and she knew he had something on his mind.

She set her mug of coffee down with a clunk. "What? You want to say something, just spit it out."

He looked up from shoveling food in his mouth.

"I think we're in over our heads here and we need help from someone who was around then."

"Who? You and Jed were gone, my memories are all fuzzy. Who would you trust to help us?"

"The person who investigated it. Sheriff Dailey."

## **Chapter 10**

Duncan waited for Thea to explode. He didn't have to wait long.

"Sheriff Dailey?" Her voice was hoarse from trying to control her temper. "The man who screwed up the investigation to begin with?"

Her face flushed with anger and for a second he was reminded of the incident last night. Her skin hot and fevered with desire, the scent of apples and cinnamon filling his senses, her moans, her pleas...

He shifted to ease the tightness of jeans. *Get your mind out of her bedroom, Perry.* Her safety was more important than his lust.

"I don't think he can help much, but half that file is missing and I'm sure there's a lot he didn't put in it." Like other suspects. He'd known the man all his life and even though he wasn't a top-notch detective, Duncan knew Chief Dailey wouldn't have run such a shitty investigation.

"He practically convicted my father with no evidence. Hell, he probably blamed my father because his disappearance then my mother's murder could have cost him an election."

He knew she was right. But they needed Dailey's help no matter what.

"We are going to have look past his inefficient handling of the case. He knows who was around your mom at the time of the murder. Other people might be able to tell us but..."

She chewed on her bottom lip for a second or two then apparently thought of the implications. "The whole freaking town would know we were investigating." She leaned back and sighed. "Okay, so when do we go see him?"

He raised an eyebrow. "I didn't say we."

She crossed her arms beneath her breasts which immediately drew his attention to them. "If you think you are going without me, you have another think coming, Duncan."

"Thea—"

"No, they were my parents not yours and if you don't let me help, I'll tell Jed."

From the determined glint in her green eyes, Duncan knew she was serious.

"He'd be pissed at me," he said.

"Yeah. So I get to go." A little satisfied smile curved her lips. It made him want to throttle her and kiss her at the same time. Distance. He needed some distance.

He stood and took his plate and cup to the sink. "I'll run into work today, check on a few things and look up Dailey's new number. He moved out of the county so it'll be a day trip."

"Okay. I'll be ready for you when you get home."

He paused by the table before heading upstairs. She tilted her head up to look at him.

"You better take this seriously, Thea. This is not some game."

Her eyes narrowed. "Really, so you think this is some game for me? My parents were murdered, someone is stalking me and people I care for are at jeopardy because of me. What do you think?"

Standing, she pushed her chair back with the back of her legs. Her jersey pants clung to her hips, her cut off long-sleeved t-shirt revealed her rounded belly. She walked over to stand in front of him, her hands on her hips. The militant look in her eyes told him that she was ready to argue this to death. He pulled her into his

arms and leaned against the counter, resting his chin against the top of her head.

"I understand. But I want you to promise not to take it too far. You'll have some company today."

She went rigid and she bent her head back to look at him. "Who?"

"Officer Michelson from last night."

She relaxed. "Just as long as you keep me up to date."

He nodded and leaned down for a kiss. The simple kiss turned molten in a heartbeat when her tongue slid into his mouth to tangle with his. Blood heated and traveled to his groin. Backing her up, he gently maneuvered her against the wall, caging her in with his arms, then pressed against her. By the time he pulled away, both of them were breathing heavily.

He leaned his forehead against hers. "This is probably a really stupid thing to do."

"Yeah."

"It'll complicate things."

"Probably."

She licked her lips and he groaned, swooped in for another taste, and then forced himself to push away. "Drop me off at my house, and then come straight back here. Michelson will be over immediately."

\* \* \* \*

By the time eleven rolled around that morning, Duncan was in a raw mood. Everything that could go wrong that morning did. Richard called in sick, Fred, another deputy, had a flat tire on the way in and Gina was in one of her moods. She'd taken a far amount of skin off him when he'd sent Michelson out to Thea's. His unwillingness to tell her why had resulted in yet another fight. By the time Chase strolled in, Duncan was ready to scream bloody murder.

"Hey, big brother." Duncan looked up to find Chase leaning against the doorjamb of his office. "Oh, from the look on your face, you've had as bad a day as I have."

He closed the door behind him and sat in one of the chairs in front of Duncan's desk.

"What brings you by today?" Duncan asked, reading over another report of a dead woman in close proximity to Crocker. This was the third in less than three weeks and something nudged at his brain, something told him there was some connection to something, but Chase's next words stopped him.

"Someone messed with my truck last night."

Duncan snapped his head up and studied his brother to make sure he wasn't joking. His serious expression let him know Chase wasn't.

"What happened?"

"Driver's side window bashed in. Oh, and the taillights were messed with. Thank God I moved away from home or Mom would have thrown a fit."

Duncan silently agreed with him. "Any idea of who it might be?"

Chase shook his head. "No."

"Any upset papas or husbands?"

He scowled. "You know I don't fool around with married women."

That was true, it was the one rule Chase adhered to. Duncan thought about the timing with what went on last night at Thea's...and the fact Chase had been the one who seemed interested in her at the cookout at his mother's.

"I have to tell you something but it has to stay between us."

Chase nodded.

"I have a feeling this might be connected to something Thea is dealing with, and if so, I want you to watch your back." He quickly



explained the history, the stalking, the letters, ending with the fact that Thea had been vandalized the night before.

Chase's expression had darkened with each new detail from Duncan. "So you think this bastard might be after me?"

Duncan nodded. "I want you to stay away from Thea."

"But don't you think she should have some kind of protection?"

"Of course. I have Michelson over there right now. I was there last night."

It took only a second or two before the recognition hit Chase. He narrowed his eyes. "And you think that's a good idea?"

Irritated with the situation, and his second thoughts about the previous night, Duncan frowned at his brother. "I know what I'm doing."

Chase studied him for a moment longer then nodded. "As long you keep her...and yourself safe."

He knew just what Chase's warning was about. He'd been the one who arrived in Austin, patched him back up after Jessica's murder. It wasn't until that moment, when Chase had refused to let him wither away from guilt and pain, that Duncan realized just how much of a pain in the ass his brother was. But he owed Chase his life. He would have never made it without his brother.

"You might want to find another...love interest."

Chase frowned. "Why?"

"That Cattleman's Ball is tomorrow night. You should have a date."

Chase frowned. "I don't usually take a date."

What his brother meant was going stag would leave his options open. "Well, take someone you know isn't interested in you."

His face split into a grin. "That's going to be hard."

Duncan laughed, but then, a thought formed. "What about Fiona?"

"Fiona Blackwell, my secretary?" Chase scowled. "That woman..."

"Yeah. She doesn't want to have a thing to do with you. Tell her that you will be representing the company."

Chase shrugged. "I'll try, but there is a good chance that she'll threaten a lawsuit."

"You heading over to the office?"

Chase nodded. "I have to finish up the work on that advertising deal, then I have a meeting with Mom about some land in south Texas she wants to buy."

Duncan nodded as he rose and walked out the door.

"Gina, heading over to Dailey's about an old case. I'll have my cell phone and you know his number."

"Sure thing," she said with a smile. Amazing. Five seconds and Chase had her smiling. Chase followed him to his truck. "So, what's wrong with Gina?"

"Her and Newhouse had a falling out. Seems he wants exclusive rights or no deal." Chase chuckled. "I think she may have met her match."

"Thea and I are heading out to Dailey's ranch. I'll let you know if we find anything out. You need me to help with Fiona?" His back was to Chase and only the sound of Chase's feet shifting in the gravel reached him. He turned and witnessed his brother blush for the first time.

"Yeah, I might need some help with her. The woman...well she is one icy lady and I don't want her to think her job hinges on this."

Duncan laughed. "She threatened to sue you for sexual harassment, didn't she?"

"Not in so many words."

"Tell you what. I'll come by after we hit Dailey's. We should be back around dinnertime and Fiona always sticks around till you leave, right?"

"Yeah."

"Well, with me explaining it, she'll either believe me or think you really are hard up." He laughed again at his brother's crude comment. "We should be back around five."

He got in his truck and headed out to Thea's. When he thought about the tense atmosphere when he left that morning, maybe he shouldn't be so hasty in his amusement. The ninety-minute drive was going to seem like nine hours if she was in the same mood.

\* \* \* \*

Thea was packing the picnic she'd put together when the phone rang and she groaned when she saw the caller id. She picked it up and regretted it immediately.

"Allie, hon, I need your help," Jason pleaded. "Graham quit without notice and half of the wait staff has gone off to other places. What the hell am I going to do?"

She gritted her teeth. The man was oblivious. He'd apparently thought running the restaurant was easy. Sure, he'd had some say in what she did, because he had helped her put the down payment on it, but he had never actually worked in the kitchens, or the front of the house for that matter. Other than drinking away some of her profits, and offering free drinks to his friends, he hadn't really spent any time there. Well, except when he decided to fuck her staff.

When she'd caught him with one of the hostesses on *her* desk, Jason had said he'd had no choice. The sight of her sickened him. With her gone and apparently the loss of one of the best-staffed kitchens in Atlanta, Al's was going down the tube. During the proceedings of their divorce, she'd stifled her anger and pain had twisted new and deep wounds. She'd wanted nothing more than to make him bleed, but the accident and her recovery had made that difficult and by the time the proceedings had started, she just wanted to get home.

Now, the resentment for what he did to her, to her restaurant, hell to the idiots he cheated with, bubbled to the top and she let go.

"Listen, Jason, I don't care if the whole staff, including the ones you screwed, quit. It's not my problem anymore. You wanted it, you got it. And another thing, don't contact me here again. I'll file a restraining order."

After clicking it off, she threw the phone on the counter. *Damn him for this.* A year ago, she would have been thrilled with the attention. Now, it left anger churning in her gut, and the memory of his cheating and lying fresh in her mind.

"What did that jackass want?"

She started at the sound of Duncan's voice. He stood in her doorway, his mouth set in a grave frown, his eyes almost black. She could feel the anger rolling off of him in waves.

"He wanted help with the restaurant. Seems he's lost most of the staff."

"He calls again, I want to know."

She turned back to the basket she was packing. "How could you not know, you're always here."

\* \* \* \*

Making his way across the kitchen, Duncan told himself not to be pissed. But he couldn't help it. Jealousy and rage had been simmering in his blood since he'd heard her say her ex's name.

"You need to tell me, Thea. He could be linked to this somehow."

She turned around, her eyebrow raised in question. "I hadn't planned on keeping it from you but I really think you need to cross him off the list."

"And why is that? Still have feelings for him?" He was taunting her and he didn't care. For reasons he didn't want to examine, the thought of her still in love with the jackass pissed him off.

Her face lost all color and her hands fell to her sides. "No. Every bit of feeling I had for the man I lost when I found him fucking one of my hostesses on my desk in my restaurant. If that hadn't done it, the fact that he blamed me for his cheating would have pushed me over the edge." She blinked as if trying to hold back the tears shimmering in her eyes.

"Shit, Thea, I'm sorry. I didn't mean—"

"No. No, I'm the one who is sorry. Sorry I was stupid enough to marry him and believe his lies." She took a deep breath and angrily brushed away a tear trickling down her cheek. "But he isn't here which would make it hard for him to be the one stalking me."

He knew she was right, but it didn't change the way he felt. He wanted it to be the ex, because that would make Jason Warren off limits to her, but also it would be solved. She looked so sad, so hurt that all he wanted to do was pull her into his arms, comfort her, kiss her, make love to her. But when he stepped forward, she moved away from him and headed for the stairs.

"I packed a lunch. Why don't you take it out to the truck while I grab a pair of shoes?"

He watched her disappear upstairs wishing they didn't need to make this trip. Grabbing the basket, he headed for the front door regretting his words but promising he would check it out. The ex had a reason to drive her back to Atlanta, and that was one thing Duncan would not allow.

\* \* \* \*

The drive was not as unbearable as Thea thought it would be. As they barreled down Highway 83 toward Dailey's ranch just outside Ballinger, they dined on the sandwiches, chips and fruit. Amazingly, Duncan seemed to want to know about her life in Atlanta.

"So, what made you decide on Atlanta?"

"It was an up-and-coming city. At the time I settled there, it was one of the fastest growing cities in the country. I had some

contacts down there. I worked for awhile at a few restaurants around the area, built a reputation. My idea."

He stole the last chip and laughed when she gave him what she hoped was a mean look. "I'm amazed you came back here."

I needed to do this. It's home. Down in my soul, I am just a small-town girl."

"No, what I meant was that you gave up a whole way of life in Atlanta."

She thought about his comment for a moment. The people who worked for her, from the sous chef to the busboys, the hectic atmosphere of the kitchen, the egos and nerves that kept it humming...

"I guess. But I really didn't give it up. I gave up the restaurant because Jason wanted it to go in an entirely different direction. He wanted to go upscale, I wanted to remain a family restaurant."

He grunted as he turned his attention to the road and for the first time in weeks, she thought about her future. What would she do in Crocker? There wasn't much she could do with her specialized degree but she hadn't felt so comfortable in years. *Maybe open a sandwich shop or a catering company?* She really couldn't think about it. More important things preyed on her mind.

\* \* \* \*

Duncan drove in silence trying to fight the conflicting forces spiraling inside of him. Why would the thought of Thea moving out of town send panic racing through him? Once they cleared up this mess, she'd be free to move. He was sure she wouldn't head back to Atlanta but maybe Dallas, or back to New York City where she went to school?

*Why would someone who had been rated one of the top young chefs in the country, settle in Crocker? No reason.* Oh, there was Jed, but he'd moved to Austin. Besides, she would want a family of her own. Which meant marrying a man, making love to him, sharing her life with him.

Pain radiated from his hands and he looked down to realize he'd gripped the steering wheel so tight, his knuckles were white.

Loosening his hold, he glanced at Thea. He studied her profile while she watched the landscape pass by outside the truck window. The flat west Texas plains were even more barren this time of year than others. November brought a few freezes to the area and killed off any other living vegetation that might have survived the summer. The tangled branches of the mesquite trees presented an almost eerie panorama. The gray skies and occasional drizzles, added to the dismal view.

"Is that the road up there?" she asked.

"Yeah. Sort of lives out in the boonies, doesn't he?"

She grinned and it sent a shimmer of something, definitely not lust, crawling through his system.

"I like it though," she said. "Sort of quiet. After all that noise in New York City and all the traffic of Atlanta, I like the quiet."

He parked the truck behind Dailey's old Suburban.

"Did you call him and tell him we were coming?"

"No," he said but followed the direction of her gaze. Dailey was sitting in his rocking chair on his front porch. Odd since it couldn't be more than fifty degrees and rainy. He was wearing the same brown cowboy hat he always did, his ruddy face serious, and his trusty rifle lying on his lap.

They both got out of the truck and he followed Thea up to the porch. She stopped when she reached the bottom of the stairs.

"'Bout time you two made it here. Been waiting since Ms. Johnson moved back to Crocker. Guess you want to know who killed your parents."

## **Chapter 11**

"You know I'm investigating their murders?" Thea asked Dailey.

His rheumy blue gaze slid from their study of Duncan to her. He stood with considerable effort. Grabbing a cane, he handed his rifle to Duncan.

"You have a look about you. Almost the spitting image of your mama. Of course, the eyes... Well come on. I don't have all day."

They followed him into his house. He gingerly limped to the kitchen. The furnishings inside were no-nonsense and plain, heavy wood, faded fabric and twenty years out of date.

"I've just put on some coffee, should be done in a sec. Make yourselves comfortable."

He lowered himself into one of the worn, wooden kitchenette chairs. Duncan sat beside him, Thea across the table from both of them.

"You said you knew my parents were murdered?"

"Thea, I think I can handle the questioning," Duncan said in a warning tone. He turned his attention to Dailey. "Now, tell me what you know."

"Knew from the beginning Johnson was dead." He sighed.

Thea knew he regretted something. *Ignoring her mother? Not catching the killer?*

"His blood on the front seat of his car and leaving his wife behind. He loved that woman more than life. He'd never have run



off. And the letters." He shook his head in resignation and then grabbed his cane.

"No, I'll get it," Thea offered and his eyes narrowed as he studied her.

"I'm not an invalid."

She remembered how to handle cranky old men. Her grandfather had been one.

"I never said you were. I need to stretch my legs after the trip. Besides, I'm sure you like yours black and I like mine doctored. I'd just have to get up anyway." She stood and without allowing for further argument, hastened to the coffeepot. She thought she heard a rusty chuckle but she wasn't sure.

"Just like your mama. Cups are in the cupboard next to the fridge."

She retrieved the coffee cups and her hands shook. Ping-pong balls bounced in her stomach and every nerve in her body was pulled tight. After all these years, she was close to finding the answers. Fear of the unknown had paralyzed her for years, but now apprehension weighed her down. She didn't know if finding out the truth would be much better. She took a deep breath, allowing her nerves to calm.

As she poured the coffee, the two men continued their conversation.

"So, knowing you, you had a list of suspects when Margie was killed but you didn't tell anyone," Duncan said.

"Couldn't tell anyone. You know how that town is. One peep out of me, and it would have been all over Crocker. I also had a problem with the townspeople. If I didn't let the rumors go on like they did, there would have been mass hysteria."

"And you could've been voted out of office," Duncan said, his voice flat. The air crackled with tension. Hoping to ease it, Thea brought the two men their coffees, then grabbed hers and returned to her seat.

"Margie had a lot of admirers." He shrugged. "Not much you could do about that."

Her blood boiled with anger. She couldn't help the sharp tone in her voice. "Are you saying my mother deserved what she got?"

"I never said that, Miss Johnson."

"So, just what are you saying?" she asked, sitting back in her chair and crossing her arms.

"What I'm saying is your mother had an easy-going nature. A bit motherly to most men except your daddy. Hell, she even brought me Christmas cookies. Someone might have taken the attention the wrong way." Her muscles relaxed and she uncrossed her arms. His attention shifted to Duncan again.

"I don't envy you your life. Tangling with wildcats can leave a few scratches."

Duncan glanced quickly at her and then back to Dailey. "Let it go. Now, let's get back to your list of suspects. A lot of the file was missing. What I want to know is where it is."

Dailey's lips curved slightly. "They hired them a good sheriff. All the rest of the report is in a box in the living room. I've been waiting for you since the murders started up again a few months ago."

"Murders?" Thea and Duncan asked at the same time.

"Yes, murders." Dailey released a disgusted sigh. "With all those newfangled gadgets you have in your office, you mean you haven't been getting reports about the women around here?"

A light of recognition entered Duncan's eyes. "The faxes. There's been two or three murders of women in the past few weeks."

"More like the past few months. All dark-haired, green-eyed, and average in height."

A chill slithered into her stomach cooling the warmth the coffee had produced.

"Women..." She cleared her throat. "Women who look like me?"

"Haven't seen any pictures of them, but the description is pretty close to your features."

"What about around the time of Margie's murder?" Duncan asked, his voice deep and concerned. She glanced at him but he wasn't looking in her direction. He was fully concentrating on Sheriff Dailey.

"Well, now there is the question. There were a few I could find, but I'm sure with all of your resources, you could probably find out more than I could then."

"Women who looked like Margie and Thea? How many do you think?"

"Over the years, I've counted about ten. Probably more. They were all in surrounding counties, mostly living on the streets."

"Ages?"

"Various ages. Not one of them over forty-five. One was young as sixteen."

*Sixteen.* Thea's stomach threatened to rebel.

"You think this person is killing women who look like me. Why?"

"I'll leave that up to the hoity-toity FBI to figure out. Unless you can make the connection, they won't help you. Even with all of the evidence I collected over the years, I know they'd ignore it and say small-town law don't know what they're doing."

She studied his craggy face, littered with lines and stray hairs he'd missed the last time he shaved. "You tried to get them to investigate my mother's murder."

He gave an almost imperceptible nod. "And your father's," he murmured.

Guilt assaulted her, as she remembered all the years she'd blamed him for the fact her parents' murderer roamed free.

"So, you want to tell me who you think did it?" Duncan asked.

"Tell you what. I'll let you take the box home with you today. You go over it and then we'll talk."

Duncan nodded and Dailey slowly got to his feet. They followed him into a dark room. One tableside light was on, casting shadows in the dismal room. The dark brown couch sagged a little in the middle, and blended into the paneling behind it. Dust littered the surfaces, and not one picture graced the walls. A massive file box sat on a battered coffee table.

Duncan picked up the box and headed for the door. Dailey touched her arm as she turned to follow him.

"Thea, you need to be very careful and listen to that Perry boy. He knows what he's doing and he'll make sure you're safe. This man...if I'm right...has gotten away with more than one murder." She nodded and he smiled. "Now, I expect an invite."

"An invite to what?"

"Thea, come on!" Duncan yelled from outside.

She rolled her eyes and Dailey laughed.

"He has a tendency to think he's in charge. Thank you so much for everything."

His expression turned serious. "You just stay safe. I don't want to attend another Johnson funeral."

\* \* \* \*

The box safely nestled between them, Duncan and Thea headed back to Crocker. The rain-slicked roads made the trip longer as Duncan had to drive a tad slower around some of the curves.

Duncan knew it was killing her not to look and see what was in the files but she'd been silent as a tomb since they left Dailey's ranch fifteen minutes earlier. She just stared out the window and chewed on her thumbnail.

"What are you thinking about?"

She turned and looked at him, her eyes taking a moment to come back to the present. With a sigh, she said, "Oh, just feeling guilty."

He slowed as he drove around a curve. "Guilty? Thea, there's nothing you could have done to save your parents."

"No. I felt guilty because of Dailey. I thought he was a jerk before I met him again." He could hear the smile in her voice.

"Other than your parents' murder investigation, do you have another reason?"

She didn't say anything and he glanced at her. Her brow was wrinkled in a little frown.

"Another reason?"

"Could there be something in your dealings with Dailey that made you uncomfortable?"

"Uncomfortable?" She was silent for a moment. "You mean like he could be the one? But I thought you liked him?"

"I do like him."

"Oh, well...no, I think it was just the handling of my parents' murder. It might also stem from that night. He was the one who answered the call."

He sensed she was studying him, but he kept his eyes on the road. Truth was, he was uneasy with the feeling he got from Dailey. To have kept all the files at his house. And, from the size of the files, Duncan assumed he continued his investigation into the murders. He knew he would continue on with the investigation, never wanting to let anything go. *But to take it to such an extreme? To obsess about it for close to twenty years?*

"You think he had something to do with it?"

He broke away from his thoughts. "No. Just made me a little uneasy that the man had such extensive files. Hell, he even knew you were in town."

"Duncan, he can't get around that well. There is no way he got to my house and back, sneaking up the stairs to leave messages. With that bum hip of his, he wouldn't have gotten away with it."

Duncan knew she was right but still something niggled at the back of his neck, the kind of feeling he got when something else was going on. It had saved him more than once in the field.

He hesitated, then said, "I think he was holding something back. There's something he's not telling us."

He came to a stoplight and waited for an eighteen-wheeler to pass. He glanced at Thea and she nodded.

"Yes. I agree on that one." She sat with one leg beneath her as she worried her lip. As she dragged it through her teeth, memories of their lovemaking the night before flooded his mind, startling him with their intensity. He looked away and licked his lips, trying to bring his thoughts back to the present. He needed to focus. If his mind was on getting her in bed, he couldn't protect her. Not since high school had he'd been turned on so easily. He shifted trying to ease the tightness of his pants.

"But what could it be? He even said one of the suspects worked for him."

"Yeah. But there was something."

*Why this crazy attraction and why to this woman?* Since Jessica, he had kept the job separate, made sure there was never a chance anyone or anything could intervene in his work...and vice versa. But now with this woman, all he had to do was think about her, and he was walking around half-aroused.

She sighed. "Well, first thing to do is to go through these files."

"Yeah." *Right, the files.* "Maybe we can find something in there that will explain this feeling I have."

\* \* \* \*

Duncan sat at the kitchen table, going over the initial report of the investigation while Thea cooked dinner. He'd offered to help and she shooed him to the table and said to stay out of her way. He decided not to argue and had planned on working. The problem

was Thea was in the vicinity and when she was, his concentration was shot.

Watching her move about the kitchen, he realized she was in her element. She was chopping some tomatoes, garlic and onion for the sauce, the spaghetti boiling in a pot of water. The heat from the stove added an attractive flush to her face.

"Anything interesting?" she asked, as she searched one of her cabinets. She rose up on her tiptoes trying to find something and her shirt rose above the waistline of her jeans, exposing the small of her back to him. Her skin was so smooth and soft. He wanted to roll her onto her stomach, and place a kiss right there. She would taste of apples and cinnamon, of sin and innocence.

He took a deep breath and tried to concentrate on the business at hand. "Not much. Just preliminary reports. Anonymous call to the police. Dailey figured it was you."

She shrugged and as she moved back to the stove, set a spice jar on the counter. "I really don't remember anything from that night. I easily could've called it in."

With the garlic in the skillet, the aroma filled the kitchen. She opened a can of anchovies and a can of olives and began chopping again.

"Anyway, I haven't gotten anything out of it so far but I can't seem to concentrate with the smell of that sauce. What are you making?"

She flashed him a smile over her shoulder. "Puttanesca sauce. Easy to make. A little spicy, but I usually have everything I need in the pantry."

"Never had it."

"Well, the story goes that the streetwalkers in Naples would make this dish after a long night of work. Probably because it was fast and easy. No pun intended. Its nickname is the streetwalker's sauce. If you want some wine, I have a great Chianti if you'd like to

uncork it." She nodded her head in the direction of a corkscrew on the counter and he retrieved the wine.

Within a few minutes, they were seated at the table, eating pasta and drinking wine.

"You enjoy cooking."

She laughed. "Of course. I'd never do something I hated."

"A lot of people do."

She sipped her wine. "But you like yours. You enjoy it."

"Thank God I do because I would have gone insane trying to run the business."

"You don't miss the Rangers?"

He shook his head. "It's odd, because it had been the one thing I had wanted from the time I graduated from college. But...after the shooting, I just didn't want to go back. And Crocker needed a new sheriff."

"But..." She hesitated, then shook her head.

"What?"

"I just realized we don't know each other that well."

"We've known each other for most our lives." He smiled and gave her a knowing look. "We know each other a lot better after last night."

She blushed prettily. "It's just that for our adult lives, we really didn't know each other, not like if I had stayed here."

He nodded. "What do you want to know?"

Thea studied him, her eyes grave. Then she asked, "Who was Jessica?"

He felt as he'd been punched in the gut. It must have shown on his face because she shook her head. "Never mind."

Normally, he would have been relieved that she retreated. But something made him want to tell her.

"I guess you heard her name from Jed?" She nodded and he sighed. "Jessica was another Ranger. The bust that went wrong, the one I got shot up in...she died."



Her face paled and he pushed forward.

"We were working the case together, practically living together. I made a miscalculation." He shook his head. "No, I fucked up. Then when that scumbag got a hold of her, I froze. I couldn't do anything." The memory of that, of the shame, rose up and choked him. He had to swallow to clear the knot in his throat. "So, I came back here because I wasn't cut out for that."

"You blame yourself." Not a question but he nodded. "You were injured?"

"I'd been beaten after they captured me. I didn't know she followed me."

"And so she broke with protocol and you were injured, she got caught and you are not a superhuman and made a mistake?"

He opened his mouth, but she shook her head. "No. I shouldn't have said that. I definitely wouldn't want anyone judging me or my mess of a marriage." She sighed.

There was a few moments of awkward silence, and wanting...needing to talk, Duncan said, "And I like it here. I feel like I am actually contributing. Less paperwork, more time out of the office."

"Yeah, you really like being out and about. I could see where office work would not be your thing. Same with me. I hated the work I had to do behind the desk as owner of the restaurant. A smaller place probably wouldn't have been so bad but as big as Jason wanted Al's to be..." She shrugged.

"Your mother loved to cook."

Her smile turned wistful. "Yes. In fact, she taught me to make this sauce."

He didn't know if it was the wine, or the cozy atmosphere of the kitchen but he needed to touch her, to feel her skin against his. So he leaned into her and gently kissed her. At first, she didn't respond. But with a muffled exclamation, she leaned into the kiss, opening her mouth to him.

He tasted the wine and the sauce, so sweet and spicy. Cradling her face in his hands, he drew her closer, tangling his tongue in her mouth and losing himself to the kiss.

As he was contemplating the sturdiness of the table, lights flashed through the window. He drew away and she protested, her eyes still closed and her lips reddened from his kiss.

"Thea, hon, there's someone coming up the drive."

Her eyes slowly opened. The barely restrained passion simmering in them vanished and he silently cursed.

"Who could it be?"

She went to the door and he thought he heard her cuss when she looked through the peephole. He stood and moved in her direction. But before he reached her, she grabbed the doorknob and yanked it open.

A blond-haired man, impeccably dressed, stood on the doorstep. A broad smile creased his tanned face, his bleached teeth almost blinding Duncan. The man's smile faded as he looked from Thea to Duncan and back to Thea again.

"What the hell are you doing here, Jason?"

## **Chapter 12**

Thea couldn't believe Jason was actually standing on her doorstep. His eyes widened at the sight of Duncan and his mouth opened and closed twice. Duncan stood silently behind her, but he'd moved so close the heat of his body warmed her.

"Thea, I thought we could have a talk," Jason said. She hated that phrase. He'd used it often during their marriage. It always preceded a discussion on how she'd failed him or the restaurant. Then it occurred to her that he'd called from Atlanta earlier that day.

"Jason, I talked to you this morning and you were in Atlanta."

"I hopped on a plane as soon as I realized I would have to appeal to you in person. I thought you might put me up for the night."

Disbelief held her mute. Even in the weak porch light, she could see his eyes narrow when she didn't readily agree with him.

"I'm a little busy at the moment."

His eyes moved to Duncan, a flash of intense anger darkened them but he controlled it. "I can see you wasted no time in getting busy with the local yokels but this is important. It's about our restaurant, Allie."

Rage surged through her. God, she hated that name. He'd never paid attention to her when she told him not to call her by it. How many times did she tell him? Too many to recall.

"It's no longer 'ours'. Or did you forget the papers we signed six weeks ago?"

"Are you telling me that you aren't going to help me?" Disbelief dripped from his voice. She searched his face for insincerity but there was none. The idiot actually thought she'd help him.

"Yeah, I'm telling you that I'm not going to help you. You have to live with your decision. You decided you wanted out of the marriage and you wanted to run the restaurant."

"But I thought—"

"You thought wrong. Now, if you head back down the road and hit I-20, you should be able to find someplace to stay tonight."

She shut the door in his face. A moment later, a car door slammed and the engine started.

"Well, that was interesting," Duncan said dryly. She turned to face him, her fisted hands on her hips. His eyes twinkled with humor and a satisfied smile curved his lips.

"Don't start with me tonight, Duncan. I'm not in the mood."

"Hey, don't take it out on me."

He reached out and pulled her into his arms and rested his chin on top of her head. Completely surprised by the gesture, she relaxed against his chest, sliding her hands around his lean waist.

The angry tension eased from her body. His hands moved down her back, massaging her rigid muscles. *God, he smells good.* She snuggled closer.

"I still can't believe he flew here today." She thought about the phone call that morning. "He must be very desperate. Graham quit. I'm not surprised."

"Graham?"

She'd pressed her ear against his chest and the rumble of his voice vibrated against it. Deep and resonate, the sound of it flowed through her.

"He was my sous chef, and Jason tried to make him take over my job when Antonio, who was my assistant head chef, quit. Probably expected him to do all the office work, also. Graham's only twenty-two and not ready for the job."

"Ah, but you did all that and more when you opened the place. What were you...twenty-four?"

"Yes." She thought of the red-haired, green-eyed sous chef. "Graham's had a pretty easy life...has a little royal blood. Plus, he never really wanted to be anything higher than a sous chef. There was only so much he'd take from Jason."

She realized Duncan was rocking them. Not much, but just enough to let her full stomach and the wine sliding through her relax her even further.

His lips touched her temple. Just a brush of his mouth and warmth spread through her. At first she thought she may have mistaken the gesture, but a second later, he pressed a definite kiss, then tilted her chin up with his knuckle.

His eyes were closed as he bent his head and touched his lips to hers.

"You know, Thea, this will work better if you participate." His eyes were still closed, and a smile played about his lips.

"What are you doing, Duncan?"

"Isn't it obvious?" he asked between kisses. "I'm complicating things."

He pulled her closer, his hands dipping down to her rear end, pressing her against his arousal. Her nipples tightened as she slid her hands up his chest and around his neck. His tongue tickled her lips and she opened her mouth willingly.

*He tastes so good.* The sweet wine was still on his lips but he tasted of something else, something she'd never sampled before. *Passion. That's what he tastes like, unadulterated passion.* And she wanted it. Her body thrummed with anticipation.

He pulled her up, and she entwined her legs around his waist. She rubbed against him, irritated with the layers of clothing that kept her from touching him skin to skin.

Without breaking the kiss, he walked a few steps until she felt the wall against her back. He ground against her. She could feel the

hard length of his cock. The anticipation had her panties damp, her heart beating out of control.

His lips lifted from hers and left a wake of wet skin as he kissed his way down her neck.

“We have to get you naked.”

He grabbed the bottom of her shirt and yanked it over her head. She'd forgotten about not wearing a bra until she saw his eyes. Something dark and dangerous moved in them, his gaze focused on her hardened nipples. Molten heat sizzled along her nerve endings, another rush of tingles skipping down her spine. Her legs were still around his waist but he leaned back from her a bit to get a better view, slipping a hand beneath her rear end to add support.

He lightly skimmed his hand over her distended nipple, causing it to pucker further. He did it a couple times more before rolling it between his thumb and forefinger. The whole time, he never looked up. He licked his lips before bending his head and taking it into his mouth. She moaned the moment she felt his wet tongue lave the tip. She shuddered as he dragged his teeth against it, then suckled. Little bursts of energy popped through her blood. She speared her hands through his hair, urging him to continue.

Before she knew what was happening, he set her down on the ground and her jeans and panties were on the floor. Duncan fumbled with his button fly but finally with an aggravated curse, he tugged it open. His erection sprang free. She circled it with her hand, amazed at the size of it. She brushed her thumb over the tip, spreading the drop of moisture around.

He stilled her hand and pulled it away from him. He retrieved a condom and he rolled it down the length of him. With his hand cupping her bottom, he lifted her against the wall again. She grabbed hold of his cock and guided him into her.

He teased her, slipping only the very tip of his shaft into her damp passage. Her position made it impossible for her to move. Duncan had all the control, she was at his mercy. Then, when she

was ready to scream, he slipped in just a bit more, slowly working his way in. He would pull all the way back out, then push back in, just slightly further than he been before.

"Duncan."

He kissed her jaw and hummed. "What?"

"If you don't—"

She sucked in a breath when he thrust into her to the hilt.

"Oh, Jesus, you feel so good." His rough voice told her that he was close, that the teasing had caused the same reaction in him.

Slowly, over and over, he moved within her. A surge of heat gathered in her stomach, her nerves tightened. She felt as if she was trying to achieve something so far out of reach. He must have known because he slipped his hand down her stomach grazing his fingers against her clit.

"Come for me, baby. Now."

Duncan thrust into her one more time, and she shattered into a thousand pieces as he moaned her name.

\* \* \* \*

The scent of musky passion filled the air around them, as Duncan tried to catch his breath but he wasn't sure if he ever would. Never in his life had he ever burned so hot, so fast for a woman. He nuzzled her neck and waited for the recriminations to start but she said nothing.

"Well, that was something." Her voice was husky and he shivered as it vibrated down his spine.

"Something?" He bit her earlobe. God, she was sweet. He'd never get enough of her.

"Yeah, I think this the first time I've done it in a kitchen."

For a second Duncan paused in his exploration and then he chuckled. Jason was a jackass. She lifted her head and Duncan looked down at her. Her curls were a mess, tumbled across her shoulders in disarray. Her lips were red and swollen from his kisses and her eyes still dark with passion. She looked completely and

thoroughly loved. His hands clenched on her rear end and he felt himself stir to life inside of her. *Too fast.*

"So, are you going to give me a lot of crap about how this is some kind of mistake?" she asked. He didn't miss the note of vulnerability in her voice.

"No. What I plan on doing is taking you upstairs and jumping your bones again."

She laughed and her muscles clenched tighter around his shaft. Gently, he pulled out of her and let her slide to the floor. For a second she looked up at him and then her face turned pink. She cleared her throat a couple times and looked away from him.

"Thea, there's no reason to be embarrassed."

"I'm not...well I am embarrassed. I'm standing here naked and you're practically dressed."

"Yeah, but all my important parts are exposed."

She looked up at him and then laughed. "Okay, but still. I'm not what you're used to."

"And just what am I used to?"

"Oh, just forget it." She tried to walk past him but he caught her arm and pulled her back. He braced a hand on either side of her face.

"Now, tell me what this is all about."

"Well, I'm not normal." She was staring over his shoulder when she made the statement. He did not like this distance at all.

"Why, do you have an extra boob?"

She graced him with a dirty look. "I know you are used to model-thin, gorgeous and I'm...well I'm not."

He studied her face for a moment. Her thick lashed green eyes, her unruly locks. His attention dipped further down and he couldn't believe the woman thought she wasn't gorgeous. Then he remembered her comments about the ex.

"What did that jackass say to you?"



"Listen, Duncan, I don't want to talk about it. I have to clean up the kitchen and we need to go over those files."

She grabbed her clothes off the floor and ducked under his arm before he could catch her and dashed toward the stove. Quickly, he buttoned his jeans and strode after her. When he reached her, she was about to put on her shirt. He never slowed down. He bent, bracing her stomach on his shoulder, his arm anchoring her legs and he lifted her.

"Duncan, what the hell are you doing?"

He didn't answer, just walked up the stairs and carried her to her bedroom. He dropped her on the bed and then came down on top of her.

"Now, let us get one thing straight here. Leave what that jerk told you at the door. I'm not him." She struggled to get out from beneath him but he grabbed her wrists and pinned them to the bed. He kept one leg over her thighs as he rolled to the side. Jesus, she was beautiful. Her breasts were perfectly full, her waist tapered and then flared into nice rounded hips. His eyes dipped further to the triangle of curls between her legs and he felt himself harden. Slowly his eyes traveled back up her body all the way to her face.

"Thea, you have to see what you do to me." She snorted and he wanted to shake her. "What do you think? I get a boner like this every time I get close to a woman? I hate to tell you this, honey, but it doesn't happen like this for me all the time. I'll be forty in a few more years, but good Lord, I already want you again." Her eyes softened, a flare of hope sparkled.

"You want to...again?"

"Oh, yeah, but this time, I'm getting naked too."

\* \* \* \*

Sometime in the middle of the night, Thea rolled over and reached for Duncan, only to find his side of the bed still warm but empty. Well, what did she expect? Jason had always said she was too clingy, always wanting to snuggle after they'd made love.

But...Duncan seemed to enjoy it. The second time they'd made love had been slow and deliberate. He seemed to revel in the feel of her skin.

She raised up on her elbow and glanced at the clock. It was just after three in the morning and she realized nature was calling. She grabbed a nightshirt and headed to the bathroom.

Once she was done, she knew she wouldn't sleep again so she headed downstairs to clean up the kitchen. The light was still burning but she was surprised to find Duncan sitting at the table. He was reading over the files, but he turned as soon as he heard the bottom stair squeak.

He stared at her for a second and then his lips curved into a satisfied smile. He stood and she realized he must have just thrown on the jeans he'd been wearing earlier. His chest was bare and she couldn't stop staring at the sexy line of hair that ran down his abs and disappeared beneath the waistline of his pants.

"I thought you might get some sleep." He reached for her and brushed his lips against hers. "I didn't wake you, did I?"

"No. I couldn't sleep."

"Well, I tried to be quiet but I was afraid I banged the pots too loudly."

She looked around the room and realized he'd cleaned it. Every pot had been washed, every counter wiped down, the dishes apparently in the dishwasher. Before she could squash it, a huge blossom of warmth filled her belly. Never in all the years they'd been married had Jason once cleaned the kitchen.

"Thanks for cleaning up."

"Hey, you cooked."

"Did you find anything?" She nodded at the files.

He sighed as if he didn't want to change the subject but both of them knew they had work to do.

"Yeah, there are a few suspects, a couple of them still around." He slid his arm over her shoulders and held her close as they

walked to the table. After she was seated, he sat down. "There is also the fact someone could be using your history to get back at you."

She looked at him, his face was devoid of all emotion but she knew what he was suggesting. "Jason."

"Yeah, but we'll work on him later." He pulled out a couple of faded file folders, hesitating before setting them in front of her.

She opened the first one and came face to face with Richard White.

Surprised, she looked at him. "Yeah, I know. I didn't even know he'd been around that year but he'd been kicked out of Texas Tech. I thought, everyone thought, it was for failing grades."

"It wasn't?"

"Well, Dailey found no hard evidence but there was some indication he might have forced himself on a girl at a frat party."

"Jesus. How could he be a deputy?"

"No charges were filed. Dailey couldn't find the girl's name. He could never prove it. And Richard's father was the head of the school board at the time, and had a lot of power back then, so he pushed Ferguson to hire him."

She frowned. "Ferguson?"

"He was sheriff between Dailey and me."

She nodded. "Why would he be suspected?"

"He did work on your house that fall."

"The roof." She'd forgotten about the bad hailstorm that had ravaged the roof and at the time, Richard had been working for one of the local roofers part-time.

"Yeah. And he seemed fixated on your mother, at least according to a couple of the guys who worked with him."

That and tormenting her. He'd spent all day calling her names.

"What's that look about?"

She looked up. "Oh, he bugged me a lot that fall."

"Bugged you?" His voice had gone deadly soft.

"Well, he always called me names."

The hand he had resting on the table clenched and she was surprised at the anger darkening his eyes.

"Duncan, it was a long time ago." She placed her hand on top of his fist. "I always thought he had low self-esteem."

"Yeah." He relaxed a little. "But that is another sign he could be the stalker. Never had much luck with the ladies."

She set aside Richard's file and then picked up the second one.

*Hammond Barker.* The name and the face were vaguely familiar.

"Do you know him?" Duncan asked softly.

"No, I don't." She read the file.

*Minister. Dispute on lot lines. Threatened to kill Mrs. Johnson and had fired shots at Mr. Johnson. Subject suspect in tire slashing of Johnson's pickup.*

"I sort of remember one of our neighbors complaining about old Beau getting into his trash." She smiled as she remembered the old hound dog. It vanished when she thought about the report. "I had no idea it was this bad though."

"Well, at your age, I'm sure your parents wouldn't have told you everything."

She nodded as she looked through the other files.

"Those are all drifters who'd been reported in the area around the time of the murders. All of them have violent pasts. Do any of them look familiar to you?"

She looked through each file. One tall and skinny, another short and fat, the next average with a bald head. She sighed. "No, none of them."

"Well, I'll get to work on them tomorrow morning. I may need to get on your computer and do a little research. I think I need to keep this away from the office."

"Because of Dick."

He gave her a small smile. "Yeah. Plus, if one person even gets an inkling we are looking into this, it will be all over town by nightfall."

"Now, what about Jason?"

"Did he know about your parents?"

She thought about it. "He knew they'd been killed, didn't know about much of it until the nightmares started." Or, at least she thought he hadn't.

"What?" he asked, apparently catching her indecision.

"Well, we were in town twice during our marriage. I guess he could have heard then." She shrugged.

"Okay, so I need to find out what he's been up to lately. Anyone else you can think of who would use this to get to you?"

"No. No one. I didn't talk about it."

"Okay. Tomorrow morning I'll run in and get those reports. I can't access some of that from your computer. Hopefully, Dailey was blowing smoke up my butt about the other murders and we don't have a killer running around the area." He studied her in silence for a moment. "I think we need to get back to bed."

"You do?" Warmth spread through her as she thought about snuggling next to him, her hands gliding over his bare skin.

"Yeah, I really am beat. Not used to this much activity in one night." He wiggled his eyebrows at her and she laughed. "And although I know you will avoid it, we are going to have a long discussion. But I'll let you have a reprieve tonight if you promise to use sex to control me."

"Well, I guess I could try. You sure you're ready for another round?"

"You just let me—"

The shrill ring of the phone made both of them jump.

## **Chapter 13**

Thea's gut tightened and uneasiness crept down her spine when her cell phone rang a second time. She picked it up and showed Duncan the caller ID. Whoever called was blocking identification. He nodded and she hit the button.

The shuddering sigh sent a wave of revulsion that coiled in her stomach.

"Thea." The caller's voice was whisper soft, but laced with anger. "Thea, who was that man?"

Fear held her speechless. Now she knew he'd seen Duncan and would target him. Every nerve turned ice cold and Thea shivered.

"W-what man?"

"The man with the blond hair."

*Jason, not Duncan.*

"He came to see you. No one will have you but me, do you understand me?"

He emitted another sigh and hung up.

She clicked the phone off. Before she could contemplate the meaning of the call, Duncan grabbed her and pulled her into his arms. His body heat surrounded her, warming her from the inside out. So many fears, but for the first time in a long time, she felt safe. She finally had someone to lean on.

"What did he say?" he asked, his tone gentle.

"He saw Jason." The muscles in his arms grew rigid. "But I guess for some reason he's never seen you. Or he doesn't see you as competition."

"Shit." He released her and started to pace the kitchen. "That means he was out there somewhere tonight. Could also mean it isn't your ex."

"Duncan—"

He shot her a look of impatience but never slowed his stride. "This game is getting a little too dangerous. I wish I could convince you to go back to Atlanta."

"No."

He stopped in front of her, all the warmth gone from his eyes. "I could tell Jed."

"Yeah, you could. But you know there's a chance he'll butt in and put himself at risk."

He leaned his head back and closed his eyes.

"Duncan, we know anywhere I go, this whacko will follow me. I'm still not sure he wasn't the one in Atlanta."

His steely gray eyes narrowed as he looked down at her. "I have a feeling the jackass was behind that."

"Jason?"

"Yeah." He propped a hand on each hip. "He'd have a motive. He wanted the restaurant."

"He was getting it. We were going to sign the papers the day after the accident. If anything, the accident probably delayed any plans he had."

"Well..."

"Nothing more to discuss." She turned and began climbing the stairs. "I'm going to bed."

Thea wasn't really sure he would follow her or not. She worried he would be like Jason and shut her out after their fight. Anytime she showed any defiance, he'd ignored her for days at a time.

Relief swept through her when he muttered something then clomped up the stairs behind her.

\* \* \* \*

The clatter of pans awoke Duncan the next morning. Rays of weak winter light seeped through the blinds.

He took a deep breath. The smell of apples and cinnamon mixed with the lingering scent of spent passion. Instant arousal. Closing his eyes, he relived the memories of the last few nights spent in Thea's bed. He'd give a month's pay to have had her in his king-sized bed. Bone-deep satisfaction pulsed through his veins.

From the noise drifting up from the kitchen, he knew Thea had to be cooking. He rubbed his stomach. He sat up, and looked around the room for something to wear. His jeans lay crumpled on the floor and he grabbed them up. After a quick trip to the bathroom, Duncan headed downstairs. The aroma of fresh-brewed coffee intensified as he reached the bottom of the stairs.

He stopped in the doorway, leaned against the doorjamb, and watched her. She was dressed in an old worn t-shirt that must have been black at one time but was some nondescript shade of gray. Black jersey leggings clung to her hips and rear end. Her hair looked as if her fingers combed it and her face flushed from the heat of cooking.

He knew now why she'd been considered an artist. Every move was economical but graceful. She dipped a piece of bread into the batter and then tossed it into a frying pan. This was definitely her element. The cozy kitchen, the scent of vanilla filling the air, the small smile playing about her lips.

He could stand there for a million years and watch her.

The thought almost stopped his heart in his chest. He would never have guessed he'd fall for Thea. But he had. From the moment he'd seen her at the gas station, he'd wanted her. The problem was, he no longer just wanted her. He needed her.

He pushed the uncomfortable feelings aside.



"Smells good."

She yelped and turned around. "Jeez, Duncan. You scared me. Don't go sneaking around like that." She turned around and began to work again. "I thought I'd make some French toast."

He swallowed past the emotion welling up in his chest. *Focus, Perry.*

"Sounds great and smells even better." He walked up behind her, circled his arms around her waist and kissed her neck. He grabbed a cup and filled it with coffee. He chuckled at the startled look on her face.

A glance at the table told him she'd been looking over the files. "Did you find anything?"

She turned and her eyes were confused until she saw him looking at the table. "No." She resumed working. "Do you know where Barker is?"

"No. But I'll look into it this morning. I'll call a few friends."

"A few friends?"

She flipped the toast over and began dipping more. He sat down in one of the kitchen chairs. "Yeah with the DPS, one is actually a Ranger."

She grabbed a plate and put the two pieces of toast on it. After sprinkling it with powdered sugar, she set it on the table in front of him with a bottle of syrup. Vanilla and cinnamon wafted from his plate and he dug into his meal.

"You know a Texas Ranger?" she asked.

"Yeah, you do too. Rusty Reynolds."

She turned around. "Reckless Rusty Reynolds?"

"Yeah."

"Reckless Rusty who got caught drag racing how many times?"

"At least twenty."

"But...they let people with records like that in the Texas Rangers?"

"No. Rusty never had a record."

"But...how—"

"You don't get a permanent record when your mom's the mayor."

"You mean he was caught all those times and he never was arrested?"

"All it amounted to was a little harmless fun."

"Harmless fun? Last race I heard about he totaled his brand new 'Vette."

Duncan shrugged. "He learned his lesson. It's better than Vic Williams. He's a doctor."

She set her plate on the table and sat in the chair next to him.

"What is he, a gynecologist?"

He chuckled knowing Vic's outrageous flirting brought about that comment. "No. Heart surgeon. He lives in Dallas and I hear he and his life partner are very happy."

Her eyes widened and then she choked on her food. She coughed a few times and took a sip of coffee. "He's gay? He dated every cheerleader and drill team member in school."

"Kind of explains his behavior, huh?"

"Good Lord. Leave for a few years and everything changes."

They continued to eat in silence for a few moments but he knew he would have to break the light mood sooner or later.

"Back to the files. Anything at all?" he asked.

"No. You would probably know more about it than I do."

"Well, I think you should keep going through those letters and maybe you can find something that might point to one of these people. I just have a feeling we're missing something here."

"Hmmm."

Agitated with himself, he stood and went to the sink to rinse off his plate. He knew Dailey held something back, maybe not evidence...something he suspected. He finished his task and turned to study Thea.

"You doing okay?"

She looked up from her plate. "Okay?"

"Well, considering the situation."

"The situation? You mean having a homicidal stalker and my ex-husband bugging me?"

"No. I meant us."

Her face reddened. "Us?" She cleared her throat. "What do you mean us?"

*What the hell is the matter with her? Most women loved talking about relationship crap. Why does she look embarrassed, like she wants to avoid the subject?*

"Us. As in Duncan and Thea. As in the two people who've been having sex." His voice had risen with his anger.

Her face turned a brighter shade of red. "Well, yes we had sex." She stood and went to the sink. "I just thought you were used to that sort of thing."

"That sort of thing?" he yelled. What was wrong with him? He never yelled.

She sighed as she wiped her hands. "Duncan, you have a certain...reputation in town. If Chase is the flirt, you are the perpetual bachelor. You never get serious about anyone."

"That's not true." Okay, maybe it was a little true but it wasn't polite to point that out. She should be clinging to him.

"Yes. It is true." She crossed her arms beneath her breasts and he was momentarily distracted by the gesture. He lifted his gaze to her face. Her eyes were serious, her mouth unsmiling. "Duncan, you don't have to worry. You aren't into commitment. I don't want you pretending to be serious about me because you feel you have to. I'm not really looking for a serious relationship either. My marriage...well, it wasn't the best as you know. I don't want to run into another relationship on the rebound."

"Are you telling me I'm your rebound guy?" He'd played that guy before, but for some reason it left a sour taste in his mouth now.

"Duncan. Stop it. I won't have you trying to intimidate me." She tipped her chin up a notch and placed her fisted hands on her hips.

Feeling an emotion a little too close to fear, he blurted out the first thing that came to his mind. "Honey, all I'm trying to do is save your ass. Close quarters is all this is about."

The moment the words were out of his mouth, he regretted them. Every bit of emotion drained from her face and her eyes turned cold and distant.

"Thea, I didn't mean... Jesus." He sighed and reached for her. She frowned at him, but he ignored it. "I'm sorry."

She held herself still then a second later, she melted against him.

He kissed her temple. "I didn't mean it."

She looked up at him, and if he could reach his own ass, he would kick himself. The wariness had returned to her gaze.

"Don't worry about it." She kissed his chin, then slipped out of his arms. All the warmth from their breakfast was gone, leaving him alone with his thoughts in a cold kitchen.

\* \* \* \*

After Duncan left, Thea cleaned the kitchen and started to look over the letters to her mother again. But no matter how hard she tried, her mind kept drifting back to Duncan.

Her only experience with sex had been with Jason. Never in the course of their marriage had it ever been that great. Sure, at first she thought it would improve but she knew now it never would have.

At the time of their courtship and marriage, she'd thought they shared great passion. But Jason, already a police officer with the Atlanta PD, saw her as a meal ticket. She'd met him about the time she'd been named one of the up-and-coming chefs in the southeast US. He'd known she would make it big—she was already making good money. And she had thought the passion went both

ways, but she knew now, after her nights with Duncan, that neither of them had felt it.

Nothing had prepared her for Duncan, for the incredible yearning that welled up in her when she thought about him. From the start of her relationship with Jason, he'd complained that she didn't seem to need him. Here she was less than three hours after Duncan left, and she was wishing he was home.

As if conjured up by her thoughts, her cell phone buzzed and she knew it was him.

"Got a dress for tonight?"

"Tonight?"

His sigh was audible over the phone. "I have to go the Cattle-men's Ball, and because I have to go, so do you. Michelson will be needed here, and with that going on, there will be problems. Drinking and cowboys always cause problems."

She didn't want to go, didn't feel like trussing herself up, but she knew if she refused, he'd have to make a choice between her and his duties.

"I have a dress that should work."

"Good. Stay out of trouble." Then he hung up. She should have been irritated but instead she smiled. She appreciated a man who knew what he was about.

But she knew now she needed to work even faster. If she had to get dressed up—which would involve hose and makeup—she had less time to devote to reading over the letters.

A few letters later, she noticed something in one of them that sent a chill through her whole being. The letter was dated a month before her mother's murder.

*I watched you at that picnic. So happy, with little Thea and Jedidiah. I could see myself with you, completing the family. Your husband can never make you as happy as I can. I worship you. Do you think of me when he touches you?*

She shivered. She thought about her mother reading this note, knowing that bastard had watched them, thought these things. She shivered again.

There was one thing she was sure of. The picnic he wrote of was her father's birthday picnic. They'd had it one of the few times Jed had been back from college. It'd been at their house and was by invitation only.

The bastard had come to her parents' house as a friend and then killed both of them a month later.

*We'll find him*, she promised her parents silently. *No matter what.*

\* \* \* \*

Duncan looked over all the reports of murdered women. At least six women in the past four months had been killed in the area. All dark-haired, green-eyed.

Knowing Rusty could give him some answers, he picked up the phone and called his old friend on his cell.

"Hello," Rusty said.

"Reckless."

"Oh, Duncan." His voice relaxed. "Whatcha doing at the office on a weekend?"

"Caller ID, huh? Still can't get used to that. You sounded a little irritated. Is this not a good time?"

"Oh, no. I was worried something had gone wrong at home. You know, with Mom in her seventies—"

"Oh, of course. Well, I'm calling for work. I need some help on these murders in the area."

Rusty sighed and Duncan could hear the tension in his voice. "Yeah. They have us a little baffled, too. There's no DNA to link them, but the MO is exactly the same."

"All look alike?"

"Yeah. Black hair, green eyes. Between five-four and five-six and late twenties to early thirties. The one strange thing is that al-

though they were all shot, different guns were used with each murder."

"Hmm. Think they're linked?"

"Well, they look alike. They're all dumped off on farm roads, shot. But nothing concrete to go by."

"Rusty, cut the BS."

"Off the record, yeah. Too similar."

"I have a theory I want to run by ya. You coming into town tonight?"

"Of course. On my way right now. I'm Mom's date."

"You lead a sad life, Rusty."

He chuckled. "At least I'm not going stag."

"Neither am I. Got a date. Of sorts."

"A date of sorts?"

"Thea and I are going together." Silence greeted his announcement. "Rusty?"

"Still here, Dunc. You mean you're dating Thea, Jed's little sister?"

He hoped Rusty didn't get a hold of Jed before Duncan had a chance to explain to him just what the hell was going on, but he said, "I guess you could say that."

"Isn't she married?"

"Divorced. She's the reason I'm looking into these murders. I think they may be linked to her mother's death."

For a second or two, he remained silent. "Jesus, Duncan."

"Yeah. Drive carefully and we'll hook up tonight."

He needed to find out what had happened to Hammond Barker. All he could remember was by the time he returned to Crocker, the Barkers had moved on to another parish. Other than that, he didn't know the family very well. They'd had grown children who never visited and his family attended another church.

Problem was, his mother would be the best source for information. Town gossip flowed through her like the Rio Grande after

a thunderstorm, but she'd want to know more. Gina walked past his door.

"Gina."

She poked her head into his office. "Whatcha need?"

"You remember Hammond Barker?"

She leaned against the doorjamb, her brow wrinkled in thought.

"Scary tall preacher with big horse teeth? He always drove that faded green Ford pickup."

"That'd be him. Have you ever heard what happened to him?"

"Well, he left town that year of the Johnson murders. Went somewhere down south. I heard he was fired from the church. Something to do with improper conduct."

"Improper conduct?"

"Yeah. Something to do with an affair or something like that."

"An affair?"

She shrugged. "It's been a few years. I do know he and his wife split after that."

"How do you know all this?"

"Oh, my sister went to his church and the scandal was their main gossip for months."

"Anything else?"

She frowned. "He's been in jail."

"Jail? And you mentioned all that other junk first?"

"I just remembered. Anyway, his lady friend split up with him and it seems he didn't agree. That all?"

"Yeah."

He turned back to his computer and started running down the lead. Thirty minutes later, he leaned back in his chair and thought about the implications. His stomach clenched.

Hammond Barker had spent time in jail for stalking and raping his ex-mistress. Problem was, he'd been released from jail six months earlier and never made it to his first parole hearing.



He'd vanished into thin air.

## **Chapter 14**

Thea pulled on her third stocking in two minutes and released a sigh of relief when she actually succeeded. Gwen would be there at any moment, and Thea still wasn't dressed. Her nerves were frayed around the edges. Even though everyone they knew thought Duncan and she were meeting up at the dance as friends, she knew better. But she had to make sure no one, not her brother, Gwen, or the killer, knew they were involved.

As she retrieved her dress from her closet, she thought about the fight she'd had with Duncan that morning. It really wasn't much of one, but she knew if it had gone on, both of them would have been yelling at each other. And, as weird as it sounded, it didn't bother her. She had seen her parents go head to head a few times. Not once in her whole marriage had she and Jason fought. Jason's form of fighting was quietly freezing her out until she would apologize—even if she hadn't done anything to apologize for.

After grabbing a pair of black heels, she hurried downstairs. She slipped on her shoes then looked at herself in the mirror. The emerald green velvet dress hugged every last curve of her body. Gwen had convinced her to buy it a few years ago when her friend had come to Atlanta for a visit. She'd told Thea it would look great, that the color was perfect. It emphasized her eyes, almost matching them perfectly. But she was not used to wearing something so revealing. From the front, it was demure enough for a

church social. It was a plain dress, long-sleeved, showing very little skin. But the back...

She turned, and looked over her shoulder. The back of the dress was almost nonexistent. Her entire back was exposed, from her neck to the small of her back. She wiggled her rear end to make sure the material didn't slip.

A horn sounded and she grabbed her handbag and coat and rushed out the door.

\* \* \* \*

Duncan arrived half an hour later than he'd expected and parked his truck a fair ways from the VFW hall. Every big function in the town was held in the hall, partially because of the size and mostly because they had a liquor license.

As he hurriedly walked to the front door, he put on his tux jacket. He'd had a long day of investigating and coming up with dead ends. Then he'd called Thea to tell her he would be late and she should ride with Gwen, and they'd fought about that. The woman was more stubborn than anyone he ever met. But after threatening her with revealing what was going on to Jed, she'd acquiesced. She couldn't understand that just being alone was dangerous. More company, less chance the bastard would catch her alone.

He shoved his hands through his hair, trying to put it in some semblance of order. Finally, he was inside the building and his eyes instinctively searched for Thea. He saw Gwen. Thea was not standing dutifully beside her as he'd told her to. He scanned the room as nerves bunched his stomach muscles.

*She better be inside the building.* If not, he would put her over his knee as soon as he got a hold of her. That thought gave him a few ideas about what else to do with her once they got home.

Duncan stalked over to Gwen.

"Hey, Duncan. How was work?" Gwen asked. For once he didn't return her smile.

"Fine. Where's Thea?" His tone was abrupt but he didn't care.

Gwen smile widened. "She's dancing with your Uncle Chris."

He placed a hand on each hip and surveyed the room. He spotted her two-stepping with Chris. She smiled at something Chris said. Thea was a beautiful woman but tonight she was stunning. The green of her dress matched her eyes. It was form-fitting, but not as revealing as some of the other dresses on display tonight. It was sexy without being trashy. Classy, just like the lady.

As he watched them, his chest began to hurt and he realized he'd forgotten to breathe. Duncan took a breath, filling his lungs and exhaled just as Chris spun Thea around a corner. Her back was to him and that was when he realized she was practically naked. And Chris' hand was splayed on her flesh. A wave of heated anger surged through him.

A red haze materialized out of nowhere blinding him to their objective.

"What the hell is she doing dressed like that?" He turned to face Gwen. Gwen raised one eyebrow as she sipped her wine. Maybe the tone in his voice was a bit possessive. "How could you let her wear that dress in public? It's indecent."

Gwen smiled, her light blue eyes sparkling with humor. "I helped her pick it out."

Duncan muttered a curse that had Gwen laughing harder. The music had stopped and the band announced they were going to take a break. He turned and headed toward Thea. Halfway there, he realized he'd been taking off his jacket to cover her.

He knew the moment she saw him. Her eyes widened and she stopped in her tracks. Duncan continued on the same path, and halted within inches of her. She dropped Chris' arm and swallowed.

"Duncan," Chris said. "Nice to see you could make it. I know some years it's hard to get away."

Duncan never took his eyes off of Thea. "Yes. I wouldn't miss it this year for anything." Under his intense stare, Thea's skin reddened. He couldn't tell if she were angry or embarrassed. "It seems you've procured my date."

"Oh. I didn't know... well I had no idea the two of you were seeing each other."

Thea's eyes narrowed and sparked with fire. "We are not seeing each other. We were coming together tonight because we were both stag."

"Well, I'll leave you kids to sort it out." Amusement and a touch of something Duncan couldn't identify were evident in his voice. Duncan glanced at him but the smile Chris gave him showed nothing.

"Thank you for the dance, Chris."

"Any time, Thea."

She turned her attention back to him. "We are going to have a talk, Sheriff Perry. Follow me."

She snapped around. Her anger was palatable but he followed.  
*Who wouldn't with a view like that?*

\* \* \* \*

Thea stomped through the crowd. She really didn't have any idea where she was going. Then she remembered the hall had a few smaller meeting rooms in the back and she headed in that direction.

She couldn't believe Duncan was running around the room acting like he owned her. Like he had a right to order her around. Where did he get the idea she was going to do what he wanted? Like he was some kind of Neanderthal and she'd be the little woman being yanked around by her hair.

Okay, so she did get a secret little thrill when he strode through the crowd with a determined frown. He moved like a panther, winding his way through the people intent on his prey. And just for a second, some kind of primitive instinct swelled within her. She'd shivered with excitement from the memory.

She found a deserted room and opened the door and didn't hold it for him. Instead she let it close behind her. He grunted as it hit him and satisfaction swelled. It was juvenile. She didn't give a damn.

She flipped on the lights, and turned around ready to do battle. He stood before her, his arms crossed, his feet spread apart. He had the nerve to look irritated with her.

"What the hell was that all about back there?"

His eyes narrowed and his lips thinned into a straight line. "I could ask you the same thing."

"Ask me the same thing? What do you mean?"

"You need to take the dress back to the store."

"Why?"

"They forgot to sew the material in the back. I'm trying to protect you and you're running around half dressed."

"Let me get this straight. You're mad because of the way I'm dressed?"

"Yes."

"Well doesn't that beat all? I mean, here I was worried that you just made yourself a target for the stalker. If he didn't know something was going on before, he knows now. What the hell were you thinking stalking me like your dinner?"

For a second, he stared at her, then closed the distance between them. He pulled her into his arms but she refused to relax against him. His fingers skimmed her spine, as his body heat surrounded her. His spicy cologne sent a curl of warmth to the pit of her stomach. He kissed her temple and sighed.

"I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking. I saw you dancing with Chris and then when you turned and his hand was on your back..."

*Oh, God.* He was sexy and so masculine when he acted like a primitive male protecting his property. But he was downright irresistible when he was humble. Her whole body relaxed into his and

she slid her arms around his waist. She rested her head against his chest and listened to his heartbeat.

"I won't let it happen again. I put myself and you at greater risk tonight, and I'd never forgive myself if something happened to you." His voice was a low rumble against her ear. The sound comforted her. "We better get back. I made enough of a scene to have gained the attention of half the old gossip women in this town."

His deep, gruff voice washed over her and sent a wave of heat racing through her. Her nipples tightened and heat pooled between her legs. She didn't want to go back to the dance but she knew they had to. She curled her toes inside her shoes and forced herself to pull away from him. Immediately she sensed the loss of heat and shivered.

She looked up and almost groaned when she recognized the heat in his eyes. He reached for her and she went willingly back into his arms. She wrapped her arms around his neck and lifted her lips to his.

The kiss was bruising in intensity. She opened her mouth, allowing for his invasion. He pulled her closer and pressed his erection against her belly. She moaned or he did and she was seriously thinking about the sturdiness of one of the tables when a burst of laughter down the hall brought both of them back to their senses.

\* \* \* \*

She pulled away and for a few moments their heavy breathing was the only sound in the room. He lifted his hand to shove it through his hair when he noticed it was shaking. *Good Lord*. All the woman had to do was kiss him and he was a mess. What the hell was the matter with him? Never before had he allowed anything to interfere with his job. Now, when it was most important he was at the top of his game, he was turning into an overgrown teenager with out-of-control hormones.

"We need to get back." His voice was rough with unspent desire. "I've already caused enough speculation." Her eyes were dark with passion but she nodded without comment.

He followed her out of the room, turning off the lights. The hallway was deserted as they walked silently side-by-side back to the main hall.

"Should we walk in there together?" she asked.

"Yeah. Everyone saw us leave together so there's no reason to sneak back in. You didn't have any phone calls today? No notes?"

Her brow wrinkled. "No."

They reached the main part of the hall and more than a few heads turned in their direction. The band had retaken the stage and Duncan decided nothing was going to help. At least he could have her in his arms if they danced.

He placed his hand on the small of her back and guided her toward the dance floor.

"What are you doing?" she asked. "We've already made you a target."

"Nothing can be done about it now and I want to dance with my girl."

As the band struck up a George Strait song, Duncan pulled her into his arms. The apples and cinnamon scent he knew now was her body wash surrounded him. He guided her around the floor, her round warm body fitted against his. She was so unbearably soft. Memories of kissing and caressing her sweet flesh had interrupted his thoughts more than once during that day. Hell, he was still half cocked and with a little encouragement from her, he'd explode inside of five minutes of getting her to himself.

The song ended and even though he wanted to stay on the dance floor, he noticed Jed standing on the edge of it. His hands were on his hips and irritation etched his features. The only question Duncan had was what to tell the man? Should he tell Jed about



the stalker, or the fact he couldn't keep his hands off his best friend's sister?

Thea linked her arm with his. He guided them through the crowd, stopping to say hello to a few people. By the time they reached Jed and Gwen, Jed looked ready to blow. They'd been friends since grade school and, other than a few boyhood skirmishes, they'd never really had a fight.

"Duncan, I think we need to talk."

He sighed. In his lifetime, he would never have thought to argue with this man and definitely not over Thea.

"Okay. Let's get out of the crowd."

Jed glanced around and Duncan watched as his friend reined in his temper. They'd already sparked enough gossip tonight.

"Fine. You lead the way."

Duncan turned and headed back to the room where Thea and he had had their talk. Anger radiated from Jed and Duncan understood it. He just hoped he could keep his best friend after he explained everything.

\* \* \* \*

Thea sipped her water as she watched people dancing. But her attention kept drifting to the hallway where Duncan and Jed had disappeared. They were probably in the same room where she and Duncan had their talk. She could just imagine what was going on.

"Never thought I'd live to see the day." She turned to face Gwen who wore a satisfied smile on her face. The pale blue silk dress she wore matched the color of her eyes. Her hair, usually worn in a ponytail or braid was loose around her shoulders, cascading in a riot of curls down her back.

"What are you talking about?"

"Duncan Perry taking the fall. The man has avoided marriage his entire adult life." Her eyes sparkled from excitement.

"And?"

Gwen took a step closer and lowered her voice. "Honey, you have that man wrapped around your finger. I'm amazed he didn't rip Chris' arms out of their sockets and beat him over the head with them." Thea snorted. "What is going on with you two?"

Thea bit her lower lip. Gwen was really hard to lie to. She had that radar device all teachers seemed to have that could detect any lie within a hundred yards. Gwen had been a mother figure for her for years even though only five years separated them. She loved Gwen, respected her, and Thea could rarely lie to her.

Thea took a deep breath and tried her best to look innocent. "Nothing."

"BS. Try again, Thea."

She sighed. She should have known she'd never be able to lie to Gwen. "Not much. And that is all I'm telling you," she added quickly when Gwen looked like she was going to protest. "Besides, just what is my brother doing here?"

Even in the dim light, Thea could see Gwen blush. "I have no idea. He found me and asked after you. I assume he came here looking for you."

"You had no idea he was coming back?"

Gwen shook her head and took a sip of her wine and Thea stifled a disappointed sigh. Their parents' murder had done so much damage. She wished Jed and Gwen would figure out they were meant for each other.

"And don't think I don't know what you are doing, Thea Michelle Johnson. That man has staked you out as his property tonight and to my knowledge, he's never done that before. Any woman was as good as any other. But he's let everyone within a fifty-mile radius know you are his. You want to play dumb with me, okay. Somewhere down the line, you're going to need help."

"Help with what?"

Gwen's grin grew brighter. "Help with the wedding."

\* \* \* \*

Chase had spent the last half an hour with the one woman on earth he couldn't charm. He glanced at Fiona. He was so used to seeing her dressed in her ugly business suits, mostly pantsuits. Tonight, she wore a black velvet dress, that should have looked horrible given her ivory skin but it made her look even more fragile and remote.

"You don't think anything will happen tonight, do you?"

He heard the worry in her voice and understood it. "No. Even if something does happen, Duncan will take care of it."

She turned her head to study him. "You really love your brother, don't you?"

"Of course." The woman puzzled him.

"Well, you're very lucky. But I agree with you about your brother. He will try and stop this whacko but I'm just not sure if he will be able to. Sometimes, the police can't do a thing."

She looked away from him again, turning her attention to the passing landscape, only it was dark and he knew she couldn't see a thing. Duncan had said he was sure there was more of a story to Fiona than she let on and now Chase was wondering just what it was.

He pulled up to the front door. "Why don't you go ahead and wait for me here and I'll park the car?"

She nodded and got out of the car. It took him at least ten minutes to park the car and get back to the front door. Fiona stood shivering standing by the front door.

"Jeez, Fiona, I didn't mean for you to stand outside."

She smiled. "That's okay. I actually like this cold weather. I walk at night."

"Not by yourself."

"No, I take Brutus with me." Brutus was the eighty-pound mutt she'd gotten from the pound.

"Well, let's—"

He stopped in mid-sentence when he saw Jason Warren drive by.

"What?"

"Crap." He hurried her inside and searched for Jed.

"I gotta find my brother. Thea's ex just showed up and I'm thinking Dunc's not going to take that well."

He hesitated for a moment and she laughed again. "Go on, boss. I can handle myself."

"Don't think you are getting out of that slow dance, Ms. Fiona." Her smile faded just a tad and he laughed. "Yep. You're stuck dancing with me. But first, I need to find my brother." He leaned forward and gave her a quick peck on the lips. One little peck and his head was swimming. He pulled away from her before she could return the kiss or slap him. "Be back in a few."

\* \* \* \*

"So, you want to explain what was going on out there?" Jed asked, his arms crossed and his eyes narrowed. His voice was strangled and Duncan was sure Jed was holding back so he wouldn't shout.

He knew he couldn't put Jed in danger. So, he decided a half-truth was his best bet.

"Thea and I are seeing each other."

"As in, you're dating my sister?"

"Hey, you don't have to sound so pissed about it."

"I'm sorry but when the man who's slept with every slut within the surrounding counties says he's seeing my sister, I'm not going to be overjoyed."

"I'm your best friend. And let's remember, you're not a virgin either!"

"Yeah, and I know you better than almost anyone. I want to know what the hell you think you're doing fooling around with my sister. She's vulnerable right now after the divorce. I do not want

some jackass who wants another notch for his bedpost taking advantage of her."

Anger simmered in his blood. Shock held him immobile. He loved this man like a brother and Jed's statements cut him deep. He'd not always had a spotless record with women, but he never saw them that way. But apparently, Jed thought he did. Is that what his best friend really thought of him?

Before he could defend himself, the door burst open and Chase hurried into the room.

"Chase, we're trying to have a discussion here," Duncan said.

"Well, you might want to get back out there and defend your rights."

"What?"

"Jason Warren just pulled into the parking lot. I have an idea he's looking for your lady."

"What the hell is that bastard doing here and what do you mean *your* lady?" Jed asked but he was ignored.

"Shit. I told her last night to be careful of him." He just wasn't sure if she would resist any of his offers. Last night she did, but this was a man she'd been married to for ten years. He didn't know if one night of the best loving he'd ever had would be enough to keep her at his side. And there was always the worry that he was somehow involved with the stalking and the wreck.

"Last night?" Jed strangled out.

"Yeah, well when I got here, I saw him drive by as we were heading in."

"Damn it. Thea and I had a fight this morning before I left for work so I forgot to reiterate to stay away from that asshole."

"This morning?" Jed shouted but Duncan ignored him and headed out the door. "Hey, we are going to have a discussion about this, Duncan."

"Yeah, I know, but I have other things on my mind at the moment." *Like ripping the head off of one pesky ex-husband.*

Thea walked through the crowd, talking to people she hadn't seen in years. Through the years, she'd realized she was not a big city girl. During her marriage she knew they would never move to some small town. But she'd insisted on moving to Duluth, a suburb of Atlanta and fighting the traffic. She'd convinced Jason, whose parents still lived in Manhattan, that kids needed lots of fresh air and space to grow. But the children had never come and Jason had sold the house.

She sighed. She needed to get away from this thinking. Just like at the cookout, she couldn't shake the feeling that someone was watching her. Of course a lot of people were gawking because of the scene Duncan had caused but there was that niggling worry that someone, some man, was watching her for another purpose. She shivered.

Still, it was hard to accept that someone she'd known her whole life was the stalker. These people were like her extended family. She looked around and counted at least ten teachers she'd had, a couple of the ministers, and one of the assistant managers from the grocery store was playing in the band.

She decided to get some more water. As she walked, the tension in her stomach grew. Someone was watching her, and they were following her. She was sure of it. A chill seeped into her bones as sweat gathered at the nape of her neck. The room was stifling with all the bodies in it, but she shivered again as she felt eyes move over her body.

The refreshments were in a corner, not isolated, but at the moment, she didn't like walking through the crowd being stalked. Forget refreshments. She needed Duncan. Something was very wrong here.

Thea whirled around and bumped into someone who'd been right behind her. She looked up and found herself staring at Jason. His lips curved evilly as panic snaked down her spine.

## **Chapter 15**

"Thea, darling, you look ravishing," Jason said in the patronizing voice she hated. "Although, I find the back of that dress a bit too revealing for a woman with your figure."

She almost laughed in his face. "Jason, what are you doing here?"

"I told you last night. I'm ready to take you back."

Her amusement quickly turned to anger. The bastard actually believed she would want him again.

"Listen, Jason, I want nothing to do with you. You cheated on me and you wanted the divorce."

His asinine smile slipped a tad but he recovered when he realized they'd acquired an audience. "But I've decided to give you another chance."

"Another chance at what?" she asked through clenched teeth.

"What do you mean?"

"A chance at being your wife while you bop anything that moves or a chance at running my restaurant?"

"Why, I would think they would go hand in hand."

"You thought wrong. You are the most self-centered, egotistical jackass I have ever met. In your feeble little mind, you actually think I would want to go back to a life with you?"

"Ah, come on, Allie. We had some good times." Anger was pumping through her in waves. Before she could jump on him and tear off his face, said face paled three shades and most of the sur-

rounding crowd stopped talking. Even before she turned around, she knew Duncan was standing behind her.

The hairs on the nape of her neck stood at attention.

"Warren," he said from behind clenched teeth. He stood so close the heat of him burned into her back. "I think you've outstayed your welcome."

Warmth spread through her at Duncan's defense. And the temptation to let him take care of Jason almost overwhelmed her. But in her heart, she knew she had to do it herself. Something deep down in her gut told her Jason was a problem but he was *her* problem.

She turned around. Duncan stood within inches of her, his fists clenched, his eyes as dark as midnight, his nostrils flaring. He was the epitome of an alpha male defending his territory.

For just a second, her head spun. Except for Jed, a man had never come to her defense and some primitive part of her thrilled at the action. But, as fast as the warmth had spread through her, her levelheaded contemporary self took control.

"Duncan." He didn't even look at her. She laid her hand on his chest and even through all the layers of clothes, she could feel the very heat of him. He looked down at her touch. "I can take care of this."

His eyes narrowed, and an emotion that was not anger leapt in his eyes. Vulnerability. That was what it resembled but as fast as it had appeared, it vanished. She shook her head, sure she'd been mistaken.

"I can handle him." He raised one eyebrow and then stiffly shook his head.

As she turned around, the morbid fascination of the crowd wasn't lost on her. Jason's eyes narrowed in anger, his face mottled with rage. Thea took a deep breath and took back control of her life.



"Jason, we're divorced. As in, no longer married. You wanted the restaurant; you got it, along with all the problems. You're no longer riding on my coattails. I'm not returning to Atlanta to bail you out."

Jason took a step closer and she could feel Duncan's hot breath as his breathing accelerated. Irritation overrode her anger. She was doing this, not him. No longer would a man dictate to her what to do with her life. She straightened her shoulders and lifted her chin.

"Fine," Jason spat out. "You'll regret this, Thea."

He stomped away and the crowd parted. Jason could be mean if provoked but he was a coward. Plain and simple. If he had to fight his own fights, he'd turn tail and run in the other direction.

"Thea, I think we really need to have a talk."

She whipped around and stared dumfounded by the anger in Duncan's voice. "No, I don't think so, Duncan. At least not right now. We have made enough of a scene before and now this." He scanned the surrounding crowd as if it was the first time he noticed it. Another stiff nod and she had a temporary reprieve. She sighed as the band began to play again. "Since there is no reason to hide it now, we might as well dance."

His eyebrows shot up in surprise but he placed his hand on the small of her bare back. Skin met skin and her pulse sped up, heat rolled through her. As she stepped into his arms, she realized she'd not been happy. She felt she had to take care of the matter herself, but for a moment, she liked having an alpha male stand up to protect her.

\* \* \* \*

Thea carefully avoided Jed for most of the evening. About ten that night, he snuck up and asked her for a dance. She thought about excusing herself, but the look in his eyes had her accepting without hesitation.

"So, you and Duncan?"

"Me and Duncan what?" She was being a coward. She knew it and he knew it. But she didn't care. He was more father than brother sometimes and discussing her sex life with him was doubly uncomfortable.

"Thea, I'm not in the mood for games." They reached a corner and he spun her around and then continued on with his interrogation as they two-stepped. "Duncan is not the kind of man you should be involved with."

"Oh, and what kind of man is he?"

"He will not, under any circumstances settle down."

"And?"

"Thea, you deserve more than that. You deserve to get married again, and have kids. You'd be a great mother."

A lump formed in her throat. "I thought at one time that was what I wanted but, Jed, I tried that once and failed miserably. I'm just not sure what I want now but I know I don't want to settle down. At least, not at the moment." He looked as if he would argue and she raised an eyebrow. "I'm not a kid anymore and you have to let me make my own mistakes."

"Just—"

"Jedidiah. No more. Just promise me one thing."

"What?"

"Don't let this come between you two. He...well, he is really worried about that I think. Well, to a point."

He hesitated. A thoughtful expression lit his eyes, then a slow smile curved his lips.

"Okay, I promise."

She sighed and searched for Duncan. He was on the opposite side of the dance floor, being interrogated by Gwen. She caught his eye and shrugged her apology. He rolled his eyes and spun Gwen around.

\* \* \* \*

Duncan had a healthy fear of angry and preachy women. Thirty-six years as the son of Selma Perry had taught him that much. Despite that, he had asked Gwen to dance, knowing full well she was ready to give him a piece of her mind.

"So, you want to tell me exactly what's going on with you two?"

"No."

"Duncan."

"Well, you asked if I wanted to. I don't."

"Quit being a smartass. I'm a teacher. I get too much of that from my students. Now, I'm no longer asking." He remained silent, searching the crowd for some kind of diversion. "Duncan Perry."

"Hey, don't yell at me." He saw the determined look her in her blue eyes and relented. "We're seeing each other."

"Jed said you're sleeping together."

"None of your business."

"Everything with Thea is my business. I'm not going to fail her again."

The song came to an end and he escorted her off the floor and to a darkened corner. "What do you mean?"

She sighed and studied the swaying couples on the floor. "I think, well Jed does too, we failed her in some way. Like we should have seen what a rat Jason Warren was." She shrugged. "She married young, we should've paid more attention."

"You married young."

"And look how that turned out." She looked at him, worry etched her features. "Thea barely knew Jason when they were engaged and I think she married because she thought it would take a burden off Jed."

He snorted and her eyes narrowed with suspicion. "Gwen, there's one thing I know about Thea. There's no way you or Jed or

anyone would've changed her mind. Once she sets her mind to something, she's more stubborn than a mule."

She studied him so intently it made him squirm. Then she smiled so brilliantly he blinked. "Why, Duncan, I do believe you know Thea very well."

"Yeah...well...anyway it's not any of your business or Jed's."

She nodded and led them back through the crowd to where Thea and Jed were standing. They chatted for several minutes, all of them avoiding the issue of Duncan and Thea's relationship. It was a relief when he saw Rusty striding through the crowd. Thea saw Rusty too and insisted on coming with him.

"Reckless. About time you got here," Duncan said, sliding his arm around Thea's waist.

Surprise then speculation danced across his features. "Well, I would have been here earlier but I got another call."

"Is it—"

"No, this one was a male but it took them forever to get back to me on that. I was halfway here when they radioed it in." He turned his attention to Thea and his voice warmed considerably. "Thea, you sure have grown up. Are you in town long?"

"I'm not sure," she said.

"None of your business," Duncan said at the same time.

Rusty grinned, but dropped the subject, while Thea stared at him as if he'd grown another head.

"I'll need to go over that other stuff with you," Duncan said. When Thea said nothing, he knew she understood it had to do with the murdered women.

"Well, I'm stuck here for awhile. My mother would throw a fit if I just up and left this evening after being so late. How about I come by your place afterwards?"

"Okay. You know the old Miller house, don't you?"

Rusty studied him then nodded, his grin widening into a full-fledged smile. "Now, I have to dance with a few eligible ladies to make my mother happy. Thea?"

Before she could answer, Duncan cut in. "She doesn't meet your criteria."

"Oh? Beautiful, available. She meets mine."

"Kiss my ass, Reckless. You know what I mean."

"I just wanted to know if you did." He winked at Thea and sauntered through the crowd.

He glanced at Thea while she studied Reckless as he asked one of Coach Newman's girls to dance. Just like him to pick the daughter of the coach who'd hated him in high school. Reckless always lived up to his name.

"He's changed a lot. Well, at least I trust him more than I would have when he was in high school." She looked at him. "You need to quit acting like a bull in rut."

That blunt statement raised his temper to new heights. He'd stood by and allowed her to confront Warren, and he'd let all those other men dance with her. But, by damn, the woman was pushing him over the edge. Before he could respond, Jed and Gwen approached them.

"Was that Reckless?" Jed asked.

"Yes. He was trying to come on to Thea. Why don't you go threaten *him*?"

Jed shot him a warning glance.

"Threaten him? Jed, did you threaten Duncan?" Thea demanded.

"No, I didn't. Jason showed up and interrupted me."

"Well, either way, we are out of here. I've had a long day at work."

He held his breath until she nodded her agreement. After saying goodnight to them, they were stopped at least half a dozen times while trying to reach the door. They retrieved her coat and

he hurried her out to his truck. He was ready to remind the woman just who she belonged to.

\* \* \* \*

The tension grew the closer to her house they got. He avoided the subject of what went on tonight because he knew they'd fight and he decided to put that off as long as possible. Since the moment she could speak, the two of them had fought. About the time she was old enough to tag along, Jed started to proclaim what they were doing as secret but every now and then, Duncan would side with her. He thought she should feel some loyalty.

He took a peek at her rigid posture and her crossed arms. *Yeah right.*

By the time he parked in her drive, he was itching for a fight. Never in his life had a woman tied him up in knots like this. One minute he was horny as hell, the next he was ready to take her over his knee.

He followed her to the front porch and into the house. She pulled off her coat and threw it on the sofa without stopping on her way to the kitchen.

"I'm starved, how about you?" she asked. "There wasn't much selection there tonight and I really didn't get to eat that much. I bet you didn't get to eat a thing this afternoon."

She paced nervously through the kitchen opening cabinet doors. Anxiety rolled off her in waves reaching out to him, propelling him to comfort her. There was no way he could allow her to go through it alone. Some deep primal urge had him moving across the floor, taking her in his arms.

She tensed for a second, then returned the hug half-heartedly. She attempted to step back, away from him, away from what he was offering her and anger had him holding on tighter. He crushed her soft body against his, and his heart tumbled when she returned his embrace.

An emotion, something so strong, almost overpowering, surged through him. It coursed through his veins and sent his mind spinning out of control. He cupped her face in his hands and tilted her face up. Her eyes were half-closed, slumberous. Just the sight of them, looking as if she'd just awakened after a night of loving, sent heat rushing through him.

He lowered his lips to hers, her eyes slowly closing the closer he got. Her scent, apples and cinnamon and musky arousal, swarmed around him, surrounded him, aroused him even further.

The taste of her, the wine she'd drunk, the passion surging through her, sent any of the blood still left in his brain, racing to his groin. He traced her spine, delicate but so strong. His groin was heavy with anticipation and he had to have her. He abruptly broke the kiss, and grabbed her hand and tugged her upstairs.

Only the hall light shone into the dark room as he settled on the bed, her standing in front of him. He'd love to turn on the light, see every bit of her gorgeous body in detail but he knew it would break the mood.

Within a couple of minutes, he discarded his jacket and shirt and leaned back on his elbows as she began undressing. He kicked off his shoes. Just thinking of her, naked and willing beneath him had him almost bursting.

She seemed in a rush to discard her dress but he stilled her with one word.

"Slowly."

She looked up, her eyes hidden in the shadows but he knew what they looked like. Dark green filled with arousal, simmering with desire. She turned and gave him her back. For a moment he held his breath, wondering if she would refuse.

His breath wooshed out as she peeked coyly over her shoulder. Her fingers slid over one of her shoulders. He watched, mesmerized by the motion as she pulled the dress to her forearm. She repeated the action with the other side.

She turned to face him and pulled the dress down further, freeing her arms and revealing her breasts. She'd been braless and he was glad he hadn't known. They would never have made it home.

Wiggling, she discarded the dress, throwing it aside without a thought. She stood before him in nothing but her blush and stockings. Lust intermingled with something so unknown to him, so foreign, it almost unmanned him. A smile tugged at his lips when he recognized the feeling rolling through him. He accepted it, knowing he had no way to avoid it.

He took her hand and tugged her to the bed. She came willingly, laid out on the bed like an offering. As fast as humanly possible, he finished undressing.

He practically dove on the bed and rolled so she sat astride him. The silk of her stockings against his hips hardened him even more. His erection was nestled between her legs. Her breasts rose and fell as her breathing increased. Slowly, he slid his hand along her ribs to cup the bottom of her breast.

She was full breasted, but it wasn't the size so much as the shape and the feel and the taste of them. He reared up, taking one turgid nipple in his mouth and suckling. Her moan, aroused and husky, pitched his heartbeat into overdrive.

He moved to the other, reveling in the taste of her, sweet yet spicy. Her hands speared through his hair, as if trying to hold him closer. He broke free and grabbed a condom from the nightstand. Within minutes he was easing his way into her tight sheath. He watched her, her head thrown back in wild abandon, her eyes closed as she slid down his length, enveloping him with her warmth.

Minutes later, her muscles tightened as she convulsed, the tremors pulling him with her as he shouted her name.

\* \* \* \*



Jason Warren stumbled out of his car searching for his key-card. He pulled everything out of his pants pocket and it fell on the pavement with a splat. His head swam with anger and the ten beers he'd had after he left that stupid ball.

"Damn woman," he muttered.

Everything was Thea's fault. Look at the employees at the restaurant. Every one of those idiots quit as soon as she walked out the door. She'd turned them against him, he was sure of it.

He bent at the waist to shift through his belongings still lying on the ground in a puddle from the recent rain. Finally, he found his key and shoved the rest of the items back in his pocket.

It took five attempts, but the door finally opened. He staggered into his motel room; the vague smell of must and cigarettes assaulted him. *She couldn't go to a town with a decent hotel, could she?* Hell, he'd gone to another town for a beer as the only place that served liquor was the hall where the dance had been held.

He'd decided to lay low for a few days, wait for her temper to cool, then approach her again. All businesslike this time. That's what he'd do. Appeal to the businesswoman in her. He would coax her into agreement and then all of his problems would be solved.

He smiled. Nothing would stand in his way now. Thea was as temperamental as any artist but he knew how to handle her. And she could be handled. He was sure of it.

It was the last thought he had before the cold metal of a gun touched his temple.

## **Chapter 16**

Pleasure continued to hum through Thea as she snuggled closer to Duncan. She still lay on top of him, every bone in her body melted to mush. He had a way of doing that to her. With a touch, a look, hell, just thinking about him did it to her. She contemplated not moving for at least a day or two but Duncan's stomach rumbled. He chuckled. A deep satisfied male type of chuckle that curled her toes.

"I guess you expect me to feed you now?" she asked.

He smacked her on her butt, then rubbed the spot. "Well, you did mention something downstairs about being hungry."

Her whole body heated as she remembered yammering on like an idiot.

"Yeah, well, I guess I could throw something together." She tried to move, but he caught hold of her and lifted her chin with his knuckle.

"There's no reason to be embarrassed, Thea."

"Well, you're used to this type of thing, I'm not."

"This type of thing?" His voice was neutral, without emotion. He dropped his finger.

She propped herself up on his chest. "You have to admit, you've had quite a lot of women. Other than my ex, you're the only man I've slept with. Casual affairs are not my thing."

He stared at her, silent for a few moments. Releasing an exasperated sigh, he slid his arms around her and pulled her down.

"After we catch this bastard, we're going to have a really long talk. But, for now, I'm hungry."

He deftly set her on her feet and he stood next to her. A rush of goose bumps exploded on her arms and she shivered. She grabbed a pair of sweats and a t-shirt.

After both of them finished dressing, they headed downstairs.

She rummaged through the refrigerator. "How does a sandwich sound?" When he didn't answer, she turned to find his gaze directed at her rear end. "Duncan!"

His eyes met hers and her face warmed. "What?"

"Sandwich?"

"Yeah, sure."

She gathered all the ingredients and went to work. "You'd think you've had enough."

He chuckled. "I hate to tell you, honey, but that day's not going to come anytime soon."

She turned to ask him what he meant, but a flash of light alerted her to an approaching car. Tension coiled in her stomach.

"Reckless."

She sighed. "Of course. I forgot."

He kissed her temple and then headed for the front door.

The murmur of male voices filled the room as Rusty and Duncan discussed the case.

"Thea," Rusty said. He was still dressed in his tux, his dark brown hair the same unruly mess and his blue eyes sparkled with speculation. "That looks wonderful. Is there anyway I can convince you to make me one?"

"Ham and cheese?"

"My favorite." He walked toward her, his arms outstretched as if to embrace her but Duncan grabbed him by the collar and yanked him back.

"Hands off."

She was sure her face was candy apple red and she resumed fixing the sandwiches.

"How the mighty have fallen," Rusty said. "I want an invite."

"An invite to what?" she asked without turning around.

"Never mind," Duncan said. "We need to get to work."

\* \* \* \*

Dennis Farley hated working the late shift at the Crocker Inn. Fifty was too old to be sitting up all night renting rooms. He hated it even more when they had trouble.

The desk chair moaned in relief when he pulled his considerable weight out of it. The occupant in Room 117 had called to complain that the television in the next room was blaring. After repeated calling and receiving no answer, he knew he had to walk all the way down there and check it out.

The cold northern wind slapped him in the face as he trudged along the sidewalk. The caller stood outside of his door, a tall elderly man who checked in with his niece under the name Smith. Odd that he would call attention to himself. Must be from out of town.

"Thank God. That damn TV has been blaring for an hour."

Dennis looked past him at his niece who hid behind the curtains. Yeah, if he had a prime piece like that, Dennis knew he wouldn't welcome the interruption.

He knocked on the door. No response. He knocked a little louder and looked at the rental car the man had been driving. It was parked across two spaces, the lights still on. *Great. The guy had probably been on a bender. Passed out drunk with the TV blaring.*

"Management. Open up."

"Don't you have a key?"

He turned and looked at the jackass Smith. "Don't you have a wife?"

His eyes bugged out and his mouth hung open. "Hmph." He stalked away and slammed his door.

Dennis slipped the keycard in the slot and opened the door.  
“Mister?”

He walked to the TV and turned it off. How did he feel? Irritated the occupant was so rude to have the television blaring and just leave like that? Surprised no one seemed to be there? The place looked deserted but there was a smell, something he couldn't identify. As he turned to check out the bathroom, he saw the man laying face down on the floor beside the bed. Blood stained the carpet.

Bile rose in his throat. The faint metallic scent of blood overpowered the stale cigarette smoke odor.

He rushed out of the room to the office. He held on to call 911 and then promptly threw up in the trashcan.

\* \* \* \*

Rusty, Thea and Duncan sat around the kitchen table eating and discussing the recent murders.

“Now, according to the FBI, there is not enough evidence for us to link them. Yes. They all looked alike, and they are within a fifty-mile radius, but truthfully, that's all we have to go on.” Rusty shook his head. “They were all killed differently. Well, at least several different ways. But there's something there, I can feel it.”

“Sexual assault?” Duncan asked. He hated to be going over this in front of Thea, but she wouldn't leave even if he threatened her. This seamy underbelly wasn't something he wanted her to know about.

“No. None. But there was evidence of ejaculation on the scene.”

“Why is that important?” Thea asked.

“Well, it means he is more turned on by the killing. The act of rape isn't what floats his boat. It's the killing,” Rusty explained.

Her face paled and her throat worked. Duncan reached out and took her hand. He knew she was imagining her mother's murder. He should never have let her listen to this.

"You said they were killed differently? Maybe they're not connected," Thea said.

"No evidence to refute that, I admit. But there's something..."

His beeper sounded. He looked at the pager and cursed.

"Mind if I use your phone? My cell's in the car."

"Sure," she said and nodded to the phone on the wall.

As Rusty called, Thea cleared away the plates and Duncan looked over some of the notes he had made. His cell rang before he could really start to make sense of anything.

"Perry here."

"Boss," Michelson said. "We got us a problem at Crocker Inn."

The young man's voice wavered.

"What's up?"

"There's been a suicide." His neck muscles tensed. "Shooting from the looks of it but I haven't gotten too close."

"You have to if you want to investigate."

"Well, boss, you know I never did this kind of thing before."

"Yeah. I'll be there in a few minutes. Know him?"

"Not personally, but he signed in as Jason Warren."

His blood turned to ice and he looked at Thea who was watching him with concern.

"Okay. Did you call the county coroner?"

"Yeah, Doc Sawyer's on her way."

"What is it, Duncan?" Thea asked.

"It's Jason." He stood and then pulled her into his arms. "He committed suicide over at the Crocker Inn. Looks like he shot himself."

She pulled back and looked up at him. Her face bone white.

"He'd never do that."

Jealousy speared through him. He knew in his gut she would never go back to Jason Warren now, but they'd had a history to-

gether. They'd spent holidays and anniversaries and mornings in bed together.

"Listen, Duncan, he would never do that. He would never do that to his parents."

"That doesn't preclude him from committing suicide."

"He had a cousin who'd committed suicide. It tore the family apart."

"I gotta go," Rusty said. His lips flat and his brow furrowed. "They found another woman about five miles outside of town."

"Local?"

"I don't know. There was no ID as usual." He rubbed the back of his neck. "Look, I may be at this all night but we need to get together tomorrow. Maybe with some fresh eyes, we might be able to pick up on something."

"No problem. I have a possible suicide so I need to get dressed and get going also."

"Thanks for the meal, Thea. We need to do it another time, really soon." Duncan didn't mistake the deep tone in his friend's voice.

"Off limits, jackass."

Rusty just smiled and headed out to his job.

"I'm going to give Chase a call and have him over here in a little bit. I don't like you staying alone."

Thea propped a hand on each hip. "I'm going with you. He was my husband. Someone will have to identify him."

That thought gnawed at his gut. Why did she have to keep reminding him of what she'd been to Warren? It wasn't as if it could compare with anything the two of them shared.

*Shit!* He didn't need this now.

"Identification will happen later. I need you to stay here and out of the way. I need to do my job."

Her eyes studied him for a second and then she nodded.

He gathered up his things, his own nerves rising with each minute that ticked by. Chase pulled into the drive within minutes. Duncan leaned down, kissed her mouth and headed upstairs to change. Keeping his mind clear of Thea was going to be hard, but he had to do it to find the bastard who was threatening her. After that, he would deal with the feelings she brought out in him. And they would have their talk, whether she liked it or not.

\* \* \* \*

Thea paced through the house, her nerves stretched tight and ready to break. She didn't like the implications of what was going on and she regretted that Duncan had found out. Yes, he'd been helpful. But she could have discovered a lot of what he had, it just would have taken her longer. She didn't want him in danger, not because of her. And she knew it was more than feeling guilty. How did she feel about her ex getting it?

She loved him.

"Duncan can handle himself."

She glanced at Chase but kept pacing. Duncan had waited until his brother had shown up and then left them alone.

"I know." But she didn't. Now everyone knew about the two of them, including the killer.

"One thing I can't figure out is why?"

She stopped. "Why?"

"Don't get me wrong, I find you attractive and if Duncan wasn't head over heels for you, I would take a whirl at you myself. But one thing I can't understand is this fixation first on your mother and now on you."

She shrugged still trying to ignore the zinging of warmth shooting through her. Duncan was *not* head over heels for her.

"I have no idea. I guess if I did, I would be able to figure out who it is."

She shivered. Someone she knew. Her stomach knotted and soured. She'd known it all this time, but somehow ignored it.



"I just can't imagine being that fixated on someone."

Chase's brow was furrowed, his hands rested on his lean hips. She couldn't help it, she laughed.

He glanced up evidently surprised by her merriment.

"I can't help it, Chase. You..." And she flopped onto the sofa, laughing more. "You can't think of fixing your attentions on a woman for more than a few days, let alone twenty years. The look on your face is priceless."

A self-depreciating smile lit his face. "Now, Thea, if you would just dump my brother, I'd fixate on you all you wanted."

Despite the tension, or maybe because of it, she erupted into giggles again.

"You know, you're hard on a man's ego, Thea."

\* \* \* \*

Duncan parked his truck beside the coroner's hearse. With a sigh, he got out and headed toward the room Jason Warren had once occupied.

The Crocker Inn was an old throwback from the days before the interstate system. It was situated on Highway 84 and had once been one of the busiest motels in the area. But then Interstate 20 had been built and all the traffic gravitated to it.

The structure was weatherworn and in need of repair, the paint either faded or peeled away. All the doors faced the outside of the one-story structure. The building was a huge U shape with a miniscule pool now out of commission for the winter.

The cold north wind blew through the parking lot, stirring up small bits of gravel and dust. He squinted his eyes against the debris and forged ahead.

The scene just outside of the room resembled a circus. Morbid onlookers fought for the best spot in which to watch the proceedings. Several of his deputies, most of them not in uniform, were trying to hold everyone back away from the door. He didn't recog-

nize any of them so he figured they were from out of town. *How would they have gotten word so soon if this isn't a busy road?*

"Sheriff." Sam, all of twenty-one and as eager as a new puppy, came rushing forward. Apparently he was no longer sickened. "Glad you're here. Doc's in there now and these people are getting out of hand. Some of them even wanted to tour the scene."

"Good Lord." He strode forward at the sound of angry shouts. Several of the onlookers were insisting on getting closer and were shoving his officers around.

"That's enough!" Everyone, including his deputies, froze. "Now, what I need is for you two," he said, pointing to Charlie and Sam, "to take everyone aside and ask them what they saw. Anyone unwilling to cooperate will be hauled in for questioning."

"You always did know how to make an entrance, Dunc," LouEllen Sawyer said from the doorway, a smile curving her lips. The fifty-something doctor had been their coroner since before Duncan had taken the job of sheriff. She was blunt, but good at her job.

"Lou, hate to bring you out on a Saturday night."

The doctor shrugged. "Not like I have much to do when I'm on call. Nothing turns off a date more than leaving him to visit the dead."

Duncan followed her into the room. "Well?"

"Murder." She stripped off her latex gloves. "No gun powder on his hands. Gun was left but it's lying on the floor. So, I have a feeling it was left here for a reason."

"What reason would that be?"

"How the hell should I know? You're the policeman." She crossed her arms beneath her breasts. "The caliber was a .44, silencer on it, of course."

His cell phone went off again.

"Perry."

"Hey, Rusty here."

"Reckless, whaddya find?"

"Young woman, black hair, green eyes. Halfway between the hall where the dance had been held and the inn."

His bones chilled.

"How was she killed?" But he already knew the answer.

"Shot to the head, probably a .44. How's the suicide?"

"No suicide. Murder, possibly a .44. I think our two investigations just became one."

## **Chapter 17**

Duncan took a swallow of old coffee and grimaced. Bitter and stale. He didn't have a choice. He needed something to keep him going tonight.

As he paced the small area behind his desk, he tried to find the one thing that was missing. Something, somewhere had to link the death of Jason Warren, the murdered women and Thea's stalker. He had no proof, but he knew they were connected. It was that one tiny bit of information, something he'd stored in his brain that would break the case. He settled his hands on his hips and leaned his head back and closed his eyes.

"Does that work?" Rusty asked.

Duncan opened his eyes. His friend looked just as haggard, even more so since he still wore his tux. His hair was a mess and the circles under his eyes told Duncan he was suffering as much as Duncan was himself.

"There's something. I don't know what it is, but this all ties together."

Rusty nodded and sauntered to the chair situated in front of Duncan's desk. He collapsed into it, his expression mirroring Duncan's.

"Yeah, I agree. Other than these women look like your girlfriend, there isn't anything else to go on."

"Agreed. Girlfriend?"

Rusty raised one eyebrow. "What would you call her?"

He didn't dignify the question with an answer. Girlfriend seemed too insignificant a word for Thea and what she meant to him. There was a tiny part of his brain that knew the answer but he pushed aside those thoughts. He had to deal with the here and now. He had to find the killer. Then he would figure out what came next for the two of them.

"You gonna call Thea? She'll need to identify the body."

"Yeah." He rubbed his hand over his face. His stomach muscles bunched and tightened. "I've been avoiding it."

Rusty nodded and Duncan knew what he thought. He thought Duncan was trying to spare Thea pain. But deep down, in places he didn't want to think about, he knew the real reason. He feared her reaction.

She'd been up front and honest about her marriage and how it fell apart and truthfully, he didn't think there were any residual feelings left for the idiot. But everything changed with her ex's death. When people died, one forgot all the bad stuff they did and just remembered the good.

Duncan decided he needed to get it over with and grabbed the phone and dialed her number. She answered on the first ring.

"Duncan." Worry threaded her voice.

"Hey, honey. It was Jason. They're going to send his body to Ft. Worth for an autopsy. But I need you to identify him."

She didn't respond for a several seconds, and he wished he could see her face. She was so expressive, he'd know right away what she was thinking.

"Okay. What do you need me to do?" Her voice was thinner.

"I need for Chase to bring you into town and I'll take you to the county clinic. They're keeping him on...they're keeping him there until they can transport him."

"I can drive myself."

"No. Chase will drive. That way we won't have two cars and you'll be safe."

"Duncan, you could get stuck there for hours."

"Just do it, Thea. Do it for me."

There was a pause again and then she said, "Okay."

After hanging up, he sat in his chair and looked at Rusty. He'd propped his feet on Duncan's desk, slouched down in the chair, and was snoring.

His nerves were as jittery as a windmill during a blue norther. He knew it had very little to do with the case and everything to do with Thea. He needed to separate these feelings from work. Otherwise, he just might lose the one good thing in his life.

\* \* \* \*

As Chase drove them through Crocker, Thea bit her thumbnail with a vengeance. It had taken her years to overcome the bad habit. Now, she just didn't care. All she cared about was getting to Duncan.

Tonight's earlier events hit home as soon as Duncan walked out the door. This sicko was targeting people around Thea and Duncan would be number one on his list. She didn't know what she would do if something happened to him. And she felt guilty.

Her ex-husband, a man she'd married and shared a life with for ten years, was dead. Killed because of his association with her. Relief warmed her while her stomach coiled with guilt. Relief that it had been Jason who'd been killed and not Duncan and guilt because she knew she should feel something for Jason but didn't.

Chase interrupted her thoughts. "Thea. You really need to stop worrying. Duncan's a big boy and everything will turn out all right."

"I'll just feel better when this is all over."

He never took his eyes off the road. "Yes. Mom wants some grandkids and since Duncan is the older of the two of us, I think you two should do something about it."

"Chase Perry, Duncan and I are not getting married."

"If you say so."

He pulled into the parking lot of the Crocker Police Department. She saw Duncan's truck and a few other vehicles she assumed belonged to other detectives.

She was out of the car before Chase could set it in park. The front door opened and Duncan stood in the doorway as she hurried up the steps. She threw herself into his arms. His arms wrapped around her, his warmth surrounded her.

She squeezed him tight, glad she was finally there, and he was all right. His tangy cologne still clung to him and she breathed in the scent, allowing it to calm her.

"Hello to you, too." There was a trace of amusement in his voice but there was an underlying strain in it as well.

"I was just so worried."

He pulled back from the embrace, a small smile tilted his lips. But there was something else, something vague and wary about him tonight. She didn't know if it had to do with the case or with their relationship.

"If you two lovebirds are through?" Chase asked.

\* \* \* \*

Duncan pulled Thea to his side and slid his arm around her waist. Now that she was there, he wasn't letting go until he had to. The twenty-minute wait had seemed like a lifetime.

"Go away."

"That's the thanks I get," Chase said, mock condemnation in his voice. "Well, I guess I better get home. I need all the beauty sleep I can get."

He sauntered to his car.

"Chase, thanks," Duncan said. Without turning around, Chase nodded. He got in his car and was on his way.

"You want something to drink?" he asked.

"No, I'd rather get this over with if it's all the same to you."

He guided her through the station house and to his office. Rusty was still snoring. One rather loud snuff filled the silence and

Thea smiled. It wasn't much but Duncan felt better seeing her reaction. She was so damned resilient, so strong.

"Let me get a few things in order and we'll head over with another officer."

"Why do we need another officer?"

He stopped in his task and looked up. "We're personally involved. It would just be better if we had someone else there to witness."

"Boss," Richard said. "Just got a call both you and Reckless might be interested in. Found another woman, off of Richter road."

Rusty stirred immediately making Duncan wonder if he'd been mistaken about him sleeping.

"Who called it in?"

"Anonymous," Richard said.

"I guess we better get going," Rusty said. He stood and stretched his hands to the ceiling. "I'm really getting sick of receiving these calls."

Dread slunk down Duncan's spine as a chill rushed through his veins. There was no explanation, no reason for the reaction. Yes, there was another dead woman but that wasn't it. And even though he didn't completely trust Richard, Duncan knew Thea would be safe at the office. Various officers from the Crocker and county police departments were milling around.

Maybe he just didn't feel right leaving her. He studied her for a second. Her face was still pale making the circles bruising the tender skin beneath her eyes stand out even more. But she seemed to be holding up. She gave him a sad smile.

"I'm gonna—"

"I know. You have to go. I'll be safe here."

"It could be a while."

She smiled. "I can wait."



The click of the door sounded behind him letting him know Rusty had given him the privacy he needed.

He pulled her against him, her body soft and willing. She trembled. It was not from a chill but from the connection they had. Physical, spiritual, whatever he called it, there was something so deep, it was ingrained into their souls.

With the duty ahead of him already on his mind, he bent his head and brushed his lips against hers. He wanted to give her a simple kiss, but she wouldn't let him. She stood on her tiptoes, slid her arms around his neck and deepened it. Her tongue tickled his lips. Surprised he opened his mouth and she stole inside. Everything that had happened in the last few hours fled his mind at that moment.

She tasted so sweet, so spicy, so incredible hot.

His hands stole down to her bottom as he lifted her against his arousal. Her breasts flattened against his chest. Her nipples stabbed his chest through the layers of clothing. Everything that was horrible melted away with her against him. It was as if nothing existed outside of her embrace, as if he had come home. He was seriously thinking about locking the door to his office and trying out the desk when someone knocked on the door.

"Good Lord, Perry! Can't you wait until after we find the dead girl?"

Rusty's voice was like cold water. Both of them pulled back from the kiss. His jeans were stretched tight over his obvious erection and he reached down to adjust himself. Thea's face resembled a fire engine.

He chuckled. "Well, they'll be talking about this for weeks."

She cleared her throat and her face turned a brighter shade of red.

"Don't let it bother you, Thea."

"Maybe you're accustomed to it but, well, I'm not." She wouldn't look him in the eye and it bothered him.

He grabbed her shoulders as she tried to turn away from him. Gently, he tilted her chin up with his knuckle.

"I'm not accustomed to it, Thea." Her green eyes sparked with disbelief. "I'm not saying I'm a saint. But I've never lost my head like that. I have a ton of things to do, and all I can think about is getting into your pants. *That* is not normal for me."

There was still a sliver of suspicion in her eyes but she nodded. He gave her a quick kiss.

"If you get bored or too tired, call Chase and he'll pick you up. Otherwise, you need to sit tight in my office. No one else takes you home. Well, Jed, but no one else. Okay?"

"Be careful."

Many women had said it, and with the exception of his mama, he realized Thea was probably the only one who'd really meant it.

"I will."

He grabbed his coat and headed out the door. As he settled in his truck he couldn't block the feeling that something wasn't right.

\* \* \* \*

She was back to chewing her thumbnails. Thea mentally forced herself to place her hands on Duncan's desk.

No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't stop worrying about him. He knew his job, she was sure of that, but her father hadn't been a dumb man.

To take her mind off the situation, she studied Duncan's office. Not much to it. A picture of his mom which looked to be recent given the gray now in Selma Perry's hair. Other than that, not much on his desk.

She stood and walked around the small office. The paint on the walls was a dull off-white, and chipped. Various documents hung on the walls, including his Bachelor's from Texas Tech. *Criminal Justice*.

It shouldn't surprise her but it did a little. Duncan knew his job, she was sure of that. But she'd never known he was interested

in law enforcement. She didn't know if she wanted to be married to another cop.

*Whoa! Hold the wagon.* She wasn't getting married again, and Duncan was definitely not inclined. But before she could stop them, images of a life with Duncan flashed through her mind. Refurbishing her house, going to football games, *having his children*.

She shivered. It was all Chase's fault. He'd put those goofy ideas in her mind but she knew it wouldn't happen. Duncan would never settle down and she didn't know if she could trust any man again.

Before she could rectify her thoughts, the door opened behind her. She glanced over her shoulder and found Richard the dick-head. A sinister grin darkened his features as he shut the door behind him.

"Poor little Thea. I guess you're in need of some comforting."

A chill settled in her stomach, curdling the coffee she'd had. Knowing he would get off on her fear, she didn't break eye contact.

"Now, Dick, I have no idea why you would think I'd need a lazy slob like you. Go away before I call one of the other detectives in."

He advanced and for a second, she froze. He was bigger, meaner. She could smell his body odor mixed with his usual cheap cologne. She swallowed and then tried breathing through her mouth. The urge to back away almost overpowered her, but she fought it. He would pounce as soon as she showed just how scared she was.

He stopped within inches of her. Lust darkened his beady little eyes. He reached out and she flinched. His smile deepened.

"Go ahead and call them. They're not gonna hear you. They're all out on the front steps having a smoke."

He settled his finger on the hollow of her neck and her stomach threatened to rebel. She took a step back and he crowded her against the wall. Terror inched down her spine like a spider.

He grabbed the front of her shirt and yanked it. One of the buttons popped off. She knew she should scream. She should knee him in the groin. But she couldn't. Fear held her immobile.

He reached to pull her shirt again. The door banged open and Duncan's Uncle Chris stepped into the room. Richard dropped his hold of her shirt and turned around.

"Thea? Are you alright?"

She scooted around Richard before he could object.

"Yes. I was just waiting for Duncan. I need to talk to Duncan." The tremor in her voice sounded hysterical even to her own ears. But she knew no one would believe her but Duncan.

"He just called me a while ago. Seems they'll be out there for an hour or two and he asked if I could take you back to the house."

"Oh. Why didn't he call me?"

"I don't know. I just know he couldn't get a hold of Chase and he didn't want you sitting here all night."

*Duncan had said no one but...*

She glanced back at Richard, his eyes narrowed as he studied Chris.

"Okay. Let me grab my coat."

She put on her coat. As they headed out to his car, Chris put his arm over her shoulders and squeezed. Surprised, she glanced up. A small smile curved his lips. All the terror of the evening dissolved. She couldn't wait to get home.

\* \* \* \*

Duncan turned down the old farm road. They inched along but found nothing. Irritation crept along his nerves. It was their third time down this road and they'd found nothing.

"Maybe it was a prank," Rusty offered.

"Maybe. I just hope it wasn't called in just to throw us off."

"Well, the joke's on him with Thea at the station house."

Duncan nodded but the uneasy feeling he had earlier had grown. He knew there was something wrong, something very wrong.

"Maybe you should call in and get directions again."

"No. We've been up and down this road and there's nothing. It was a prank or...no, I know it wasn't a prank. It was a decoy call."

He dialed the number to the office. Richard answered.

"Richard, let me talk to Thea."

"She's not here, Dunc."

"Where the hell is she?"

Richard hesitated for a second and Duncan's anxiety heightened.

"Your Uncle Chris stopped by and said you told him to pick her up. They left twenty minutes ago."

## **Chapter 18**

The warmth in Chris' car surrounded Thea, calming her nerves and relaxing her muscles. From her fights with Duncan, to the mess at the dance and now her dead ex, she'd had a rough day. She rubbed her temples and closed her eyes. Lord, she was tired.

"Long day?" Chris asked.

Thea opened her eyes. A slight smile tipped his lips, and even in the dim light from the control panel of the car, she could see the handsome face so much like Duncan's.

"Yeah. Just a little too much excitement for my tastes."

He patted her knee in a completely fatherly way. But maybe because of the tension of the day, something slithered down her spine like a snake.

"Why don't you just lean back and relax? I'll have you home in no time at all."

She shook off her uneasiness and settled back in her seat. A man who'd known her parents and her all her life was treating her with affection. Nothing to worry about.

It was the stalker's fault. Once they caught him, she'd feel more comfortable with men. She just hoped Duncan found something that would help.

\* \* \* \*

A thousand thoughts flew through Duncan's mind as he sped to Thea's house.

"So, your uncle picked her up. What's the big deal?" Rusty was a top-rate investigator, Duncan was sure of it but the guy just hadn't connected the dots.

"I never called Chris." His throat almost closed off the words, trying to deter the admission. A man he thought of as a father figure, who'd taught him how to drive and, hell, bought him his first condom and explained safe sex, couldn't be the killer. Could he?

"You never called Chris?" The tone of his voice suggested he was working it out. "How would he know?" He was silent for a few seconds. "You're not thinking Chris would..."

The steel ball weighing down his stomach indicated he was thinking of it. "I-I am. Jesus."

"But I've known him all my life. Why would he do something like this?"

"Rusty, you know as well as I do one of the things they always say is 'I'd never expect him to do something like this.'" Even accepting that, his heart still rebelled at the idea of Chris being a killer.

He pulled into the driveway, jumped out of his truck, and hurried up the front steps, Rusty hard on his heels. Chris' car was nowhere to be found and only the porch light and one in the kitchen seemed to be lit. He unlocked the front door.

"Thea, baby, you in here?" Silence. They searched upstairs and the backyard. Nothing. Not even a sign of a struggle.

"Where would he take her?"

"I don't think he'd go to his house. Too close to Mom." The image of the charred remains of the Johnson house rose in his mind. "The only other place I can think of is her house."

"We're here, Duncan, and there's not a sign of her anywhere."

"He took her to the old Johnson house. I'm sure of it."

As they sped down the road, he called the station house and sent a car to his uncle's place then asked for backup from the Rangers to be sent to the old Johnson land.

His head pounded and a chill went through him at the thought of not making it there in time to save her.

\* \* \* \*

Thea stirred when the car came to a stop. She'd never really fallen asleep but drifted as Chris had driven her home. She slowly opened her eyes as he stepped out of the car. She blinked when she saw her surroundings.

She'd avoided the remains of her parents' house. To this moment, she hadn't realized the extent of the damage. The house she'd grown up in was nothing but charred wood and twisted metal. It had been a two-story ranch house, much like the one she was renting right now. The only room left halfway intact was the living room. The ceiling was gone but the four walls were still standing although they'd been weathered by years left open in the elements.

Uncertain what Chris had in mind by stopping here, she followed him out of the car and caught up with him as he walked through the remains of the front porch.

"I remember when your parents started dating," he said, not turning around. He shoved his hands into the pockets of his pants. "Margie was one of the most beautiful girls I'd ever seen."

A gust of wind blew against her back and she shivered. She crossed her arms and rubbed her arms wishing she'd brought her coat.

"Only in school two days and your dad asked her out. Snapped her up just like that." A tinge of anger laced his voice. "None of us ever had a chance at her, you know."

"Mom always said it was love at first sight."

He spun around, the stream of lights from the headlights illuminated his anguished face. "But why? Why him and not me?"

\* \* \* \*



Every minute it took to get to the Johnson house erased ten years from Duncan's life. He turned down the old farm road that led to their property.

"You don't think he'd do anything, do you?" Rusty asked. When Duncan didn't reply, he continued, "Of course he would. If you're right, he killed her parents."

Bile rose in his throat but he swallowed it. "And he killed all those women. All these years..."

He wouldn't think about it. He couldn't if he planned on keeping his cool. Saving Thea. That was all that mattered to him.

\* \* \* \*

A chill of fear raced through Thea. He took a step closer and she backed away. She had to keep her wits.

"Why, Thea? I loved her. I worshipped her. I would have made her happy."

"She was happy."

Anger mottled his face. His hands bunched into fists but he didn't step closer.

"Happy? You call sitting in this house, this farmhouse with its bad plumbing and driving an old car being happy? There were months they barely had enough money to pay the bills!"

The fear she'd tried to conceal must have shown on her face because he took a breath and then released a sigh. It was the same sound as the one in the phone calls. She was still trying to wrap her mind around the fact Chris, a man her father considered a brother, was a killer. He'd been her father's best man and Jed's godfather.

"Everything came so easily to your father. I had money but your father, he had luck. Dirt poor and uneducated. What did she see in him? Why was he the one she turned to?"

Anger mixed with fear, knotting her stomach. She swallowed past it. Losing her anger now might really set him off. Even in the shadows cast by the car lights, she recognized the glazed look in his eyes. It was the look of a person with nothing to lose.

"I waited. I waited for years. Oh, I let her know how much I loved her, but never in person. Love notes." A chilling smile curved his lips. "For years I planned. I knew no one, not that jack-ass Dailey, not anyone in town, would suspect a Perry. Especially one who had been best friends with the victim." He closed his eyes, apparently lost in his sick fantasy. "I plotted and planned and waited. Then, when everything was in place, I struck." He sighed again. Goosebumps exploded down her arms at the breathy sound.

With him off in his world of memories, she knew this might be the only time she could escape. Without a second thought, she spun around and took off running. Her survival depended on getting away from him, so she'd take her chances running through the pasture. It was the only chance she might have to survive.

\* \* \* \*

Duncan pulled in behind his uncle's sedan. The headlights were still on, the passenger and driver's side doors ajar. There was no sign of them anywhere.

He jumped out of his truck trying to decide where to head first when an SUV pulled up behind him. Rusty waved to it and Duncan assumed it was the Rangers.

Fear simmered with betrayal and the only thing he could think of was finding her. He turned to start searching and Rusty stopped him with a hand on his shoulder.

"Hold up, Duncan. Let me decide what to do here."

"Screw you."

He tried to break free but Rusty grabbed his arm in a death grip.

"Duncan, you have got to listen to me. You're emotionally involved, you know her. If you take charge, it'll be a mess."

"You know her, too."

"But I don't love her."

Duncan didn't move, didn't say a word but the truth hit him like a load of bricks. There was no way he could save her, keep her safe, if he ran out there half cocked.

"Okay, but I have final say."

\* \* \* \*

"Thea! I can explain. If you would only listen." His footsteps sounded in the brush behind her. Calling on the adrenaline pumping through her veins, she ran faster. "Your mother made the mistake of not listening to me. Said she never saw me as anything but a friend. A friend!" He was closing in on her, and she quashed the terror.

"She ruined it. Ruined everything. I showed up that night hoping. Hoping your mother had finally come to her senses. But she disagreed. Then she refused to discuss it. I had no choice."

Memories of that night, of Chris' voice, of her mother's shouting pleas, flashed through her mind before she could stop them. Try as she might, there was no halting the anguish in her mother's voice. Her last act was to save her daughter. She lied to save Thea and she wouldn't let her mother down now.

"Then you came home for your grandfather's funeral. You took my breath away. I knew that you, you could save me. You could be the one to take her place. But you had that jackass you were married to, so I stayed away."

She continued running. Fear pumping through her, trying to ignore the pain of his deception lancing through her. She no longer heard his footsteps and he'd stopped yelling at her. Thea hoped she was gaining some distance from him. Ahead, she saw a light. It looked like one of the few streetlights on the deserted farm road. Just a few more steps and she may be able to get her bearings and head for help.

Just as she stepped onto the road, the fine hairs on the nape of her neck bristled. She knew before she turned around that Chris had caught up with her.

“Thea. Did you really think you could get away from me?”

She slowly turned to face him. His hair was a mess and anger darkened his usually cheerful eyes.

The thing that caught her attention, though, was the gun he had pointed at her chest.

## **Chapter 19**

Thea had known Chris was the killer. But for some reason, the thought he would pull a gun on her was unbelievable. The kind, loving man she'd known her whole life never existed. This man twisted love into a depraved form of worship. She took a breath trying to calm the nerves dancing along her spine.

"You didn't think you could get away, did you?" he asked. He stared at her, his eyes still glassy with his madness. "Your mother didn't understand. Why do they never understand?"

His hand holding the gun shook. Thea knew calming him down would be the only way to survive.

"Chris, you have to understand. You'd just told me you killed my parents."

"I didn't kill your parents. I released them from their existence. They were unhappy, and I saved them." The absurdity of the statement had her fighting a hysterical giggle that bubbled up in her throat.

"Right." She concentrated on hiding her anger, her outright disgust with him. Injecting what she hoped was the right amount of understanding in her voice, she said, "They didn't understand."

"Your father was so surprised." Her composure almost slipped at the sound of pride in his voice. "He just kept asking why."

"Well, maybe he was just too simple-minded."

His eyes searched hers as if trying to determine whether or not she was lying. She attempted to look as innocent as possible. If she could gain his trust, she had a better chance.

"Yes, yes! He just couldn't understand why I was releasing him." His grip on the gun loosened. "Of course, it is going to pain me to have to kill Duncan."

\* \* \* \*

Duncan headed off in the direction he was sent by Rusty. He'd argued with Rusty who said he should stay behind. Truth was, he needed to be the one to find Thea and Chris. He could reason with Chris. At least, he hoped so.

He kept searching his memory for a clue, something that should have jumped out at him about his uncle. How could a man he loved, he knew all his life, be a killer?

As a cop, he knew the stories. The quiet ones were the ones who could move through the crowd, killing people, and getting away with it for months, sometimes years. But never would he think Chris could cold-bloodedly kill his best friend. Then...all these years. All those innocent women.

He pulled his mind away from those thoughts. Recriminations for missing the signs could come later. Right now the most important thing was finding Thea.

He caught the murmur of voices and headed in that direction. It was a man and a woman. He inched closer and within seconds, he recognized Thea's voice.

\* \* \* \*

"Duncan?" Thea asked, her voice strained from panic.

"Well, of course. He touched you. He must die."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Thea, don't treat me like an idiot. Any man who looks at a woman the way my nephew did tonight has made love to her. No." He sighed, looking older all a sudden. "I regret it, but he must die. Then, maybe, maybe we will have a chance."

"A chance at what?"

"For love, silly." His playful tone almost made her choke on the bile in her throat. The man was clinically insane. She had to get away from him.

"But, Chris, you love Duncan."

"Well, yes, I guess I do. But nothing like my love for you. Or for Margie. Until she ruined it. No, Duncan will have to die."

"Well, why don't you take care of me?"

Both of them jumped at the sound of his voice. Duncan still couldn't believe this man held a gun on his woman. They both turned to look at him, Thea's eyes first warmed with relief then chilled to panic at the sight of him. Chris shook his head in regret.

"Why couldn't you just leave her alone, Duncan? You've slept with every tramp in town, their stink is all over you. But you had to touch her."

"Chris, be reasonable—" Thea pleaded but Chris wouldn't listen.

"Reasonable? Reasonable? For the second time someone I trusted stole the woman I love, corrupted her. Slept with her before marriage. And *you* want *me* to be reasonable? I planned, I waited, hell I even got rid of that bastard ex-husband of yours. And you want me to be reasonable? You are supposed to love me. Like *I* love you. We will be happy together. Happy like you could never be with Duncan."

Chris' voice had risen with each statement. He was completely hysterical and Duncan was worried that in his madness, he'd lose control and shoot Thea. His mind jumped from idea to idea. He needed a plan, something that would stop Chris. Thea took care of it for him.

"But I don't love you, Chris. Not like that." Her voice was low and calm. Never did she break eye contact with his uncle. "I love Duncan. I probably always have."

She reached out to Chris with her hand but before he could stop her, Chris backed away. Horror etched his features as he stu-

died her as if she were grotesque. Duncan readied himself to pounce if Chris tried anything but he didn't want to move unless necessary. Chris still had the gun pointed at Thea and if he approached his uncle, he might kill her.

"No, no, *no!*" His voice raised with each no. Complete madness glazed his eyes and he continued to back away from Thea. "No, I will not allow this to happen again."

He stopped and looked at Duncan. The pain in his eyes tore at Duncan's heart. This man truly was mad.

"No, I can't stand by and let this happen."

Chris aimed the gun at Duncan and Thea's heart almost stopped beating. For several seconds, not even the sound of their breathing could be heard as all three of them seemed to be holding their breath.

"Chris, you can't kill Duncan. You know you love him."

"Not as much as I love you." He never took his eyes or gun off of Duncan.

"But, if you kill him, you could never have me. I would never be yours. I'm Duncan's."

He glanced at her, pain contorting his face as if he finally understood what she'd been telling him. His hand dropped and his shoulders slumped. He turned away from them and Thea looked at Duncan. Without hesitation, she hurried to him. The moment she was in his arms, he squeezed her tight, thanking God nothing had happened to her.

"Everything will be okay," Duncan promised.

He never took his eyes off his uncle. Chris stood motionless in the country dirt road, seemingly lost. He still held his gun, but it dangled from his fingertips. Sounds of the other men approaching sent relief flowing through him. He didn't want to be the one to arrest his uncle.



Rusty was the first to reach him, but as he approached, Chris spun around. Duncan shoved Thea to the ground and fell on top of her as the shot rang out.

Chris fell to the ground, the gun he used to kill himself dropped beside his lifeless form.

\* \* \* \*

Thea sat on the tailgate of Duncan's truck, someone's jacket wrapped around her. The county paramedics declared she was slightly shocky and since that moment, Duncan told her to sit and rest. He and Rusty seemed to be handling the details as both their departments had investigations that would be probably linked to Chris.

From the moment everyone converged on the scene, Duncan had been distant. She shivered anew at the cold expression in his eyes when he saw his uncle kill himself.

Pain still stabbed her heart. Chris had been such a good man, or so she thought. And with his retelling of what he did, the memories were slowly creeping into her consciousness.

When he'd arrived that night, she didn't know it had been him. At least, she didn't think she did. Maybe she'd pushed it back into her subconscious so she didn't have to deal with it. She knew it would be years before she recovered from seeing Chris point that gun at Duncan.

She shivered.

"Thea."

Her brother strode forward, worry creasing his brow. She hadn't even known they'd called Jed. Before he reached her, she started to tremble.

Jed pulled her into his arms and held her tight against his chest.

"Oh, Thea. Honey. I'm here to take you home. Gwen's sick with worry."

"I was gonna go home," she said between sobs.

"That's why Duncan called me. You can't stay by yourself."

"But I thought Duncan was coming home with me."

"No, Thea, I'm staying here. I have too much to do." His voice was almost toneless.

She glanced at Duncan. His face was void of emotion. She'd known he shut himself down, he had to. Chris had been a surrogate father to both the Perry boys, someone he had always looked up to. He had a job to do, that she understood. But even knowing that didn't stop the pain from slicing open another wound.

She shook her head but didn't say another word. Jed slung his arm around her shoulders, and walked her to his truck. Tomorrow, she'd talk to Duncan and sort everything out.

\* \* \* \*

"You're screwing up something good there, buddy," Rusty said from behind Duncan.

"Mind your own business, Rusty." He didn't turn around. He continued to watch Jed's taillights until they disappeared around the curve. Nothing hurt like the pain in Thea's eyes but there hadn't been a damn thing he could do about it. He'd wanted to pull her into his arms, kiss away the pain. He wanted to drag her home and make love to her.

He had an investigation to complete. He had to stay focused.

He turned around and Rusty stood, his arms crossed, and an angry expression on his face.

"I can't believe you called her brother. Man, she's the best thing to happen to you. You know we don't need you here."

"I said to mind your own business." Anger and pain were battling in him and anger was coming out ahead. He wasn't sure he wouldn't take a swing at the next person who pissed him off.

"What, don't like the criticism?" Sarcasm dripped from his voice. "You really are a bastard if you can stand there and tell me that you didn't see how you hurt her."

Duncan spun away afraid he'd knock Rusty senseless. Damn fool didn't learn though because he followed him.

"Duncan, I don't need you here. Go to Gwen's. Take her home."

"I can't."

"Everything is wrapped up here."

He sighed. "No. I can't. I have to tell Mom."

Duncan placed his hands on the hood of his truck. He still had no idea what to say to his mother and Chase. The pain of knowing what Chris did all these years while practically living under their roof. He shook his head. It was going to be hard to tell them.

"Oh." Rusty walked closer and leaned against his truck. "But, Duncan, I think you are going to screw this up and you are going to regret it. Thea strikes me as the type who will only be so patient with a man."

He closed his eyes knowing that was true. But there was no way he could deal with that, or just what he did wrong. His mother...his whole family, the news he had to tell them would hurt and shame them. Hell, he just hoped his mother could bear it. She'd been through a lot the last few years, and the worst was yet to come.

But the thing he hated most was that he had put Thea at risk. If he had taken his head out of his ass and paid attention, he would have noticed. But instead, he'd been screwing around with Thea, ignoring the clues, not diving deep enough.

"I should've known."

Rusty slapped him on the back. "Son, there is no way you could've known. Hell, he'd fooled the whole town. I would've never guessed and I've known him my entire life."

Duncan opened his eyes and looked at his friend. "But you didn't live with him. And you didn't put a woman's life in danger thanks to your stupidity."

"Duncan..."

But he said nothing as he rounded the hood of his truck and slipped inside. He had to tell his mother that her brother-in-law had been a killer. And then he had to learn to live with himself.

\* \* \* \*

After a lot of tears and hugs, Jed wanted answers. But thankfully, Gwen was there to step between the two of them and convince Jed that Thea needed a break.

She stepped in the shower, hoping to wash away some of the grime and a lot of the memories of the night. Alone for the first time in hours, the terror she'd held at bay crept up on her. The idea that she had almost lost Duncan, that she had been the reason for so much pain crashed down on her. Before she could stop it, grief racked her body and sobs tore from her throat. She cried for the loss of her parents, for Chris' family and even for Chris. Somewhere inside him had been a good man before a mad obsession had twisted him.

The stark memory of the night her mother was killed would not leave her. She had lost so much that night. A mother, a normal life, her piece of mind. So much pain, so much loss...all those women. She sank down onto the floor of the tub as the water slashed over her, hugging her knees to her chest. Eventually, she found she hadn't the strength left to cry. She stepped out of the shower and dried herself off. Within minutes, she collapsed in bed and fell into a dreamless sleep.

She awoke late the next morning, the physical effects of stress still pounding in her head.

After brushing her teeth, she headed downstairs. The scent of fresh-brewed coffee filled her senses. She reached the kitchen and found Jed and Gwen deep in conversation. Their heads were bent close to each other's. Gwen's hand rested on the tabletop, Jed's was on top of it. She must have made a sound because the two of them pulled apart as if they were guilty of something. Frowning, she grabbed a mug and poured herself a cup of coffee. When she

turned back around, they were studying her with matching concerned expressions. Silently, she groaned. Knowing they would want a full report, she poured herself a cup of coffee and sat down.

Thea told them everything, from the night of her mother's murder to the letters she started receiving, to the investigation she and Duncan had conducted. With each tidbit of information, Jed's anger heightened. Twenty minutes later, Jed sat back in his chair, a nasty frown on his face.

"Let me get this straight. Duncan's been staying with you? You told him and you didn't tell me?"

"Good Lord, Jed. Get a grip," said Gwen. "What the hell is wrong with you? Out of all that, you want to talk about Duncan?"

"I could have protected her better than Duncan."

Gwen rolled her eyes. "No, you couldn't. You're way too emotional, as usual."

He looked like he wanted to argue with Gwen, but he shook his head. "Okay. Okay, a little stupid of me, but she's my baby sister." He turned to face Thea. "Why didn't you tell me, and just what the hell do you and Duncan think you're doing?"

She studied her brother and realized this was more than just brotherly worry. He was genuinely hurt that she didn't go to him. "I love you, but I know you. You never forgave yourself for being gone that night." The flush that mottled his face told her she was right. "I didn't want you going off half-cocked. You're a good cop, but I am not sure you could have been in this situation. Now, I want to get dressed and head home."

A look passed between Jed and Gwen that Thea couldn't interrupt. Then they both looked at her.

"Thea, I think you should stay here," Gwen reasoned.

"No. I want to go home. There's no reason to stay here. Chris is caught."

"The kids might come around," Jed said.

Thea shook her head. "No. They'll go to Mom and Dad's. Besides, all my clothes are over there."

She stood and headed to her room before they could come up with another argument.

Ten minutes later, they were heading down the road to her house. Jed pulled into her driveway and Thea had to hide her disappointment. Duncan wasn't there. Granted, she knew he had a lot more important things to deal with, and his family had been dealt a blow so painful, it could shatter them. The image of his blank expression when Jed had taken her away rose up. She pushed it aside, needing to concentrate on the here and now.

Slipping out of the truck, she walked up to the porch. Jed silently followed her up the stairs to the front porch. She unlocked the door and turned to tell him to leave but the serious look on his face stopped her. She headed through the living room to the kitchen, his reluctant footsteps following her.

"Uh, Thea." The worry in Jed's voice caused worry to creep up her spine. "Duncan dropped off the key this morning while you were still sleeping."

Keeping her back to Jed, she closed her eyes to the pain almost blinding her. In the time since her separation, since finding out her husband was nothing but a cheating bastard, she'd thought she knew pain. But nothing compared to this. She refused to break down in front of Jed. Last night seemed to have aged him ten years and he didn't need his sister sobbing all over him about a guy.

She plastered a smile on her face, hoping it wouldn't look too fake.

"Well, at least I don't have to go hunt him down for it."

"Thea, I didn't know when he stopped by he'd been staying out here."

"What did you think the key was for?"

"Well, I thought maybe he needed it for...oh hell, I don't know."

She leaned forward and kissed his cheek. "Don't worry. I didn't expect anything. Jed, I really didn't. I just divorced, for goodness sakes. And although you like to pretend I'm twelve, I'm a woman grown. I wanted some fun. That's all."

Yeah and she had some oceanfront property in west Texas. But she couldn't let Jed know how much those words hurt. "You need a place to stay?"

He looked like he didn't want to talk about that, but he apparently he thought better of it. "Yeah."

"Then you can have the spare room. Also, I am going to need your help looking at some real estate this week."

"Real estate?"

She nodded. "I am contemplating opening a café."

He cocked his head to the side and smiled. "You aren't thinking, you've decided."

She laughed. "Yeah, I have." Thea's mind drifted back to the night before, to the moment that Chris had shown up and her smile faded. "I am going to need to talk to someone, and unfortunately, it will probably have to be Duncan."

Jed frowned. "He's on administrative leave."

With a sigh, she nodded. "Who is in charge?"

"Deputy Fredrickson."

"Call, tell him I want to lodge a complaint against one of their officers."

"Uh, Thea...you can't do this to Duncan."

She made a face. "Good Lord, Jed. I'm talking about Richard. He threatened me last night."

His expression changed from worry to outrage in the blink of an eye. "What the hell are you talking about?"

She explained about Richard, his connection to the case, what might have happened at Texas Tech. Each tidbit of information had him cussing.

"I want to lodge a complaint. A bastard like that should not have a badge."

Jed nodded and took out his cell phone. "You might have to go in and make a statement."

She straightened her shoulders. "I can do it."

He smiled and then pulled her into a giant bear hug. "I love you, Althea."

Tears prickled the back of her eyes and she blinked to fight them off. When she pulled out of the hug, she said, "I love you too."

Pausing in the act of dialing, he said, "Maybe I should go in, talk to Fredrickson first. I want this kept low until we get everything in order."

She thought it odd, but she shrugged it off. "Okay. I'm going to do some cooking."

He leaned in, gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. "If I see Duncan, do you have a message you want me to give him?"

At the mention of Duncan's name, a shaft of pain sliced through her. She almost said no, but the ache was too raw to ignore. She knew he wasn't thinking right now, that his mind was tangled, messed up from everything that happened, but it didn't matter. She wanted him to hurt as much as she was hurting. And if she pissed him off, he might stop being such a jackass.

"Yeah. Tell him that it was no big deal and not to worry. Now that Chris is gone, I don't need him."

Jed's face went blank, then he grinned. "You do know him."

She offered him an innocent smile but said nothing.

Moments later she watched Jed back out of drive and mentally rubbed her hands together. Thea regretted she couldn't be there to see the expression on Duncan's face when Jed told him her message. She knew it would irritate him. And, sooner or later, he'd come looking for her.



*Her Mother's Killer*

She didn't care. She was ready to fight him for all he had. Including his heart.

## **Chapter 20**

Wednesday morning, Duncan sat in his office, filling out forms on the investigation. After telling his mother and Chase, he'd went home and collapsed in bed for most of the day. When he awoke at four in the afternoon, the first thing he thought of was calling Thea.

But reality had crashed around him. Thea could never really be his. He knew it as well as he knew his last name. *How could a woman actually love a man who was blood related to her parents' killer?* Besides, he knew she wouldn't be sticking around Crocker for much longer. She'd probably move to Dallas or somewhere big like that. Someone with her talent couldn't make money in a town the size of Crocker.

The weight of failure once again sat on his shoulders, in his very soul. He had failed Jessica, all those years ago, and he had almost done it again. The door to the station house opened and Jed walked in. Another punch to the gut. Regretfully, Duncan stood, knowing he was probably about to lose his best friend. Not only had he bedded the man's sister, but his uncle had killed Jed's parents.

Jed smiled, and waved to a couple of the deputies and Rangers still lingering, finishing up the investigation. The closer he got, the more visible the stress was on his face. His smiles weren't real, the circles beneath his eyes darker than Duncan had ever seen them. He looked used and worn out and Duncan knew just how he felt.

Jed stepped into his office and shut the door behind him.

"You here to kick my ass?" Duncan asked.

A look of surprise flashed in his eyes and a rusty chuckle escaped. "No. I wanted to... well hell, I wanted to thank you."

"Thank me?"

"Yeah. If it weren't for you, Thea would have been running around the county, putting herself in danger. Hell, who knows what would have happened if you hadn't moved in and taken over? You know how she is."

He nodded, still waiting for the accusations. When Jed didn't say anything else, Duncan decided to bring up the subject.

"I failed again."

Jed studied him for a moment, then said, "What happened with Jessica, hell, you know what she was like. That whole situation was a clusterfuck from the beginning until the end. You made a mistake, but she was a cop too, and she made them. She put you in danger."

Duncan shook his head in denial but Jed plowed ahead. "Man, you have one helluva God complex."

"What the hell do you mean?"

"You made a mistake, a major fuckup, but you *are* only human."

"I almost cost Thea her life."

"I told you, she was intent on putting herself in danger. You made sure she was safe. And thank God Richard is suspended. That bastard should never have let her go."

Another failure, he should have seen Richard's problems.

"Oh, for the love of God. I can read your mind right now. I knew Richard and would never have thought he would try to assault my sister. And, if you suspected, you couldn't do anything until you investigated. You would have been slapped with a lawsuit." Jed rubbed his hand over his face. "Lord, I'm tired."

"I thought you might want to 'discuss' my involvement with your sister."

Jed's eyes widened a bit and then he smiled. "Well, she did tell me to thank you for everything you did."

"She did?"

"Yeah, in fact she'd wanted me to tell you to tell Chase and Rusty she needed to have them out at the house for dinner to thank them. Especially Chase. She feels guilty about putting him at risk."

"She feels guilty? What about me?"

"Oh, that's your job. I mean, it's expected of you."

Rage and jealousy pumped through him. He had no right to feel them, but he did.

"And Thea explained everything to me."

He settled his hands on his hips. Jed was grinning at him as if he was privy to some joke.

"And just what did she explain to you?"

"Well, that you both understood there were no strings attached. That you were both just fooling around."

"And that doesn't bother you? As her big brother, you should be more protective." Sarcasm dripped from his voice. He couldn't believe he had to stand there and explain just what Jed should be doing. Hell, if she'd been his sister, and the situation had been reversed, he'd be kicking the crap out of Jed.

"Well, as she explained yesterday, she's almost thirty, not thirteen. She's a woman who has to make her own decisions. She said it was no big deal."

Oh, anger boiled his blood. "No big deal?"

"Yeah, said it wasn't like you two were in love, or anything."

He grabbed his coat and headed to the door. Without a word to Jed, his deputies, or Gina, he rushed to his truck. He'd just see about no big deal. That woman had a thing or two to learn about him, and he was ready to teach her.

\* \* \* \*

Thea watched Chase gobble down the last of the pasta she'd made him. He stopped by, unannounced, giving her the little hungry puppy look so she'd invited him to lunch.

"I guess I should wonder where you put all of that food," she said then let out with a laugh.

"Well, Perry men have always had high metabolisms. We're stallions."

"Yeah, I can tell you have a way with Fiona."

He scowled and her heart caught. It was the same little-boy-denied-a-treat look that Duncan had. "I have no idea what that woman is thinking most of the time."

"And, for you, that's a first?"

"Yeah. I mean she puts off all these vibes, but..." He stopped as if afraid he'd said too much. He cleared his throat. "Mom wanted to come by but she didn't know what to say."

"You tell her that she can stop by anytime. I want you and your mother to know that I don't blame either one of you. How could you have known?"

He shifted in his seat and cleared his throat. Finally he nodded and she figured that was all she was going to get out of him.

"I was amazed Duncan moved back to his place." She just stared at him, and didn't say a word. He chuckled. "Going to keep quiet, huh?"

She widened her eyes trying to look as innocent as possible. "Why, Chase, I have no idea what you are talking about. It was nothing more than a fling. I told Jed to tell him not to worry."

He laughed out loud. "You're about to reel him in, aren't you? He's probably going to fall for it, knowing my brother."

"You shouldn't be laughing. I don't think it's going to be much longer before you have your own date with destiny. Or maybe you've already had it."

He crossed his arms and raised an eyebrow. "What did that mean?"

"Oh, nothing. Just that I have a feeling about you and a certain secretary."

He was back to scowling again. "Don't call her that. She throws a fit if you don't call her an administrative assistant."

"Well, I still think—"

The sound of a car pulling into her drive cut her off and she stood to look out the window. When she saw Duncan and his angry expression, she was sure Jed had stopped by to talk to him.

"What?" Chase asked. He joined her at the window and whistled. "Man, he looks pissed."

He jumped out of his truck and walked determinedly to her porch. He threw his brother's car a dirty look before pounding up the steps. Without knocking, he opened the door and stepped into her living room.

Before she could say a word, Chase eased his arm around her shoulders. She looked at him as if he were insane but he just winked.

"Hey, Duncan. How's everything going?"

She studied him, her gaze eating him up. It'd been less than two days, but it felt like a lifetime since she'd last seen him, held him. He was dressed in his uniform, the tan cotton material emphasized his physique. *God, he's gorgeous.* Even now, when she was pissed at him, she felt the sexual tug, the yearning.

His color was heightened because of his anger, but she could tell the past couple of days had been hard on him. He just looked tired, from the bags beneath his eyes, to his posture.

"What the hell are you doing here, Chase?"

"Mom asked me to stop by and then Thea begged me to eat lunch with her." He squeezed her shoulders when he told that lie. His smile broadened.

"Leave."

"Excuse me?" Chase asked.

"Get out of this freaking house before I beat the shit out of you."

Chase laughed. "Okay." He turned to Thea. "Now, if he gives you any problems, you let me know."

When they were alone, she shifted nervously from foot to foot. Now that she had him here, she didn't know what to do, what to say.

"You want to explain to me what that was all about?" His voice was deadly soft.

She crossed her arms, trying to hide her shaking hands. "No."

"No?"

"Yeah, no."

"What do you mean no?"

"I think it's a pretty simple word, Duncan. Even a dumbass, small-town cop can figure it out."

A vein throbbed at his temple and a stain of red spread from his neck to his face. She had to fight the smile threatening to emerge.

"Really. So less than a week after you're attacked, you're entertaining men in your home?"

"Entertaining men?" She chuckled. "You make it sound like I opened a brothel."

"Stop kidding around. Tell me now what the hell my brother was doing here."

"Exactly what he said. Having lunch."

She gathered the dishes and took them to the sink. Silently, he seethed behind her. She knew she confused him and she was glad, the butthead. He actually thought he could walk away from her.

"What did you mean by that little message you sent through your brother?"

Slowly, she turned and leaned against the counter. "You've seen him? I haven't talked to him for over twenty-four hours. Said

he had left something at Gwen's and then called and said he was busy."

His eyes narrowed. "What did you mean by that message?"

"Just what I said."

"Do you care to explain yourself to me? I figured you'd be heading out of town as soon as you could." Bitterness dripped from his words.

Surprise held her tongue still. Surely he knew she was staying here. She searched her memory and realized she hadn't told him her plans. Of course, if the idiot thought she'd leave him after what they shared, he deserved to worry.

"Well, gonna be kind of hard to run my business from somewhere else."

"Business?"

"Yeah. I'm thinking about opening a shop, maybe just catering...haven't decided yet."

"You can't stay here."

"Excuse me?"

"I cannot live my life in this town if you are here. I can't stand by while you date other men." The anguish in his voice tore at her. It was the first emotion, outside of anger, he had shown her since Chris' suicide. It hurt, ached, to see him in pain, but it gave her hope.

"And why would that bother you?" She had to know; he had to say it.

He abruptly turned and gave her his back. He placed both of his hands on his hips and sighed.

"You have to ask?" His voice was so quiet she almost didn't hear the question.

"I have to hear it, Duncan."

He spun around, pain deepened the lines around his mouth. The big hulk of a man looked so vulnerable. She wanted to reach



out and pull him into her arms. But if she did, they'd never get past this. They'd never be able to move on.

"I love you. You know I do. I just can't..."

"You can't what?"

"How can you live your life with a man who is related to the one who killed your parents? Aren't you afraid of what is in our blood?"

Understanding and love filled her heart. She should have known the man thought he was doing this for her own good.

"Duncan. That's just silly. There is no link and no one in your family has had this tendency before, have they?" A tiny bit of hope flared in his eyes as he shook his head. "Maybe this was a result of something that happened to him. Or maybe it really was love at one time, but his obsession twisted it."

"But..." He swallowed visibly. "You would—"

"Of course I would. I plan on staying in Crocker for the rest of my life. Something had always been missing in my life since I left here. I love to cook. But I am not a big city kind of girl. I hate the traffic and I like to know all the gossip." She smiled as tears gathered in her eyes. "I want to stay here with you."

He didn't say a word. Just stepped forward and grabbed her. He pulled her into his arms, his warmth seeping through her clothes. His scent surrounded her, all masculine, wind-blown man. Joy filled her heart, warming her from within. Her whole body tingled with anticipation.

"And you have to marry me, Duncan. My brother will throw a fit if we just live together."

He eased back, a cocky grin on his face that sent a rush of heat through her body. God, she loved this man.

"Well, of course." He lifted her into his arms. "And, then I'll have a talk with Chase about showing up here uninvited. I'm really getting sick of that."

As he laid her on the bed, love and joy filled his heart knowing she was truly his. "You can't go back on your word now, Thea."

"No." She ignored the tears of happiness that spilled out of her eyes and down her cheeks. "No way. You're mine."

"I like the idea of being owned, especially by you."

She laughed, then pulled him onto the bed. It was the last coherent thought either of them had for hours.

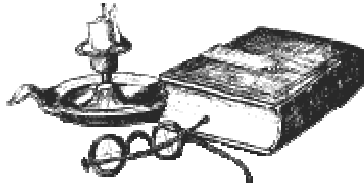
## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born to an Air Force family in an Army hospital, Melissa has always been a little bit screwy. She was further warped by her years of watching Monty Python and her strange family. Her love of romance novels developed after accidentally picking up a Linda Howard book. After being hooked, she read close to three hundred novels in one year, deciding that romance was her true calling instead of the literary short stories and hard core suspenses she had been writing. Since her first release in 2004, Melissa has had over twenty short stories, novellas and novels published, including her first contracted work, *The Hired Hand*, which was a 2005 Eppie Finalist in Contemporary Romance.

Since she is a military brat, she vowed never to marry military. Alas, Fate has her way with mortals. Her husband is an Air Force major, and together they have their own two military brats, two girls, and their adoptive dog daughter. They live wherever the military sticks them which, for the first time, does not involve bugs big enough to eat her young. In her spare time, she reads, complains about bugs, watches her DVD collections of *Scrubs* and *Arrested Development*, and tries to convince her family that she truly is a delicate genius. She has yet to achieve her last goal.

She can be reached at her site: [MelissaSchroeder.net](http://MelissaSchroeder.net). She also spends much time with her other Wicked Writers at [groups.yahoo.com/group/wicked\\_writers](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/wicked_writers).

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