

PAULA GRAVES

CODE NAME:

WILLOW

She never thought she'd see him again. Now he's the only man who can save her.

Paula Graves

**Code Name:
WILLOW**

*For Jenn, who suffered through every bit of this story with me. She
deserves sainthood for her patience.*

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CODE NAME: WILLOW
CAST OF CHARACTERS

Maggie Stone - She's spent years trying to escape her former life as Marguerite Cole-- Code Name: WILLOW--the troubled daughter of the President. But when one of the at-risk youths she counsels needs protection, she looks to her past for help.

Jack Bennett - The retired Secret Service agent never expected to see naughty Marguerite again. But his former charge needs his help, and he's never been able to say no to WILLOW.

Remy Chauvin - The tough street kids swears he saw a cop commit murder. He and Maggie believe rogue cops are trying to kill him to shut him up. But is the boy telling the truth, or is he trying to cover up his own lies?

Mark Blevins - The New Orleans detective is a hero, loved by the people he works with and the folks on his beat. But does the golden boy have a dark side?

Laura Sandoval - Jack's former lover is an assistant U.S. Attorney out of New Orleans. Though Jack thinks she's their best hope of sorting out the truth, Maggie doesn't trust her. Does Laura have her own agenda where Blevins is concerned?

Travis Cooper - Looking for Maggie Stone and the young patient he believes has taken her hostage, the F.B.I. agent turns to Jack's former lover Laura for answers when he begins to suspect Jack is helping the fugitives.

James Cole III - Maggie's estranged father inserts himself into the search for his daughter. But is the former President motivated by love or a desire to return to the national spotlight?

Chapter 1

Bang bang bang!

Loud pounding from the security agency's main lobby sent adrenaline pulsing through Jack Bennett's nervous system. He grabbed his Glock and edged to his office door. Overkill, probably, but twenty years in the Secret Service had made suspicion second-nature. Anticipating danger kept people alive.

Switching off his office lights, he opened the door and peered into the darkened reception area. The front door was all glass--bulletproof, of course. No one outside could see in through the mirrored glass, but Jack had a great view of his late-night visitor.

Definitely female, her drenched gray T-shirt clinging in all the right places, from round breasts to narrow waist. Wet jeans encased her shapely legs, sucking the air from his lungs.

Coaxing his gaze upward, he noted tangled dark hair and wide-set eyes narrowed in an attempt to see through the mirrored glass. Jack looked her over with more professional eyes, checking for the shape of a weapon out of habit. Her hands were visible and empty. No obvious bulges under her clothes, unless you counted the ones that were God-given gifts.

And God was good.

He crossed to the door and jerked it open, catching the woman off guard. With a huff of surprise, she lifted her startled gaze to meet his. A dozen different expressions darted across her face in the span of a second before she flung herself at him, her arms roping around his waist. Off balance, he had to take a couple of staggering steps backward to steady himself.

"God, Jack, I never thought I'd be this glad to see you again!" Her breasts flattened against his ribcage, her thighs opening to accept the pressure of his left leg. Her drenched hair smelled like flowers.

His head swam as his blood rushed south.

She pulled away, her expression mortified. "God, how pathetic was that?"

He pulled her out of the rain slanting through the doorway. As he opened his mouth to speak, she preempted him, wiping her rain-streaked face.

"I heard you'd retired and gone back home, so I hoped--" She looked up at him, breathless, her expression tinged with embarrassment. "I stopped across the bay and found your ad in a phone directory." A half-smiled curved her lips. "'I've protected presidents--I can protect you.' Catchy."

She shivered as she spoke; whether from nerves or being drenched to the skin, he didn't know. He laid his hand on her shoulder, intending to ask who she was. But when she shuddered at his touch, as if her body were stuck in fight-or-flight mode, he lowered his voice to a gravelly half-whisper and said instead, "I'll get you a towel."

Swallowing hard, he went to the bathroom in his office, which was fully equipped with a shower and all the amenities. He grabbed a towel and returned to the front office, ready to find out just who his mystery woman was.

But the door stood open and she was nowhere to be seen.

* * * * *

Maggie opened the Corolla's passenger door and bent to look at the boy inside. "Come on, Remy, Jack's here."

Remy Chauvin met her gaze with dark, wary eyes. "You sure he's not gonna nark on us?"

Maggie quelled her doubts for the boy's sake. "Protecting people is his job."

Remy got out of the car, hunching his shoulders against the rain. Maggie put her arm around him and led him up the walk.

The office door whipped open and Jack appeared in the entry, a large gun gripped in one hand. Squinting against the sheeting rain, he stepped back to let them inside.

"I didn't want to leave Remy in the car by himself any longer," Maggie explained, huddling the boy through the door.

She watched Jack assessing Remy, wondering what he saw. She could guess; most people looked at the sullen teen and summed him up in one word: Trouble.

Jack was no different. She saw it in his narrowed eyes.

Remy returned Jack's gaze with raw animal wariness. Maggie broke the silence to deflect the mounting tension. "Jack, this is Remy Chauvin. Remy, this is Jack Bennett. We go way back. He's going to help us figure out this mess."

At her words, Jack's eyebrows twitched, his gaze slanting to meet hers. Heat rose on the back of Maggie's neck.

Maybe coming here was a bad idea.

Jack locked the door and handed her the towel. Ignoring her own disheveled state, Maggie tended to Remy, draping the dry towel over his shoulders to warm him. Thin and wiry, all muscle and bone, the boy had a hungry, feral look to his sharp features that all her work with him had yet to dispel.

But he was learning to trust her. She saw it in the way his eyes softened and his lips curved in a smile when he looked at her. She blinked back tears, determined to protect this boy at all costs. "It's okay, Remy," she crooned. "Jack's good at what he does. He'll know how to help us."

"That's what you said about those guys in New Orleans."

"Jack's different." Maggie looked up at Jack, torn between fear and hope. "Right?"

His ice-blue eyes searching her face, Jack nodded toward a nearby door. "Remy, there are more dry towels in the bathroom in my office. Get a couple more for you two."

The boy looked at Maggie as if asking permission. She nodded, smiling at him. "Go on."

Remy shot Jack a warning look. Jack returned the glare, clearly not willing to give Remy an inch. Remy looked away and slouched his way to Jack's office.

Jack waited until Remy was out of sight before turning to Maggie, his expression dark. Her stomach began to ache. "Remy's one of the kids I counsel," she explained. "I work at an inner city center for troubled kids." She smiled self-consciously. "Bet you never thought you'd hear me say that."

She'd been a different person when Jack knew her. Skinny, with spiky bleached blond hair and more makeup than a drag queen, dressed in whatever had been the trendiest, most daring thing a girl of twenty-one could wear ten years ago. She'd been in full hate-the-whole-world mode back then and not afraid to show it, especially to Jack.

She was lucky he hadn't barred the door tonight.

Jack closed the distance between them, his body heat surrounding her. A shudder of awareness rippled through her, throwing her mind into a tailspin. He'd touched her the first time they met. Right after Jimmy's death. Those days had been a blur, a nightmarish tilt-a-whirl of images. Thousands of sympathetic well-wishers surrounding her father, held at bay by his handlers. The press, eager for all the dirt on how her

brother had ended up dead of a massive heroin overdose in a seedy Georgetown dive. Her stepmother's pale hands, fluttering like a nervous butterfly as she tried to offer unwanted comfort.

And then, Jack's hand on her shoulder. Warm, big and strong. A squeeze that made her look up, way up into clear blue eyes full of gentle sympathy. Those eyes had made her cry for the first time since Jimmy's death.

And she'd hated him for it. At first, anyway.

Jack's voice pulled her out of the vivid memory. "Want to tell me what's going on, Marguerite?" he murmured.

She met his hard gaze, relief fluttering through her. "I was beginning to think you'd forgotten who I was."

"I did for a minute," he admitted. "Until you disappeared on me. That's a Marguerite Cole move if I've ever seen one."

She stepped away from him, bumping into the door. She flattened her back against the hard surface and kept her voice light. "Here I thought I was unforgettable."

He remained unsmiling. "Why are you here?"

Her stomach twisted with anxiety. She felt twenty-one and foolish all over again. "I know we didn't part as friends." Her hand rose to her throat, fingering the diamond ring that hung on a slim gold chain around her neck, worrying the stones beneath her damp t-shirt. "I just thought . . ."

A cool wariness settled over his features. "Willow--"

She looked away. "I hated that name."

"No, you hated me."

She looked at him again, her expression softening a little. "As I remember it, the feeling was mutual."

"Marguerite--"

"I go by Maggie Stone now. Lower profile."

He looked her over as if he didn't quite believe who she was. To be fair to him, she'd looked almost nothing like the girl she'd been when he knew her.

"You never called. You never wrote," he murmured.

Remy returned before she could respond, swaggering into the room with the extra towels. But Maggie could see the fear beneath the bravado. The poor kid had just been through a hellish day and things weren't looking up much.

She felt Jack's gaze on her and looked up, glimpsing a hint of surprise in his expression. Fair enough; the Marguerite Cole he'd known was definitely not the "pick up a stray and bring him home" type, unless you counted six-foot-two club studs too

wasted to get home on their own after a night of partying.

"So, Doc, you tell the big guy about the cop who popped that dude?" Remy asked.

Jack looked at Remy. "Excuse me?"

"Oh. Guess you ain't there yet." Remy folded his arms over his chest, looking pleased with himself.

Jack looked at Maggie. "What is he talking about?"

She frowned, wondering how to phrase their dilemma in the best light possible.

"Remy has a bit of a problem."

Jack quirked one eyebrow.

She took a deep breath and started at the beginning. "A few weeks ago, walking home from the youth center, he saw a New Orleans police detective execute a man. Remy told me, and I helped him report it to the authorities."

"But the cops, they all cover for their own, you know?" Remy's face twisted with disgust. "Dude busts my head, tells me I'm lyin' and if I don't cop to it, I'm gonna do juvy time. I say, 'Dude, I'm not lyin' man, I seen him.' But he pushed me into a fence and called me a delinquent."

Maggie could tell what Jack was thinking--real shock, the cops believing one of their own over the smart-mouthed juvenile delinquent. She ignored his skepticism and continued. "This detective, Mark Blevins, is the department's golden boy. Decorations out the wazoo, squeaky clean record, a real poster boy for the new, cleaned up New Orleans Police Department. We tried talking to the D.A. about it. He said he'd look into it, but he never got back to us."

"So you ran?" He looked at her as if she'd lost her mind.

"Well, no--" Maggie's lips pressed into a line. She took a moment, carefully choosing her words. "At least, not then. This afternoon, something happened--"

"Aw, Doc, just spit it out!" Remy said. "Some goons popped the Bakers this afternoon. They'd have got me too, except I heard 'em downstairs, got my rear in gear and got outta there."

"We think someone may have done something to Remy's foster family," Maggie translated.

Jack's eyebrows arched. "Killed them?"

She didn't answer aloud, for Remy's sake, but she gave a slight nod. There'd been no bodies in the house when Remy took her there an hour or so after he left, but something bad had happened there. She'd felt it in her bones.

"Why didn't you call the police?"

"Ain't you been listenin'?" Remy rolled his eyes. "Cop's are the bad guys. I go to

the cops, I kiss my butt goodbye."

"Didn't you even try the D.A. again?" Clearly, Remy's tough guy act was trampling all over Jack's nerves.

"There wasn't time. Remy was in danger." She lifted her chin and met his gaze directly. "I did what I had to."

"And what was that, exactly?" Jack asked.

Before Maggie could speak, Remy answered for her, his lips stretched in a gleeful grin. He looked at Maggie, his eyes glowing with admiration. "The doc--she kidnapped me."

At Remy's words, Jack's eyebrows met in a "V" over his nose. Maggie shot a glare at Remy, silently warning him to let her do the talking. Jack already remembered her as a flighty, bitchy little rich girl hell-bent on self-destruction. No need to reinforce that image.

"Kidnapped?" Jack repeated.

Maggie took a deep breath. "Technically, yes. I transported a minor across state lines without the permission of his legal guardian--"

Jack grimaced. "That would constitute kidnapping."

Damn it, Jack shouldn't still have the power to make her feel like an irresponsible wild child with one twitch of his eyebrows. She jutted her chin and forced herself to meet his troubled gaze. "We can sort out the legalities when Remy's safe and we know what we're going to do next."

Jack's frown deepened. "This is bad."

Remy slid between Maggie and Jack in an endearing show of bravado. "The doc did what she had to, man. She's a hero."

Jack's grim expression gave no indication of softening.

Remy turned to Maggie, his dark eyes gentle. He gave her the extra towel he'd gotten from the bathroom in the back office. "Here, Doc. Dry off, and we'll get outta here, okay? We don't need him. We're doin' fine by ourselves."

She took the towel and wrapped it around her, grateful for the added warmth. She squeezed Remy's arm. "Jack didn't say he won't take our case." She looked pointedly at Jack. "Did you?"

His mouth made a couple of false starts before he finally said, "Tell me more about what happened." He nodded toward a grouping of chairs across from the reception desk.

Maggie nudged Remy toward the chairs and settled across from Jack. Jack switched on the table lamp and a golden glow cocooned them, shutting out the dark and

dangerous world outside the office windows.

For a long moment, no one spoke as Jack studied Remy with the same watchful gaze with which he'd scrutinized everyone who came within ten feet of Maggie back in the old days. Maggie had hated that look ten years ago, hated having people watching her every move, twenty-four seven.

So why did that watchful gaze bring tears to her eyes and a hollow, needy feeling to her belly?

As bad as her relationship with Jack had been during his time on her Secret Service protective detail, Maggie had never for a moment doubted that he'd keep her safe. He'd proved himself more times than she cared to admit, including quite a few times when she'd wished him anywhere else.

Jack Bennett was good at his job. If he weren't, she'd never have brought Remy here looking for Jack's help. And if helping her old times' sake wasn't exactly an incentive, she was willing to pay him a generous fee for his help.

After all, everybody had a price.

Jack's gaze moved from Remy's face to Maggie's. "No matter how this turns out, there are probably going to be grave consequences for you, Maggie."

"I know."

"That's a first," he muttered, so low Maggie wasn't sure he'd meant her to hear him.

Her neck grew hot with belated shame. Ten years ago, consequences had been just a word. Her father had been in politics her whole life. Any scrape she'd gotten into had been fixed before she faced any real punishment. "I know I've crossed a few lines here."

Jack huffed at the understatement. "Besides kidnapping, you'd probably be charged with obstruction of justice and fleeing the scene of a crime."

Her stomach cramped with anxiety. "I know."

Jack squared his shoulders, his gaze leveled with hers. "The first order of business is to turn yourselves in to the authorities as soon as possible."

Remy shot from his chair. "Screw that!"

Maggie grabbed Remy's arm. "Let Jack finish." Surely he had some sort of plan. "We turn ourselves in and what, Jack?"

"And then hope they don't nail you for kidnapping."

Her heart dropped. "That's it?"

He met her look of dismay with a quirked eyebrow. "You think you can keep running forever? Not every cop is corrupt. You'll have to trust them at some point, and considering how many laws you've broken today, I'd say the sooner the better."

"I don't trust nobody but the doc." Remy scowled at Jack.

"You're in serious trouble, Remy." Jack pushed his fingers through his hair, lifting it into short, dark spikes, a gesture Maggie remembered well.

"Remy saw a police detective murder a man in cold blood, Jack. We're fairly sure New Orleans police officers are involved in the disappearance of Remy's foster parents."

"This isn't New Orleans. We can call the local police or even the Mobile FBI field office, though that may open a whole other can of worms. They get twitchy about kidnappings." Jack leaned toward her and laid his hand over hers where it curled over her knee. "You can't play fugitive, don't you see that?"

She closed her eyes, trying to still the sudden thunder of her pulse. God please, she thought. Please don't let me turn back into that foolish little girl who fell for her bodyguard.

His voice swept over her like a caress, hammering at the walls around her heart she was desperately trying to shore up. "If I help you break the law, it's big trouble for me, too."

She opened her eyes to look at him, her gut tightening.

"I have a lot to lose. My license. My gun permit." His dry, reasonable words drove away the warmth his touch had created. Barricades went up around her heart, easing her fears even as her body went cold with despair.

Jack was right. She knew he was. Her actions would have grave consequences for everyone involved, and it wasn't like Jack was some old friend she could depend on to help her out no matter what. She'd have to make it worth his while.

After all, he'd been paid to protect her before.

She straightened. "I'm not asking you to do this for free. I can get you money when it's over. You know that."

A dark look passed over his face. "I'm not putting you off here to jack up my fee."

She swallowed a rush of angry disappointment. "So you're really not going to help me."

He didn't speak, but she saw the answer in his eyes. Her heart dropped, weighted down by disillusionment she hadn't even realized she was capable of feeling anymore.

Why had she ever thought he could fix things for them? She should have known better; that kind of trust in other people went against everything she'd learned over the past ten years.

Everything Jack himself had taught her.

She had to think of Remy. Three weeks ago, she'd convinced the scared boy to tell

the police what he'd seen. Remy had wanted to keep his mouth shut and stay away from trouble. But Maggie had convinced him to tell the truth, to trust the authorities to do the right thing.

He'd been burned. So had she. By the cops she'd trusted to do right by Remy--and now by the man she given one last chance to help her.

Nobody was going to help them. She understood that now.

Remy glared at Jack, his expression a blend of fear and disappointment. Maggie pulled her hand from Jack's and touched Remy's thin forearm. He twitched, his dark eyes darting to meet hers. She tried to speak reassurance with her own gaze as she turned to Jack. "Okay, go call the police."

Remy jerked, but she dug her fingers into his arm.

Jack released a gusty sigh. "I'll be right back." He stood, reaching out to brush back a strand of hair hanging in Maggie's eyes. Her cheek tingled at the passing graze of his fingertips. She steeled herself against the sensation.

Make the call from your office, she willed.

She watched with relief as he disappeared through the door to his office. The second he was out of sight, she stood, pulling Remy to his feet.

She kept her voice low. "Let's get out of here."

Chapter 2

A furtive scraping sound caught Jack's attention as he picked up the phone. *What the--?* He slammed the phone down and ran to the outer office, finding it empty. The front door stood wide open, rain slanting inside.

He reached to the door in time to see Maggie and her "kidnap victim" skid to a halt by the blue Corolla parked at the curb. He shouted over the drumbeat of the rain. "Marguerite!"

Fumbling with her keys, she didn't look up. On the passenger side, Remy hopped and jiggled like a wind-up toy, darting frightened looks in Jack's direction.

Jack went for the easy target, reaching Remy as Maggie got the car door open. The kid struggled like a puppy, but Jack subdued him effortlessly and glared at Maggie over the top of the car. "What kind of stunt are you pulling here, Marguerite?"

"I knew we couldn't trust you!" she cried.

"Oh, grow up!" He jerked his head toward the open door of the office. "Get back inside before we attract attention."

She glared at him, slammed the car door shut and marched up the cobblestone walk to the office building.

Jack followed, Remy in tow, alert in case she decided to make another run for it. He sent the boy down inside the door, tamping down the urge to thump the back of the kid's head. He locked the door and picked up their discarded towels, tossing one to each of them. "Dry yourselves."

Maggie refused look at him. Just as well. He was in no mood to be guilt-tripped out of his anger by her "poor me" act. Obviously she hadn't changed as much as he'd hoped.

Maggie removed a wad of money from her jeans pocket and waved it. "Should've known you'd want the money up front."

"Willow--"

"Don't call me that." She put her arm around Remy, pulling the shivering boy closer to her. "Do you want my money or not?"

"It's not about money--"

She jammed the money into her pocket. "Oh, right. You can't risk it." The words came out in a low sneer.

"You shouldn't risk it, either."

Her cold eyes met his. "Let us go, then. Call the cops and cover your butt if you want. But let us get a running start."

"I'm not your enemy."

Tears sparkled in her eyes, but she didn't let them fall. "Then protect us. I need help, Jack."

He studied the upturned nose and black-coffee eyes, and wondered why he hadn't recognized her the second she walked in. The party girl trappings were gone, but Marguerite remained, vulnerability wrapped in a prickly coat of independence. And just like ten years ago, he was a sucker for the fear roiling beneath the mirror-like surface of her dark eyes.

His answer spilled from his lips in a rush. "Okay."

As soon as he spoke, he regretted it. Every instinct screamed "mistake." Twenty years in the Secret Service had taught him the perils of bending the rules, hadn't they? Every time it happened, people got hurt. So why did he just tell Marguerite he'd help her evade the police?

Damn those eyes brimming with a blend of wariness and hope, like a puppy that craved affection but knew deep down that a blow would be her reward for daring to trust.

He'd seen the same look in her eyes the first day they met, just after Jimmy's funeral. Lost and vulnerable, she'd made him forget the first rule of being a Secret Service agent--don't get emotionally involved. He'd touched her shoulder, offering sympathy. Two fat tears had trickled down her cheeks before she turned to stone and told him to go to hell.

And that had been one of the better days.

Jack shoved away the memory. Secret Service rules were there for a reason. If he was going to help Marguerite survive this mess, he had to think like an agent, not a friend. "Do the New Orleans cops know you're involved in Remy's disappearance?"

Her eyes narrowed. "I think so."

"Then there'll be an A.P.B. out for your car." He held out his hand. "Give me the keys. I'll move it out back for you. There's a shower in my office; go take a hot shower and change into whatever dry clothes you can find. Remy, you keep guard."

"Is this some kind of trick?" Remy scowled at him.

Jack met Maggie's uncertain gaze. "You have my word, Willow." He held out his hands for her keys.

"Your word. Big whoop." Remy remained unimpressed.

"Enough, Remy." Maggie handed the keys to Jack, her fingers brushing his. Sparks shot up his arm. His breath caught in his lungs. Forcing himself to move, he headed out to the Corolla parked at the curb and tried to ignore his body's sudden quickening.

* * * * *

Everything in Jack's bathroom was geared for a man, from the utilitarian tub and jumbo bar of musky deodorant soap to the off-brand shampoo in the plastic shower caddy. But a shower was a shower. Maggie leaned against the tiles as hot water peppered her body. The resulting tingles drove away the shivers, leaving her feeling warm and relaxed and--

--safe?

He'd given his word. Whatever else she might think of Jack Bennett, she knew he didn't give his word lightly.

The warm, masculine smell of his soap brought back memories of her Tribeca apartment ten years ago. It always smelled like Jack, though he spent as little time there as he could. He and the rest of her security detail let apartments on either side of hers. God, how her father had fumed at the exorbitant rents to keep the agents within earshot if trouble came knocking.

And one night, trouble came knocking with a battering ram.

Blame it on New York. Or three years of living in the White House fishbowl. Or the five shots of Jim Beam she'd downed in quick succession to win the barroom bet. But when she slipped a stranger her phone number, it hadn't occurred to her that he'd use the number to find out where she lived.

Jack had come to the rescue before the stranger--a parolee with a string of violent robberies on his record--could do more than push past her feeble efforts to keep him out. Only later, had ol' eagle-eyed Jack confronted her about slipping the man her number. Of course he'd seen it. He saw everything.

Knowing her father would off her funds and force her back home to Washington if he knew, she'd begged Jack to keep that information out of the official Secret Service record. And he'd given in, though he'd risked his job to do so, a fact that had occurred to Maggie only later, when she started to think of him as more than just a goon with a gun raining on her parade.

No wonder he was wary, she thought, cutting off the water.

She wrapped herself in a fluffy towels and went searching for clothes. She found a pair of boxer shorts and a white T-shirt in the bathroom closet. She cinched the drawstring of the oversized shorts and hoped for the best.

Jack and Remy turned when she entered the office. Remy's grin eclipsed his whole face. "Nice shorts, Doc."

Jack moved past the boy and approached Maggie, his scrutiny like phantom fingers sliding over her skin. "Feeling better?"

"Much. No more shivers." Not from the cold, anyway.

"I traded your license plates for mine," Jack said. "We'll take your car to my house and leave mine parked here."

"Your house?" She hadn't thought beyond getting Jack to help, hadn't considered that he might have a wife and family he'd have to explain their presence to. She forced a casual smile. "No Mrs. Bennett? Or is she particularly good-natured?"

Jack's eyes narrowed slightly. "No Mrs. Bennett."

So Laura Sandoval hadn't kept her perfectly manicured claws in his hide after all, Maggie thought. Good for Jack.

"A motel probably isn't safe enough. So, my house. We could all use some shut-eye." He gestured toward the back office. "I've already locked up front. We'll leave through my office." He pressed his hand against the small of her back, his fingers sliding against the sensitive skin.

She was acutely aware of the heat of his touch through the thin cotton T-shirt as he led her to the back door.

* * * * *

By midnight, Jack's house fell quiet. Remy had been asleep almost an hour, after nodding off in the middle of dinner. Jack had managed to nudge him toward the fold-out bed in the den before the boy went down for the count. Maggie had settled into the spare room for the night, leaving Jack alone at the kitchen counter, staring at the blinking display on the telephone answering machine. *One New Message.*

Tonight of all nights, why had she decided to call?

He started to punch the button again, then stopped, his finger hovering over the keypad. There were at least a hundred good reasons not to do this. He'd listened to the call the second Maggie and Remy left the kitchen to settle in for the night. He knew what she'd had to say. He should just forget about it. God knows, he had enough to deal with as it was.

Instead, he punched the "play" button.

"Hi, Jack, it's Laura Sandoval. Bet you never thought you'd hear from me again, huh?" Even distorted by the phone line and the digital recording, there was no mistaking the husky timbre of that voice. Still in full force after years away from the bayou, her Louisiana drawl flowed through the phone line like sun-warmed honey, reminding Jack of long, lazy nights of lovemaking.

He stopped the message replay and slumped on the breakfast bar stool, his gaze moving to the picture window spanning the west wall. Rain obscured Mobile Bay, only the brightest of coastal lights visible in the gloom. But in his mind, he was back in his old world, in the apartment just outside D.C. He'd always loved the rainy night views from his balcony, the gray mist over the Potomac and the hazy, otherworldly glow of the monuments in the distance. That view had made his cramped one-bedroom money-pit of an apartment seem like a mansion.

Laura had, for a while, made it feel like a home.

He forced away the memories, conquered the temptation of the answering machine and walked down the darkened hallway to the living room. He stood for a long time in front of the living room window, gazing out at the rain-washed night and wondering how, in the span of a few short hours, he'd managed to turn back the clock on his entire life.

Laura's phone call, out of the blue after so many years, just as he found himself entangled in another one of Marguerite Cole's messes. Unbelievable.

Well, Laura he didn't have to deal with. He'd ended things between them years ago. Made peace with the wasted years, the bitterness of the parting. He didn't have to call her back. He could erase her message and pretend it never happened.

Marguerite Cole wouldn't be quite so easy to ignore.

Maggie Stone, he corrected himself. He could guess why she'd made the name-change--declaring her independence from her father and the baggage that went with being the only daughter of President James Mallory Cole III.

She was physically different, too--more curves, less eyeliner. Nor had she tried to use her abundant physical charms to bend him to her will the way she had during the year they'd been stuck with each other. Maybe because of the kid. Couldn't exactly

come on like a sex-kitten with the kid watching.

And what was the deal with the kid anyway? Did Maggie and really think he was going to buy that bull about a crooked cop?

Maggie had never struck him as a good liar during her days in New York, but ten years was a long time. People changed. God knows, Maggie's father had been one of the most consummate actors Jack had ever known. Could be in her genes.

Maybe the kid was the liar. Maybe he'd knocked off his foster parents and fooled Maggie into buying his story about crooked cops. Or was Maggie in on it, too? It wouldn't be the first time an older woman seduced a boy to do her dirty work--

No. He didn't get that vibe from the two of them.

Still, the vague, disjointed story about murder and corrupt cops they'd fed him sounded like something out of a movie. She hadn't given him names of the people involved. He didn't even know if she really worked at a youth counseling center. The only evidence supporting any of their story was the Louisiana license plate he'd switched from the Corolla to his own Beretta.

How many laws had he already broken for Naughty Marguerite?

He dragged himself off the breakfast bar stool and went to the living room, booting up his notebook computer. Online, he started with the news sites to see if there was anything about the former president's daughter kidnapping a New Orleans youth. But he found nothing.

He closed his eyes. Everything tonight had moved so quickly. Too quickly. He should have asked more questions.

A soft creak behind him made him jerk upright.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to wake you." Maggie's voice was little more than a whisper in the dark. Light from the street lamps outside outlined her body with a golden glow, burnishing the soft waves of her honey-brown hair. She still wore his plain white t-shirt and boxers. Below the bottom cuffs of the shorts, her legs went on for miles.

She moved close enough for him to feel the heat of her body and smell her warm, sleepy scent. The masculine aroma of his soap and shampoo lingered on her skin and in her hair, transformed to something rich and lush and female.

His body tightened with hunger.

Was this why he'd agreed to help her? Sheer, animal lust?

"I couldn't sleep." She moved past him to the window and rested her forehead against the rain-blurred pane.

He took a deep breath, fighting to get his heart rate under control. *Business*, he thought. *Concentrate on business.* "Tell me what you haven't told me, Marguerite."

She turned her head slowly. "How much time do you have?"

Her skin looked like velvet. It was all he could do not to touch her to see if she was as soft as she looked. His year with naughty Marguerite had required him to exert a lot of self-control, not all of it to keep from killing her.

He turned on the floor lamp next to the window. The golden light chased shadows to the corners of the living room. "I have all night if you need it."

Her brow furrowed. "What do you want to know?"

I want to know whether or not you're lying to me, he thought. Aloud, he said, "Everything."

"I guess I should start with Remy."

"He's a patient at your clinic, you said."

"Derrieaux Street Counseling Center. Substance abuse intervention and counseling, pregnancy prevention counseling, free psych screening--that kind of thing. The city started referring local foster children to the center because we have a good reputation for family counseling and facilitation."

He nodded. "Remy's a foster child."

She sat on the love seat, tucking her legs under her. "He's a tough case--his parents won't give up their parental rights and the state so far refuses to mandate it, but they're both substance abusers who aren't likely to clean up their acts before Remy reaches the age of majority. Meanwhile, he's been bounced from foster home to foster home since he was seven."

Jack sat next to her on the love seat. "Why doesn't someone declare his parents unfit and let him get settled?"

"Good question." She sighed. "But I can't think about whys. It makes me crazy and keeps me from doing my job."

"You're a counselor?"

"I run the center. I finished my PhD in psychology a few years ago and took the job in New Orleans."

PhD? There'd been a time when he wasn't sure she'd ever get through her first year of grad school. *Assuming any of this is true*, the nagging voice in his head reminded him. "You deal directly with the patients?"

She nodded. "We don't have the staff or resources for any kind of artificial hierarchy. And I love helping kids get their lives under control and start thinking about a real future. There's so much hopelessness out there. It eats kids alive." She shifted, her knee brushing against his thigh and settling there with light, warm pressure.

He cleared his throat. "When did Remy witness the murder that set all of this off?"

"Late February. On his way home from the center. He said he saw a cop knock a guy down and shoot him in the head."

Jack frowned. "How does Remy know it was a policeman?"

"He'd seen him around the neighborhood before. A narcotics detective named Mark Blevins. Blevins denies shooting anyone. And nobody's found a body matching Remy's description."

"Could Remy be mistaken about what he saw?"

"I considered that," Maggie admitted. "But Remy has no reason to make up such a story. I know two policemen harassing him--I witnessed that myself. They were browbeating him, trying to make him admit he was lying, scaring him to death."

"That's not an uncommon interrogation procedure."

"He's just a kid."

"A kid with a rap sheet. Right?"

She looked down at her hands. "His records are sealed, but yeah, I'm pretty sure he has a record." She looked up at Jack again. "He's a good kid, Jack. Really, he is. He just needs someone to believe in him."

"And that's you?" He couldn't hide a hint of disbelief.

She lifted her chin. "Yeah. That's me."

Jack looked out the window at the rain, letting everything she'd told him sink in.

"Earlier, you said you talked to the D.A. What did Remy tell him?"

Her eyes narrowed. "He told him exactly what he saw."

"Which was?"

"Mark Blevins shooting another man, execution style."

She sounded like a TV cop, he thought. Spouting out the words from a script with no idea what they really meant. "Execution style?"

Her lips pressed to a tight line. "He shot the man in the back of the head. Isn't that execution style?"

"So they say," he murmured. "How did the D.A.'s react?"

She bristled visibly. "Much like you did, actually. Disbelief. Irritation at being bothered."

He ignored the accusing tone in her voice. "Did the D.A. say he'd look into the allegation?"

"Yes. But he never got back to us."

"Did you follow up?"

"More than once. In fact, I called his office three days ago to see if he'd provide Remy some protection, but his assistant practically laughed in my face. She said

everyone's already stretched thin since Milton Berry's murder."

No doubt; the unsolved murder of a controversial mayoral candidate in the middle of an election campaign had a way of putting a city on edge. The Milton Berry murder had prompted more than one call to Jack's business from local politicians wanting to beef up their own security. "What happened when the D.A. refused to provide protection?"

"The Bakers couldn't come up with enough money to pay for private security, so Remy just tried to stay low."

"The Bakers are Remy's foster family?"

"Yes."

"How long has Remy been with them?" Jack asked.

"Almost a year. They were good people. They planned to push for long-term status. Foster homes are generally temporary placements for children, but Remy's family situation shows no signs of improving, and the Bakers knew that. Adoption's out of the question, at least for now, but they were willing to provide a home for Remy at least until his eighteenth birthday." Maggie shifted again, her knee digging into his thigh. The pressure against his leg felt good.

Too good. Too dangerous.

He shifted away from her, unnerved by how easily she was getting under his skin without really trying. "Remy said that the Bakers were killed this afternoon?"

Maggie's fingers played with the hem of her t-shirt. "I think it's likely."

"You think."

She opened her mouth to reply, but before she uttered a word, a high-pitched wail erupted from the back of the house. Maggie's body jerked and she pushed to her feet.

"Remy!"

Jack followed, his heart racing.

Chapter 3

Maggie followed the sound of Remy's cry, her heart pounding. She found him tangled in the bedclothes of a fold-out sofa, eyes shut and body twitching. "No! Get away from them!"

She sat and touched his shoulder. "Remy, wake up."

His twitching became thrashing. One arm whipped out to connect solidly with her mouth, knocking her off balance. Stifling a cry of pain, she fell off the side of the bed.

"Maggie!" Jack crouched beside her.

"I'm okay." Her mouth hurt like hell, but she couldn't let Remy know. She let Jack help her up and started to move toward Remy, but Jack put himself between her and the boy.

"You're bleeding." Jack touched her lip, making her wince. His fingers brushed slowly over her jaw and down the side of her neck, leaving a trail of fire behind.

"I'm fine." She tamped down her reaction and went to Remy.

The boy was awake now, eyes wide with fear. "Doc?"

"It's okay. Just a bad dream." She reached out to soothe him, but he ducked from her touch. Jack put squeezed her shoulder, a nod of his head telling her to move and let him try.

She traded places with Jack and he sat, his body angled away from Remy. Maintaining a manly distance, she noted with amusement. "Worst nightmare I ever had was after a double pepperoni pizza," he told Remy with a grin. "Dreamed librarians armed with machetes were chasing me through a maze."

"Librarians?" Maggie asked.

Jack's eyes crinkled at the corners. "I had overdue books."

Remy chuckled. "Man, I could see Mrs. Carpelli with a machete--she don't put up with no sh--"

"Remy," Maggie warned.

"--stuff," he compromised with a grin.

"What did you dream about?" Maggie asked.

The boy's grin faded. "I don't remember."

"Was it about the Bakers?" Jack asked.

Remy looked stricken. "I don't know. Maybe." His mouth pinched into a tight line to hide his trembling lower lip.

"You're safe here, Remy." Jack's voice was. "Only Maggie and I know where you are, and we're not telling."

Remy looked at Maggie. His eyes widened in horror. "Oh, God, Doc--you're bleedin'! Did I do that?"

She blotted her lip. "No harm, Remy. Just an accident."

He reached down to straighten the tangled sheets. "I'm okay now," he huffed. "Y'all don't have to baby-sit me."

"Okay. Get some sleep." Jack cupped Maggie's elbow, drawing her with him out of the room to the bathroom down the hall. "Let's take a look at that lip." Jack patted the sink counter, indicating that Maggie should sit there. Maggie pulled herself up onto the counter, letting her bare feet dangle down.

Like a kid, she thought.

Jack's lips curved as he wrung out a wet washcloth. "This reminds me of that time one of the Kennedy cousins dumped you."

She flushed with consternation. "You remember that?"

"You puked all over me in the car." His nose wrinkled.

"I did eight tequila shooters." Humiliation niggled at her.

"Twelve. And a chaser of mescal. You ate the worm."

Her stomach rolled at the memory.

"Then you fell out of the car and smashed the hell out of your mouth. I was afraid you'd loosened a tooth."

And he'd scooped her up, taken her inside and tended to her wounds. It was one of her few clear memories of that night--Jack, shirt sleeves rolled up, cleaning her mouth as she cried.

That, and her drunken attempt to lure him into her bed.

He'd declined, more gently than she'd deserved.

Jack tipped her chin with two fingers to get a better look at her lip. "This will be nice

and puffy in the morning."

Maggie's heart rate doubled at the touch. *This is crazy*, she thought, fighting the tremors rattling up her spine. She was a grown woman with a whole lot of living between her and the love-smitten little fool who'd fallen for Jack Bennett.

Anxiety rolling through her, she lifted her fingers to her throat, feeling for her necklace. Her fingers found the shape of the ring beneath her shirt and some of her tension eased.

But not the hot curl of desire building low in her belly.

"I see some things haven't changed," he murmured.

His words startled her, a flush of mortification spreading over her neck and cheeks as she imagined for a moment that he'd read her thoughts. Then he covered her hand with his, tracing the outline of the ring with his fingertip.

She released a shaky breath and dropped her hand away from the ring. In his eyes she saw the same question she'd seen ten years ago when he first caught her fiddling with the ring.

He'd never asked then. He didn't ask now, instead dabbing at her lip with the washcloth. "Does he have nightmares often?"

"I don't know," she admitted, glad for the distraction. "We've never discussed it in his sessions, and his foster parents never mentioned it."

"Nightmares might mean post-traumatic stress disorder."

"You think he's having flashbacks of something while he's awake and just thought he saw something that didn't really happen?" She quirked her eyebrows. "He knows what he saw. I don't think he be that sure if it were a flashback."

Cupping her jaw in his palm, Jack touched the wet rag to her lip again. She winced, eliciting a grimace of sympathy from him. "Sorry." He dabbed away the rest of the blood, applied a cool salve to the wound and stepped back.

"Thanks." She slid from the counter and slipped past him into the hallway. "I should go back to bed--"

"Wait." He caught her hand, moving so close his warmth enveloped her. She barely resisted the urge to lean into the shelter of his body. "Before Remy's nightmare, we were talking about the Bakers." Jack kept his voice low. "Why does Remy think they're dead? Did you find their bodies?"

She pulled her hand from his. "No, nothing like that." She glanced down the hall toward the room where Remy was sleeping, worried that he might overhear. She nodded toward the living room. "Let's talk in there."

In the living room, she went to the window, staring out at rain slick streets made

shiny by the glow of streetlamps. To her relief, Jack dropped onto the love seat rather than joining her at the window. She kept her back to him, feeling more in control when she wasn't looking at him. "Remy had sneaked into the house through his bedroom window because he was late and wanted to avoid a confrontation," she began.

Hearing noises downstairs, he'd sneaked down to find three men, including one he recognized as a policeman, crouched beside the rolled-up living room rug, cleaning up what looked like blood on the floor. He'd sneaked back out his bedroom window and ran all the way to the youth center. "He wanted me to go back with him to the house, because he was sure someone had killed the Bakers." No need to tell Jack what a ruckus Remy had caused. It would only complicate matters. "But when I arrived, I didn't see any blood. The place was spotless."

"And the Bakers?" Jack asked.

She stared through the window at the street beyond. At one a.m., the neighborhood slept. It would be easy to believe she, Jack and Remy were the only people left on earth.

Right now, she almost wished they were.

"They weren't there," she answered. "Neither was the living room rug. The floor was bare. No sign of blood, everything in place." She shuddered. "That's when I knew Remy was telling the truth. Mrs. Baker is a wonderful woman, but she's no neat freak. I've never been to her house when it didn't look lived in--until this afternoon."

"Why didn't you call the police at that point?" he asked.

"We heard noises outside. When we looked out the back window, we saw men in the back yard. Policemen. I recognized one of them from an incident with Remy a few days ago."

"Did they see you?"

"Remy and I didn't wait to find out. I drove him back to the center. I was going to call the D.A. and ask for help. But when we got to the center, the police were already there."

"Why?"

"Remy had raised a fuss when he got there. Someone called them. When I saw the police, I panicked. All I could think about was that perfectly clean house." She shuddered. "I think Remy's right. I think cops murdered the Bakers."

Jack fell silent. Maggie glanced up and found him standing a few feet away, his expression unreadable. "Have you called the Bakers to see if they're home now?" he asked.

"I called on one of the stops we made on our way out of Louisiana." Maggie closed

her eyes, bone weary. "I got a recording telling me the phone was temporarily disconnected."

Jack's warmth enveloped her. "You should be in bed."

She managed a nod. "You, too."

His eyes narrowed slightly, and the air between them grew instantly charged again. He stepped back, snapping the tension. She tried not to feel disappointed.

"Things will make more sense in the morning," he said.

But he was wrong, Maggie thought. Morning would bring more questions than answers.

* * * * *

The sound of a door closing stirred Maggie from a light doze. Opening her eyes, she found herself on the ancient green shantung sofa in the living room of the Bakers' house in New Orleans. The hardwood floor at her feet was bare of rugs, just as it had been the day Remy came to her for help.

As Maggie gazed at the oak floor, a rivulet of deep red trickled from beneath the sofa and spread into a shallow pool.

Blood.

"Behind--" Remy's voice came from her left, low and choked. She tore her gaze from the seeping blood and found him standing a few feet away, his face ashen.

Maggie scrambled up, careful not to step in the blood. Remy was already tugging at the arm of the sofa, trying to pull it away from the wall. Maggie lent her strength, and the sofa slid a couple of feet forward.

Pressed behind the wall, tangled in an obscene embrace, lay the bloody bodies of Mr. and Mrs. Baker.

Heart pounding, Maggie knelt and pressed her fingers against Mrs. Baker's neck, looking for a pulse. Blood soaked through Maggie's jeans, warm and sticky on her skin.

Suddenly, the woman's eyes opened. Her pupils were tiny black pinpricks in her bright blue irises. One bloody hand grabbed Maggie's forearm, fingers tight and crushing.

"Take care," Mrs. Baker said.

Maggie cried out, flinging herself backwards. Her head banged against the wall behind her, and she squeezed her eyes shut, tears of pain and fear spilling down her cheeks. Her heart pounded a terrified cadence against her breast.

When she opened her eyes, watery sunlight greeted her, trickling through the narrow

space between the window curtains. She peered around the shadowed room, her mind struggling to catch up with her body.

Definitely not the Bakers' living room. And nothing like her small, bright loft apartment in the French Quarter. Hunter green drapes hung straight and workmanlike over the casement windows. A green thermal blanket covered the crisp white bed sheets wrapped around her lower body. The bureau by the bed matched the simple walnut bed frame--basic square headboard and footboard, no posts, no detailing, a far cry from her antique iron bed at home with the original white paint sandblasted away to display a gunmetal gray sheen.

Memory clicked in. She'd spent the night in Jack Bennett's spare bedroom.

She relieved her full bladder in the adjacent bathroom and headed to the den to see if Remy was awake yet. She found the sofa bed neatly folded up, the bedclothes out of sight. From the kitchen came the muted clatter of bowls and cutlery; Jack must have already roused the boy for breakfast.

Maggie's stomach rumbled, but she ignored it, tempted by the treadmill next to the window. She'd run track in school; long distance, sprints--she'd loved them all, loved the feel of wind in her face, the metronomic cadence of one foot in front of the other, echoed by the hammer blows of her heart pumping. She never felt more alive than when she was running.

Running helped her find her center, her focus, to face the day. And right now, she needed that feeling more than she needed her next breath.

She hopped on the treadmill, fiddling with the controls until she found a speed that felt right. She set a quick pace, closing her eyes as she visualized her daily jog through the narrow streets near her loft, imagining the sights and sounds and smells of New Orleans coming awake. Tension ebbed from her, flowed out through her racing feet and pumping lungs. Everything around her faded into nothing but muscle and bone and blood coursing through her body.

"Still running, I see."

Jack's voice jarred her out of rhythm, and she had to grab the rails of the treadmill to keep from falling off. She turned the key and shut down the machine, turning to glare at him. "Give a girl a little warning, will you?"

He stood in the doorway, a newspaper in one hand, his expression hard to read. His gaze moved over her, unhurried, as tangible as a touch. "I called your name. Twice."

Unnerved by his scrutiny, Maggie plucked at the t-shirt now clinging to her sweat-dampened breasts and moved in place, cooling down. "You know how I am about my morning run."

He didn't comment, and Maggie knew at once that something was wrong. Jack was in "guard" mode--hands at his side, eyes alert, muscles bunched and coiled as if ready to move at the slightest provocation.

"What's happened?" she asked.

He handed her the newspaper.

A grainy black and white photograph of her own face stared back at her from the front page, a candid from a fundraiser a couple of years earlier. Next to her photo was a blurry school portrait of Remy. The banner headline splashed across the top read, "Juvenile abducts daughter of former president."

Damn.

Of course the story had made the wire services. Presidents were America's royalty; stories about them and their families sold papers. She'd been foolish to hope otherwise.

She scanned the first couple of paragraphs. The lead sentence was enough to make her stomach turn. "A knife-wielding New Orleans teenager abducted the daughter of former President James Cole Friday afternoon after a violent outburst at a local youth center."

She looked up at Jack, bracing for the worst.

She hadn't braced hard enough. His anger hit her like a kick in the teeth. Nervously, she nibbled at her lower lip, hissing in pain when her teeth grazed her wound.

"Why didn't you tell me he took you at knifepoint, Maggie?"

Maggie glanced toward the hallway and frowned at Jack. "Keep your voice down."

His jaw worked furiously as he fought for control. "You bring a knife-wielding juvenile delinquent into my house without telling me about it and you expect me to keep my voice down?"

"Jack, it's not like that--"

"Not like what? Not like he stuck a knife to your throat?"

She sighed. "He didn't stick a knife to my throat. He just waved it around when he grabbed me."

"I'm not seeing the distinction," Jack growled.

"The distinction is that I was never in danger."

Jack threw up his hands and shook his head. "You're insane."

"Remy was terrified. He didn't know how to ask for help the conventional way because nothing in his life has ever taught him the conventional way to deal with anything. But he would never harm me--he'd never hurt anyone. I knew that."

"He took you hostage, for God's sake."

"Once I took him out of the confrontational situation, he gave me the knife and let me help him figure out what was going on. He felt very embarrassed by his actions and acknowledged that they were inappropriate."

"Inappropriate," Jack echoed, staring at her as if she were an alien from outer space. Even to her own ears, the jargon sounded woefully inadequate. "And I suppose when he slaughtered his foster parents, that action was 'inadvisable'?"

"Remy didn't kill his foster parents."

"That's not what the New Orleans police think."

She frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"You must not have read very far. When the police went to the Bakers' house to inform them about Remy's 'inappropriate' behavior at the youth center, they found blood all over the rug in the living room."

She stared at him, certain she'd misunderstood. "What?"

He crossed to the counter, grabbed the paper and thrust it in her face. "Read it."

She scanned the article quickly. Her eyes widened in shock. The police had found the bloody rug in the living room.

Where it most certainly had not been the day before.

What doubts she had about her decision to take Remy and run disappeared.

"They're setting Remy up."

"Who's they?"

"The police."

"Why would they do that?" Jack sounded unconvinced.

She glared at him, frustrated. "To protect Mark Blevins."

"Blevins is worth killing a couple of people and creating an elaborate set up to finger a juvenile? I know you said he's the department golden boy, but come on--"

"It's not the whole police force, Jack. It's a handful of cops working with him."

"You're basing this on what? Remy's word?" Jack's eyebrow inched upward.

Maggie squared her shoulders. "What's the alternative, that Remy killed the only foster parents who've ever made him feel like he's worth a damn? For what? Why would he do that?"

He stared at her a moment, his mouth thinned to a tight line. She saw the first hint of uncertainty in his eyes.

"Remy did not kill the Bakers," she insisted. "I was there in that house. There was no blood-stained rug in the living room, and Remy was not out of my sight for a moment after that." She met his searching gaze without flinching. "So unless you're suggesting that I'm lying, there has to be some sort of set-up involved, or the police would never

have found a bloody rug in the living room of that house."

Jack passed a weary hand across his eyes. "I don't know--"

"Remy is being set up, Jack. Trust me."

His brows arched. "Trust you?"

She supposed she deserved Jack's skepticism. She had kept details from him to protect Remy. Life with her impossible-to-please father had taught her to put the best spin possible on events. It was an old habit by now.

She hadn't lied to Jack about one thing, however: knife or no knife, not once had she felt any danger from Remy. "I should have told you about the knife. But you'd have jumped to conclusions about Remy that we couldn't afford last night."

He leaned against the counter, dropping his chin to his chest. "How many other details are you keeping from me?"

She tried not to bristle. It was a fair question. "None."

His eyes narrowed as he considered her answer. Finally he released a sigh and nodded toward the doorway. "Hungry?"

She wasn't really, but she'd probably need all the energy she could get before the day was over. She followed Jack to the kitchen and found it empty.

"Where's Remy?"

"Watching cartoons in the living room." Jack shook his head, obviously having trouble reconciling the cartoon-watching kid with the dangerous delinquent described in the newspaper.

Maggie sighed and poured herself a bowl of cereal. Jack joined her at the table, turning his chair around backwards. He straddled the seat and folded his arms across the chair back.

"I was hoping we'd have more time to figure out what to do before this thing became front page news," Maggie commented after the silence between them became too uncomfortable.

"The news hounds aren't going to sit on a story about James Cole's daughter getting kidnapped by a street punk."

She pushed a clump of corn flakes around the bowl with her spoon. "I suppose not."

"When did you last see your father?"

"A little over a year. Actually, that was the last time I spoke to him. The last time I saw him was two years ago."

"Things got that bad?"

"Things were always that bad." She couldn't keep the bitterness out of her voice. She and her father had a long history of mutual disappointment. The years had done

little to improve things.

Jack's sigh was long and deep. "I hoped he'd figure out how to be a father to you finally."

"Maybe if Jimmy hadn't died . . ." She drew small circles in the bowl of milk and soggy flakes with her spoon. "No, it wouldn't have made a difference."

He covered her hand with his. "I'm sorry."

Her hand twitched as if he'd touched a live wire to her flesh. How could he still do that to her after all these years? She had to put an end to this.

She eased her hand away. "He'll turn up now. Can't resist the cameras. He'll make a tearful plea for my safe return. It'll lead the evening news, just like old times."

Jack didn't contradict her. He knew what kind of man her father was.

He was one of the few who did.

Chapter 4

Maggie had predicted her father would be on T.V. by the evening news. She'd underestimated him; he was on CNN by noon.

Her "kidnapping" was the story of the day, and just before twelve, the studio anchor went live to San Diego where James Cole sat in a San Diego studio, the picture of grave concern. He'd changed little since Jack last saw him.

"Her mother and I are very worried," Cole said.

"Stepmother," Maggie grumbled, slouching lower on the living room sofa next to Jack.

"Marguerite? If you can see this, Mom and I are praying for your safe return. We love you." Cole's chiseled features oozed earnest concern, tinted by just a hint of fatherly panic.

Maggie's face twisted with disbelief. "Are those tears?"

Jack rubbed her back soothingly, an innocent gesture until she turned to look at him, her eyes smoldering with unspoken questions he didn't intend to answer. Not here. Not this way.

He withdrew his hand and looked back at the television. The anchor stayed with Cole for another segment, no doubt thanking the broadcasting gods for an exclusive with the former president on cable's hottest news story of the week.

Cole played the role of distraught father with the perfect blend of panic and composure. But was the emotion real?

Jack's contact with Cole while on Maggie's security detail had been limited. Cole cared little for the constant surveillance of his Secret Service detail; he'd certainly had no time for someone as far down the pecking order as Jack had been.

Jack had approached Cole just once, at the end of his assignment as Marguerite's guard. Marguerite's reckless streak worried him, and he wanted to warn the president.

Cole's cool, pointed response had stung: "If you'd spent less worrying about your own mess of a love life, maybe you could've figured out how to control Marguerite."

Jack had no answer to that. His personal life had been a mess at the time. Laura had been an emotional tilt-a-whirl, testing his love and his patience in equal measure. She loved him, she hated him, she needed him, she had no use for him. She'd marry him, she never wanted to see him again. He'd turned himself inside out trying to make her happy. He just hadn't realized the President of the United States had noticed.

He wondered if the old man knew just how vulnerable Jack had been to Naughty Marguerite. Giving into her come-ons would've lost him his job and ruined any hopes of making his volatile relationship with Laura work. But he'd been tempted.

"What next?" Maggie stared at the television screen, where the anchor had gone on to a story about a tornado in Oklahoma.

"I've got feelers out." As she turned her sharp-eyed gaze to him, he added, "Inquiries about the case, what's going on." Remy's street-wise caginess set off all of Jack's alarms. He needed to know more about Remy's connection to Mark Blevins.

"What if someone connects you with me?" Maggie asked.

"I was careful. Besides, everyone thinks you're a hostage."

She frowned. "You think I made a bad decision, don't you?"

He knew better than to answer.

"I did what I had to." Passionate conviction infused her face with color, staining her cheeks and brightening her lips. She gave off waves of fragrant, spicy heat, a heady elixir of soap and water and woman. Her hair, damp from the shower, brushed her delicate jawline and spilled over her shoulders.

He tucked her hair behind her ear, his fingers brushing her cheek. Heat roared through him, settling low in his belly.

Her eyes met his, sloe-dark. She rubbed her jaw against his curled palm as he touched his thumb to her lower lip.

He shouldn't be sitting here, cupping her face, stroking her lip, feeling his body surge like an ocean tide toward the moist, welcoming heat of the shore. He had to put a stop to it before he did something stupid.

Then her hand closed over his thigh.

A low groan escaped his throat. Her touch sent fire coursing through his body, igniting flesh and blood and bone. Her throat bobbed as she swallowed rapidly, a delicate vein in her temple fluttering like a wild thing. Her lip moved beneath his thumb,

sending a jolt along his nerve endings.

God, he wanted to kiss her. He knew exactly how she'd taste--like rain in the summer, hot and slick and sweet--

He marshaled the tattered remnants of control and withdrew.

Maggie gazed at him, her lips parted and quivering. "I should check on Remy."

Jack willed his body back under control as Maggie headed out the door. With difficulty, he dragged his gaze away from her long, shapely legs as she disappeared from sight.

* * * * *

New Orleans was a steam bath after the hard rain, hotter than May should be, even for the Crescent City. Detective Mark Blevins wiped his brow with a snowy handkerchief and scowled at

Gerald Phelps. "What do you mean, still nothing?"

Phelps paused in the middle of sopping his biscuit in a thick puddle of cayenne-spiced milk gravy. He tried not to look anxious, but Blevins noted with silent satisfaction the sheen of fear shimmering in Phelps' eyes. "Kid spent his life on the streets. He's learned a thing or two about dodging a uniform."

"The woman's helping him." Blevins tucked the handkerchief in his jacket pocket, his movements unhurried. Inside, his gut twisted with anxiety, but unlike Phelps, he hid his unease well.

Phelps dropped his fork by his plate, giving up the pretense of an appetite. His heat-flushed face paled to a pasty gray. "What happened to the foster parents?"

Blevins narrowed his eyes. Phelps should know better to ask that question. He sidestepped the query. "Someone's asking about the kid and the woman. Former Secret Service guy--used to guard the woman, back when her daddy was in the White House. Name's Jack Bennett." Blevins pushed away from the scarred oak table and stood. "Look into it. Maybe it'll be a lead."

Phelps started to reach for the check. Blevins grabbed his wrist, tightening his grip until Phelps looked up in alarm. Once he had the man's full attention, Blevins let go and reached inside his coat for his wallet. "I've got it."

Phelps drew back his hand, rubbing his wrist.

Blevins placed fifty dollars on the table in ones, fives and tens. "Make sure the waitress gets twenty-five percent; she earned it," he told Blevins as he turned to leave.

As he paid the bill at the cashier's desk, he glanced back at the table where Phelps

still sat. Phelps was counting out the money, his hands trembling. Twelve dollars and change for the breakfast, another three and a quarter for the waitress. Phelps pocketed the rest of the fifty dollars, glancing around quickly to see if anyone had noticed.

But nobody was paying attention to the slightly overweight cop in the corner booth. That's one of the reasons Blevins had picked him out of the sea of overworked, underpaid officers he saw in the squad room day in and day out. Nobody would suspect Gerald Phelps of being anything but a good little soldier for the New Orleans Police Department.

And that suited Mark Blevins just fine.

* * * * *

Jack had left the house around three that afternoon in Maggie's car, leaving Maggie and Remy alone. Remy settled in the den to watch the Braves and Astros, while Maggie scanned the cable news stations for anything new on her "kidnapping."

By five, she'd switched to an old Cary Grant movie in hopes of a little mindless distraction. But the sound of a car set her nerves jangling. She crept to the living room to peek out the window. An unfamiliar black Chevy Blazer pulled into Jack's driveway and parked.

Her heart skipped a beat.

Then she saw Jack get out of the driver's side, balancing a large pizza box in one hand.

She met him as he entered the kitchen from the side door. "Nice wheels. What did you do with mine?"

Jack laid the pizza on the counter. "I hid it. A client of mine is out of the country until November. He has a very secure garage, and nobody will be looking for his Blazer."

She smiled. "You think like a criminal."

He chuckled. "That's why I'm good at what I do."

Her stomach knotted as his eyes locked with hers. His eyes darkened and his lips parted in a low, gusty exhale.

He was turned on, she realized.

Well, well. She held his gaze, filled with a rush of confidence. For the first time since she had grabbed up Remy and started running, she felt a sense of control. This kind of situation she knew how to handle. She'd spent the last ten years figuring out how to deal with men. How to control the playing field and win every time.

She didn't drop her gaze. Didn't blush. Her lips parted, releasing a soft breath, and

she took a step closer.

Color spread up Jack's neck. His eyes dilated, and she could imagine what he was thinking. He was thinking of her. Naked. Wrapped around him, soft to his hard. She saw it, too, his muscles flexing under her fingers, his power barely leashed, straining to break free as he drove into her again and again--

His eyes darkening to pools of black rimmed by a thin crust of blue ice, he met her knowing gaze with laser intensity. She wondered if he could read her mind, see how much she wanted him inside her, branding her, claiming what was his if he wanted it.

Heat spread through her limbs. Control slipped away from her, leaving her far too vulnerable to his passion and her own weakness. She looked away, shuttering her emotions from him before he broke through the last of her defenses.

When she spoke, her voice was raspy. "So what's the plan?"

* * * * *

Remy came into the room before Jack could answer Maggie's double-edged question, his teenager radar zeroing in on the pizza box. "Please be pepperoni. Please be pepperoni."

Jack willed his heartbeat to slow, trying to forget what he'd seen in Maggie's eyes. "It's the works."

"Even better." Opening the box, Remy reached for a slice.

Maggie slapped his hand away. "Wash your hands and put out some plates."

Remy groused as he went to the kitchen to wash up.

"I made some inquiries today about the status of the case." Jack had to be vague with Remy there. Maggie had insisted they keep the news about the bloody rug from him, though Jack suspected Remy already knew the truth. The boy had seen the rug himself. He wasn't naive.

Still, Jack understood Maggie's desire to protect Remy. He had the same instincts; why else was he putting himself on the line? Harboring a fugitive and his "hostage," illegally swapping license plates, and borrowing a client's property without his permission--the list of crimes he was committing to keep Remy Chauvin safe was growing by the hour.

He glanced at Maggie, his gaze dipping to the curve of her breasts displayed so invitingly by her thin gray t-shirt. Of course, it was entirely possible, he had to admit, that Remy's welfare had little to do with his decision.

Three-quarters of a pizza later, Jack's hormones were still humming along solidly in the danger zone, making Maggie's words to Remy ring in his head like an alarm klaxon.

"Remy, you're about to end up with your pizza as a pillow. Go to bed." Maggie stood and started gathering the remains of the pizza, cutting her eyes Jack's direction. The awareness he saw in her look made Jack's palms sweat.

"You always treatin' me like a baby," Remy complained, a wide, noisy yawn undermining his argument.

"And you like it." Maggie flashed the boy a grin.

Even her maternal side looked sexy to Jack. He found himself envying the tender touch Maggie gave Remy as the boy stumbled off to bed.

He was definitely swimming in shark-infested waters, Jack thought. Worse, Maggie knew it, and would use it to her advantage if he let her.

Maggie turned back to face him, her eyes dark and aware. She walked slowly to him, each step calculated to make give him the best view of her tempting curves. He couldn't look away, even when she stopped beside his chair, her body heat spilling across him, stoking the fire in his belly.

"You look tense." If a woman could purr, Maggie purred the words, low and growly. She moved behind him and slid her hands over his shoulders, smoothing his t-shirt. "I can fix that." Her fingers dug into his taut shoulder muscles, strong and deft.

Alarm bells went off in the logic center of his brain, but his hungry body ignored them, giving in to the pleasure her talented fingers wrought. Animal awareness buzzed through him, heightening his senses. She smelled like rain, dark and earthy. Her furnace-hot body burned the skin of his back through his shirt, though only her hands touched him.

When she dropped her hands away, he had to grip the edge of the table to keep from sliding out of his chair. Electricity pulsed through every nerve in his body. Her breath whispered over him as she bent close. "Your turn."

She sat in the adjacent chair, her gaze dark and demanding.

His heart hammered in response. What was he doing, even considering such a dangerous move?

The problem was, resisting Maggie had never been easy, even when he'd had a dozen reasons for keeping his distance.

Unfortunately, most of those reasons no longer existed.

He rose and circled the table until he stood behind her. Flattening his palms over the tight muscles between her shoulders and her neck, he began stroking lightly, as if

she were a wild animal he was trying to gentle.

"Harder," she demanded.

Breath catching, he complied. A groan of pleasure rumbled deep in her throat. The sound shot straight to his groin.

He had to hear that sound again. He tightened his grip on her muscles, increasing the pressure of his fingers.

There. Low. Needy. Female.

He felt ready to burst out of his skin, like a teenager at the mercy of his body and his glands and his one-track mind. If she made that sound again, God help them both, he was going to take her right there on the kitchen table, Remy be damned . . .

"Remember the time I had a cramp in my leg during that

Five K race in Tribeca?" Maggie's voice was dark velvet.

He remembered. He'd had to run the race with her, listening to her taunt him about not being able to keep up with the men at the front of the pack. He'd ignored her, alert for danger but not really expecting any, thanks to the advance security team.

Then Maggie had suddenly dropped like she'd been shot.

Jack's training took over in a heartbeat. It could have been a sniper with a silencer, he'd told himself, eyes scanning the crowd and the periphery as he crouched over her, blocking all access to her until the other agents could catch up.

She'd looked up and muttered two words that had sent relief flowing over him in cold, drenching waves. "Leg cramp."

He'd pulled her leg into his hands and rubbed out the cramp. When the worst of the pain was gone, she'd flashed her perfect white teeth at him and asked, quite loudly, if he made a habit of feeling girls up in public.

"I remember." He dropped his hands and stepped back, clinging to the memory of her pain-in-the-butt attitude, letting that memory cool the sexual heat coursing through him. Passion gave way to anger--at the Naughty Marguerite act, at himself for being so easily sucked into her game. Obviously, she was trying to get something from him, but what? Cooperation? Information? Whatever it was, Jack wasn't going to hand it over so easily.

"What kind of inquiries did you make?" Maggie asked softly.

And we get to the crux. He stifled a sigh, contemplating keeping the information from her. But he'd planned to tell her anyway, and keeping it from her now just seemed petty. "One inquiry, really. To a guy in the New Orleans FBI field office."

Her eyes widened. "You contacted the FBI?"

He stifled a rush of satisfaction at her dismay. *Now who's in control?* "I didn't tell

him you were stashed away in my guest room, Marguerite. Relax."

"What *did* you tell him?"

"That I'd guarded you and that I wanted to be kept apprised of any developments in the case. Not sure he'll do it, though." He and Travis Cooper had gotten crossways a few years back, when Cooper had been in the Baltimore regional office and Jack on diplomat detail. Cooper had been less than helpful then. Or now. The only thing he could add to what Jack already knew was that Maggie's reputation as a man-eater was still intact.

Let that be a warning. The sooner he solved the problem of Maggie and Remy, the sooner he'd have his sanity back.

But his promise to Maggie limited his options. He had to be careful whom he approached for information, afraid the wrong people would learn Jack Bennett was asking questions about the Remy Chauvin case, figure out his past connection to Maggie and put two and two together. But if he couldn't ask questions, how was he going to get the answers he needed?

He needed help from someone with insider status, someone who wouldn't be suspicious of his interest in the case and who could make discreet inquiries and keep his name out of it.

He glanced at the phone on the kitchen counter.

Someone like Assistant U.S. Attorney Laura Sandoval.

* * * * *

Maggie's "abduction" was still one of the top stories on the news Sunday morning. After breakfast, while Jack was in his room making a phone call and Remy was in the den reading the Sunday comics, Maggie settled in Jack's living room and flipped the television channel to a cable news outlet, grimacing when her father's face greeted her.

"I'm flying to New Orleans to meet with investigators on Marguerite's case," Cole told the anchor interviewing him. "And I'm offering a \$500,000 reward for information leading to the safe return of my daughter to her family."

Great, Dad. She frowned at the television. *Stick a bull's-eye on my back and load their guns.*

On another channel, a blonde was talking about Maggie's years on the New York party circuit. Cringing, Maggie switched off the television and went to check on Remy. But he wasn't where she'd left him.

"Remy?" she called. No answer.

The den wasn't large, just four walls filled by a sofa, a television and DVD player on a narrow stand, and a desk with a lamp. A large book case took up two-thirds of the wall adjacent to the window. Under other circumstances, she'd find the bookcase too great a temptation to resist, but she didn't like wondering where Remy was.

She went back into the hall. The door to Jack's bedroom was closed--still making phone calls? She tried not to think about that. Unlike Jack, she didn't think they could trust *anyone*. Every phone call was a betrayal waiting to happen.

She went to the kitchen and called Remy again. Still no answer. She circled the kitchen, beginning to worry.

"Boo!"

She whirled around. Remy stood behind her, grinning. She bit back the curse hovering on her tongue. "Where were you? I've been looking all over for you."

He shrugged. "Here and there. Whatcha need?"

"I worry what you're up to when I'm not there to keep you in line." She softened her words with a smile.

He grinned. "Aw, you can trust me, Doc."

About as far as I can throw you, she thought with affection.

* * * * *

Jack stared at the phone number written on a notepad in front of him and picked up the phone. It had been over five years since he'd talked to Laura Sandoval. Though he rarely thought about her anymore, the idea of speaking to her now was more daunting than he'd expected.

But she was now a U.S. Attorney working out of New Orleans, with plenty of contacts in the New Orleans Police Department. She might know what was going on in the investigation of Maggie's abduction. Given his history with Marguerite, Laura wouldn't find his questions suspicious.

She answered on the third ring, her voice low and a little rough, as if she'd just awakened.

He cleared his throat. "Hi, Laura, it's Jack."

There was a brief pause, then her voice purred through the phone line. "I didn't think you were going to call me back."

"I've been swamped," Jack lied. As they got the pleasantries out of the way, he glanced at the list of notes he'd made before calling. "You rang?"

She made a soft chuckling sound. "I guess you've heard the news about Marguerite

Cole."

He arched an eyebrow, surprised to have an opening so quickly. "Yeah. What do you know about that?"

"What's in the news, but I heard about it before it hit the press. It made me think of you. I guess that's why I called."

"How much access to information do you have?" he asked, hoping he didn't sound overeager.

"I suppose a lot, if I asked the right people. Why?"

"Curiosity, I guess. I can't imagine Naughty Marguerite letting herself be kidnapped by a snot-nosed punk."

Laura laughed. "Talk about 'The Ransom of Red Chief'!"

"Exactly." Jack wrote a check mark by the first note and went on to the next. "So, what do you know about this Remy Chauvin?"

Chapter 5

"Why are we doing this?" Jack fiddled with his seat belt.

"He'll be fine," Maggie assured him. She was driving Jack to the office early so he could switch the license plate back to his own car before office hours. Remy had wanted to come, but Maggie refused. It was too dangerous. Instead, Jack had given Remy a panic button to be used if Remy felt the least bit of danger. It would buzz a corresponding receiver Jack kept strapped to his belt. Remy had seemed mollified.

"He wouldn't get far on foot, I suppose."

"Jack, relax. Remy knows he has nowhere to go."

"And he won't go anywhere without you." Jack smiled. "I never figured you for social work. I imagined you in a Manhattan office, shrinking the heads of the neurotic rich."

She couldn't blame him for that. "My perspective changed."

"I'll say. What happened?"

She cut her eyes at him. "Someone told me to grow up."

He grinned. "When did you ever listen to me?"

"It was the one time you made sense." Not that she'd thought so when he'd uttered the words moments before he left for his new assignment. It had been the first time they'd really spoken in days, since the night she'd offered him her heart and her body and he'd handed them both back to her.

She'd talked him into letting her cook dinner for to say goodbye. She just hadn't mentioned the wine and candlelight, or the tiny black dress that fit her like a second skin.

God, she'd been terrified. And excited. And so in love she couldn't see straight.

Her track record with men was bad, but Jack was different. He didn't play games. That night, neither would she. After dinner, she'd tell him how she felt about him. Deal with things like an adult.

It hadn't gone as planned. She'd been nervous as a cat, burning the pasta and dropping one of her mother's heirloom crystal wine glasses and shattering it. When Jack had comforted her, she did the only thing she knew how to do right.

She'd kissed him.

Maybe it had been wishful thinking, but he'd seemed to respond, setting off a thousand little explosions along her spine. Euphoric, she'd blurted out her feelings, her carefully planned declaration crumbling into an inarticulate confession of undying love. His look of horror had broken her heart.

He hadn't even tried to let her down gently, immediately bolting for the door.

She hadn't expected his goodbye visit. Or the words. "Grow up while you can, Marguerite." She'd managed not to cry until he left.

Only later, at the end of another humiliating relationship, had she understood what Jack meant. She'd let what Jack thought of her matter too much, just as she had with her father and her most recent disastrous affair, when the only thing that should matter was how she felt about herself. And the only way to feel better about herself was to take control--of her life, her body and her emotions. The realization changed her life.

"I guess what happened to Jimmy had something to do with your choice, too," Jack said. "Do you do drug counseling?"

A shard of old pain sliced through her heart. "I have a wonderful colleague who handles the substance abuse counseling and prevention. She's been through it herself and can talk to them where they are." She was proud of the work she did at the counseling center. When she got back to New Orleans--

Her stomach curled into a knot. When she got back to New Orleans, she wouldn't have a job.

Jack pointed to the turn-off to his office. She followed his direction, making a mental note for the trip back.

"I'm going to wrap up some unsigned contracts and let my staff know I'll be out of pocket for a few days."

"Won't they be suspicious?"

"I've done this before--some clients demand total privacy, and I handle them personally, working out of my home for absolute discretion." Jack gestured. "A left at this corner."

Within moments, they were at Jack's office. Jack started to reach for the door

handle, then turned to look at Maggie. "I know I've asked this before, but just exactly how much do you know about Remy? About his background?"

"Only what he told me in sessions."

"Which was?"

She shook her head. "It's confidential."

"Does it affect this case?"

Maggie considered the question. Like most kids who fell between society's cracks, Remy had been in his share of trouble. But he wasn't angry or violent. Even the knife-wielding bravado that had brought on their present dilemma had been born of terror, not rage. He hadn't set up an innocent police officer or murdered his foster parents. "No," she said with conviction.

Jack didn't probe further. "I'll be home as soon as I can. You and Remy may want to go over everything that's happened over the past few weeks-- work out a chronology of events. Something we can use to get a handle on this situation."

It was a good idea. "Okay."

"We'll figure this out, Willow." He leaned toward her, the spicy tang of his aftershave filling her lungs. A prickle of tension built low in her belly. He met her gaze, the warmth in his eyes sending molten awareness spreading through her.

A flutter of need built in her belly. "I know."

His fingertips brushed her knuckles. Her breath caught in her throat, trapping the entreaty on her tongue.

Kiss me.

He leaned closer, his breath moving over her lips like a phantom promise of the kiss she craved. But he drew back, dropped his hand away from her face and opened the car door.

A bubble of anticipation imploded in her chest.

She watched him stride away, her focus on the ripple of muscles beneath his suit. So strong. So solid. No wonder she'd wanted to believe he could be the man of her dreams.

As if such a creature existed.

Closing her eyes, she let the buzz of awareness subside, forcing her mind to more pressing problems. Jack hadn't been appeased by her answers about Remy. Though he hadn't pressed for more information, she doubted Jack was through snooping.

And if he asked the wrong questions of the wrong people, the whole mess could come tumbling down on top of them.

After switching the car tags without incident and getting two pending security contracts signed before 10:00 a.m., Jack assigned his best installers to the jobs and set about tying up loose ends. He briefed Hank Carr, his second-in-command, giving him a vague story about a sensitive security case. If Hank found the explanation suspicious, he was discreet enough not to comment or ask any questions Jack couldn't answer.

As he was packing up a portable security kit around noon, Laura Sandoval called with disturbing information.

"He what?" Jack sat back in his desk chair, stunned.

"He was arrested by Detective Mark Blevins and another narcotics detective about a week before the alleged murder," Laura repeated. "I can't get to the juvenile records without a warrant, but I know people who know people."

Jack clenched his fist around the telephone receiver. "So maybe he's setting Blevins up for payback."

"Blevins is a Boy Scout. Dozens of citations, ringing endorsements from the city council and the mayor. Real big hero during the hurricane. Remy's testimony would never be credible. Too easy to claim he was tryin' to get back at Blevins."

Jack's stomach clenched. If Blevins knew Remy's testimony wouldn't convict him, why would he go after Remy?

He wouldn't. Which meant Remy had been lying all along.

And Maggie was home alone with him.

"Call me if you come up with anything else. I'm working from home for a while, so call my cell or my home number." He gave her the numbers. "You haven't told anyone about my call, have you?" He'd asked her not to, giving her the excuse that he didn't need the publicity surrounding the case.

"No." There was a brief pause on Laura's end, then her voice tightened. She'd obviously guessed what was going on. "I'll call if I have more information." She rang off.

Jack grabbed his coat and headed for his car. On the road, he grabbed his cell phone. As he dialed his home number, the phone beeped. His battery was low. He fumbled through the glove compartment a few seconds before he remembered he'd left the adaptor in the Blazer the night before. With a growl, he flipped the phone onto the seat and pressed down on the gas pedal, beating the yellow light ahead with room to spare.

He'd be home in ten minutes. Five if he hit the lights right. What could happen in ten minutes?

* * * * *

"So Blevins first picked you up on St. Patrick's Day in a raid on O'Hara's." Maggie shot a stern look at Remy as she jotted down the information in the notebook she'd borrowed from Jack's office. She'd taken Jack's advice, calling Remy to join her in the living room to go back over the events leading up to the day he'd seen Blevins shoot the mystery man in cold blood.

Slouched in an armchair, one long, thin leg draped over the arm, Remy affirmed her statement with a sheepish half grin. "Tony wanted to try green beer."

"There was a raid on the bar and you were caught up in it?"

"Yeah, but I was clean. Didn't even have no beer, so they let me go." He dismissed the incident with a wave of his hand.

"But it was Blevins who arrested you?"

"Yeah, that's how I knew it was a cop who popped that guy."

Maggie flinched at the way he referred to death as if it were just a blip on a video game screen. The monster eats the avatar? No problem. There's always another one.

But in real life, one was all you got. The sooner Remy learned that lesson, the better.

"I been thinkin', Doc--why off the Bakers? Why come after us? All he's gotta say is how he arrested me a month ago and I'm lookin' to burn 'im back. I look like a punk and he walks."

"But you didn't even get booked before they dropped the charges. That's not much to get ticked off about. If I know you, it was probably one big adventure."

He grinned. "Yeah. I never rode a paddy wagon before."

"So what's to hold a grudge about? The D.A. could have nipped that attempt to challenge your testimony without much problem," Maggie pointed out.

"Come on--he's a hurricane hero. Everybody loves the guy." Remy dropped his chin. "I'm so screwed."

Maggie touched his arm gently. "Not if I have anything to say about it. Now, about the actual day of the shooting--"

The phone rang, interrupting her in mid-sentence.

She and Remy looked at each other, unsure what to do. "It could be Jack," Remy said.

Or someone else. Someone none of them wanted to hear from.

"I'll see who it is," she said

She reached the kitchen just as the answering machine picked up. A woman's voice spoke at the sound of the beep. "Jack, it's Laura."

Maggie crossed to the bar and gripped the edge of the countertop, her stomach curled into a painful knot. She recognized the bayou drawl an unwelcome ghost from the distant, bitter past. Laura Sandoval, Jack's old lover.

"I just tried your cell phone but got no connection," Laura's whiskey alto continued. "I've been givin' this thing some thought. The kid's got to be workin' some sort of payback scam against Blevins."

Maggie slumped against the counter. What the hell was Jack doing spilling his guts about Remy's case to Laura Sandoval, of all people?

"I'd keep a real close eye on your . . . contraband. Might turn out a little more dangerous than you think. I'd consider callin' in bigger guns. Talk to you soon."

Maggie stared at the now-silent answering machine. Jack had betrayed them. And to Laura, of all people. Laura, the high-strung bitch who'd treated Jack like crap and Maggie like a bratty little pest trying to pee in her cornflakes.

Could Jack possibly still love Laura after all this time?

Tears stung the back of her eyes, catching her off guard. She shouldn't be hurt, damn it. She should be mad as hell.

She batted the moisture away and stormed from the room, her mind racing. One thing was clear: she and Remy had to get out of here now. Grab what they could and disappear. She had the keys to the borrowed Blazer; they'd have to ditch the SUV soon enough, but they could go a long way before that had to happen.

She gathered their belongings into a couple of pillowcases and went to the den, ripping a piece of paper from a message book on the desk by the bookcase. Forcing herself to calm down, she jotted a note to Jack. More than he deserved, but she couldn't go without letting him know she was okay. Then she headed down the hall to the living room, where she'd left Remy.

He almost collided with her in the doorway. His eyes were wide and dark with fear. "They're here!"

She blinked, surprised. "Who's here?"

"The dudes who wanna pop me!" Remy plucked at her arm. "They're outside, Doc. We gotta hide!"

Remy's panic spread to her own shaky limbs. "Hide where?"

Remy pulled her down the hall, hooked a sharp right into the den and headed for the bookshelves lining the far wall.

Maggie skidded to a stop. "Remy--"

He reached up and pulled out a book on the middle shelf of the bookcase. Maggie stared as the bookshelf started to shimmy and slowly swing inward, revealing a hidden room.

Panic room, she realized. Unbelievable.

Somewhere behind them, a door opened. Maggie's pulse shot to high gear. Snatching up the note she'd left for Jack, she pushed Remy toward the panic room. Remy put the book back on the shelf as they scooted inside, and the bookcase swung silently shut behind them.

"I pushed the panic button Jack gave me," Remy told Maggie softly, all signs of belligerent adolescent gone, eclipsed by steely-eyed determination. "He's gonna know to come home."

Come home to what? To killers who wouldn't think twice about killing him where he stood?

* * * * *

The panic button alarm went off as Jack was rounding a curve. He gave a start at the sudden shrill ring, his hand losing its grip on the steering wheel long enough for the Beretta to veer into the next lane. He jerked the wheel, bringing the car back under control, and reached into his pocket, hoping he had accidentally set off the alarm himself. But the flashing remote light on the device confirmed the transmitter he'd left with Remy had set off the alarm.

He gunned the Beretta, trying not to panic over what might await him at home. Maybe it was a false alarm; the kid wasn't exactly the most levelheaded teenager Jack had ever come across. He wouldn't put it past Remy to set off the alarm as a prank. Or it could have been an accident.

He calmed himself with effort. He'd spent the past few days trying to reassure Maggie that she was overreacting to the danger she perceived. He didn't even think that Remy was any real danger to her, despite what Laura had discovered about the boy. So he probably didn't have anything to worry about.

But he put the accelerator to the floor anyway.

* * * * *

"You've been in here before." Maggie kept her voice down as Remy took his seat at a complicated-looking electronics control console and started pushing buttons.

"Once or twice," he admitted in equally hushed tones. He flipped a lever and a row of four monitors set into the back wall flickered to life. The black and white pictures steadied quickly, but it still took Maggie a moment to realize she was looking at camera views of the yard surrounding Jack's house. She finally recognized the house across the street by its distinctive arched awning--the camera was showing a view of the front yard.

"Are there any interior cameras?" she asked.

"I think so." Remy flipped a switch and the pictures on one of the monitors changed. Maggie moved a little closer and recognized Jack's living room. The monitor was small and the picture quality wasn't great, but it was better than not having a clue what was going on outside the panic room.

She gave a little start when two men entered from left of the frame, guns drawn. They wore caps low over their faces, making them impossible to recognize. But there was something a little familiar about the taller man, something in his walk, in his barrel-chested build.

He was one of the two cops who'd been harassing Remy outside the youth center, she realized.

Next to her, Remy uttered a low oath. She echoed the sentiment silently, quelling a rush of panic. She glanced around the cramped room. "Do you see a phone, Remy?"

He looked around and gestured toward a small gray cell phone sitting about halfway up a floor-to-ceiling set of cubbyholes housing a mind-boggling array of gadgetry. Maggie picked up the phone with a sigh of relief. Jack had drilled his cell number into her head all morning before he left. She punched in the numbers quickly and waited.

"The cellular customer you are trying to reach is not available. Please try again later."

"Damn!" She disconnected with a stab of her thumb.

"How about his office?"

She started to dial that number, then stopped. "What if he's not there?"

"You hang up."

"And have somebody check caller I.D. and find out I'm calling from one of Jack's cell phones?"

Remy looked up at her, his earlier bravado cracking to reveal the scared kid underneath. She put a comforting hand on his shoulder and looked up at the monitor. Remy's itchy fingers flicked switches controlling the monitors, keeping pace with the two intruders as they went room to room, making a quick but thorough search of the house. Maggie chewed her bottom lip, wondering if there was another way to get word to Jack about what was happening.

If he walked in on these guys--

She pushed the horrifying thought out of her mind. "Is there audio?"

Remy looked up at her. "I think so, but if we turn it on, they'll hear us through the bookcase."

Maggie searched the wall of storage compartments. Surely there were--there! She stood on tiptoe and pulled a tangle of headsets from one of the compartments. Untwisting the cords, she handed one set to Remy, keeping another for herself.

Remy plugged the cords into the output sockets. Almost immediately, Maggie heard the crackle of static, then a faint murmur of voices. She gestured for Remy to increase the audio. He turned a knob and she could make out words.

"We know they *were* here," one of the men said. The video was too fuzzy for Maggie to make out which had spoken.

"Think they're with Bennett?"

"Maybe they're hidin' around here somewhere." This comment was accompanied by a gesture of the shorter man's arm, so Maggie surmised he was the speaker.

"Prob'ly." The other man gave a nod and they moved out of camera range.

Remy grabbed Maggie's arm and pointed.

Maggie followed his worried gaze to the monitor at the far left. The camera shot was a slow pan shot of the street in front of Jack's house. Maggie didn't see anything that would excite Remy's interest; about a half-block down, a jogger was moving in the opposite direction of the house, and about a block down, a car approached the stop sign at the corner, but--

Remy reached out and lifted the earpiece away from Maggie's ear. "It's a Beretta," he whispered.

Maggie's stomach coiled. "Jack."

He was driving straight into an ambush.

Chapter 6

"There's gotta be some way--" Remy flicked another switch.

The two men came on screen on the third monitor, moving into another camera's view. Maggie slipped her headphones back over her ears and peered at the monitor, trying to make out where they were. Her heart skipped a beat as she recognized the study right outside their hiding place.

She felt Remy's fingers curl, claw-like, around her arm.

"They gotta be here," the shorter man drawled. "Or the alarm woulda been set."

Remy and Maggie turned to look at each other. The alarm.

Maggie pulled off the headset and looked frantically around the room for anything that looked like a security alarm panel. Remy grabbed her arm and pointed at the wall next to the bank of monitors. A small keypad was set into the wall.

Please, God, let that be it, Maggie thought, hurrying to the punch pad. There were no instructions, nothing to tell her if she was doing something wrong or right.

She started randomly pushing buttons.

A few seconds later, she hit pay dirt. An earsplitting wail filled the air, stopping the intruders in their tracks. Maggie stepped back and stole a glance at the outside monitor to check the progress of the Beretta. It slowed to a stop and pulled over about halfway down the block.

Maggie held her breath, wondering who'd make the next move.

* * * * *

The blare of the alarm sliced through the midday haze, startling the slim blond jogger

and the brindle Sheltie keeping pace at her side. She turned and looked toward the noise, her gaze sliding past Jack's Beretta as it slowed to a stop.

Heart racing, Jack eased the car to the curb, ignoring the curious jogger as he peered up the street. More than one house on this street had alarms installed; he'd installed half of them himself. But instinctively he knew the siren splitting the air of the quiet neighborhood came from his own house.

Movement on his front stoop caught his eye, and his heart lurched. Two men trotted down the concrete steps to a dark sedan parked across the street from his house, moving like cops--confident and aggressive, with a minimum of fuss. If not for the wail of the burglar alarm and the caps worn low over their faces, they might be mistaken for a couple of detectives doing routine legwork.

Their nonchalance scared the hell out of Jack.

He slouched low and reached into his glove compartment for his telephoto digital camera. Quelling his rising anxiety, he aimed and focused the high power telephoto lens at the two men, snapping three or four shots before they got into the sedan.

Luck was only partially with him; while they pulled out and headed away from where Jack sat in the idling Beretta, giving him a decent shot of the Louisiana license plate on the back of the sedan, most of the numbers on the plate were obscured by splattered mud. Maybe it would be enough to get an I.D. on the car, but Jack doubted it.

He waited until he no longer saw the sedan's taillights glinting in the sun, then slammed the Chevy into drive and squealed up the street. He swung into the driveway at a drunken angle, barely waiting for the car to jerk into park before he was out of the Beretta, racing up the steps to the front door.

The intruders had had the presence of mind to lock up behind them, he noted with a chill. And somehow, they'd managed to beat even his top-of-the-line deadbolt.

These guys were deadly serious.

He drew the Glock and entered the house. The wail of the alarm was loud enough to make his ears ache; he reached to his left and punched the disarm code into the keypad set into the front wall. The alarm died away, leaving an oppressive silence tempered only by the frantic cadence of Jack's heart.

He listened for movement. There was nothing.

"Maggie?"

She didn't answer.

Jack swept through the living room, his stomach roiling. "Remy? Maggie?"

He heard a soft scraping sound and raced toward it, his Glock at the ready. Pausing at the doorway to the study, he pressed himself flat and listened for the sound again.

There it was, soft but unmistakable. The door to the hidden security room opening.

"Jack?" Maggie's shaky voice was the sweetest sound he'd ever heard.

He released a pent-up breath and swung around to face Maggie and Remy, who stood in the opening of the hidden room, their eyes wide with anxiety. Jack couldn't see anyone else with them, but his training was too thoroughly ingrained to allow him to drop his guard yet. "Are you okay?"

Remy answered. "Yeah, man, but we thought you was a goner for sure!" He swaggered into the middle of the room, a scrawny little rooster pumped up with adrenaline and relief.

Jack spared him a cursory glance before his gaze returned to Maggie, who stood still and silent in the open doorway to the electronics room. He put away his weapon and took a slow, careful step toward her. "How about you? You okay?"

She nodded. "Yes."

Something was wrong, but he had no time to sort it. If he didn't phone in the error code, both his company and the police would be calling any minute to see why the alarm had gone off. He crossed to the phone on the desk and picked up the receiver.

It was dead.

"They must've cut the line." He glanced up at Maggie.

She stared back at him, her murky eyes unreadable.

He moved past her, tempted to reach out and brush his hand across her pale cheek as he did so, but something in her expression quelled the urge. He found the cell phone lying on the electronics console and called in the false alarm to the police, then called his office.

"Tried to call you as soon as the alarm came across," Hank Carr commented, "but we've got a dead line reading."

"Looks like a pine limb snapped, took the phone line with it and set off the sensors. But it's all clear on my end," Jack lied. He disconnected and tucked the cell phone in his jacket pocket. Moving out of the hidden room, he almost tripped on something lying in the floor.

He looked down at the two stuffed pillowcases at his feet, recognizing the clothes he'd bought for Remy and Maggie among the garments spilling out of the makeshift bags.

He looked up at Maggie, his gut clenching.

She met his gaze, her chin jutting. "We can't stay around here anymore. They know where we are. They'll be back." She moved past him and stuffed the spilled clothes back into the bags. She thrust them at Remy. "Go put these in the car, Remy. We're

leaving." She gave him a nudge toward the door.

Jack watched Remy leave, frowning. "What's going on?"

Maggie turned to look at him. Her dark eyes were cool and distant. "They know where we are and who we're with. They'll be back, and I intend to be gone before that happens."

He couldn't believe what he was hearing. After all he'd done, all the risks he'd taken for her and the boy . . . "Where are you going to go?"

"You don't need to know that." She turned away from him.

Anger bloomed fiery hot in the center of his chest. He caught up with her in the hallway, grabbing her arm. "What the hell do you mean, I don't need to know?"

She jerked her arm away from him. "I'm grateful for your help, Jack, but Remy and I have to go now. There's no need for you to be involved any further."

He followed her down the hall toward the spare bedroom. "What else happened here today, Maggie?"

She barred him from entering the room behind her. "You had misgivings about helping us from the beginning, Jack. I shouldn't have pressed you on it."

Confusion battled with anger. Obviously, something had gone wrong--more than just the intruders. There was no way she could have packed up those pillowcases while the bad guys were in the house. "I'm willing to help you, Maggie, you should know that by now, but you have to tell me what's going on."

Her chin trembled. "I can't tell you anything, Jack. I'm sorry. We'll be out of your hair in a few minutes."

He grabbed her as she turned away from him, drawing her toward him. She stumbled and he caught her up tightly to keep her from falling. Their legs tangled, the point of her hip pressing against his groin. His pulse, which had just begun to settle after the intruder scare, lurched back to full throttle.

"Tell me what's going on," he demanded.

"No." But even as she spoke the denial, she melted against him, her body soft and pliant against his.

His mind raced, wondering if she was playing him again. It might be a ploy to make him let her go, but there was no hint of Naughty Marguerite in the trembling body pressed against his.

So she was at his mercy. And he was just desperate enough to use her favorite weapon against her to find out what he needed to know.

Deliberately, he lifted one hand and threaded his fingers through her hair, tilting her head back, forcing her to meet his gaze. Her eyes widened and grew darker. Her

breathing quickened. Her lush body smelled of heat and fear and passion.

Need slammed through him like a physical blow, shaking his resolve, but he struggled to maintain control. He lowered one hand to the small of her back, pinning her hips against his own with a quick, fierce thrust. Her lips trembled open, emitting a small, surprised gasp.

He shifted, catching the open door with his heel and shoving it shut behind him. He slumped against the door, pulling Maggie with him, cradling her body with his own. A shudder rippled through her slim body, but she didn't pull away. Her breath was warm and sweet against his throat.

He slipped his hand under the hem of her t-shirt, splaying his fingers across the hot satin of her back. She released a shivery sigh, her body softening even more, spilling across him like liquid heat. He plunged his fingers in her hair and drew her head back, lifting her face to him. Her eyes fluttered shut and her lips trembled apart.

He dipped his head but stopped short of her lips. He wanted to kiss her, to taste her, to feel every inch of her warm, sweet body, but he forced himself to speak instead. "Were you even going to say goodbye?"

Her eyes snapped open. She went tense against him, her hands pressing against his chest. "I was going to leave a note on the desk."

He let her go. "A note."

She straightened her blouse, lifting a shaky hand to her tousled hair. "I thought it was the least I owed you."

He couldn't keep the bitter sarcasm out of his voice. "Thanks for that."

Her eyes shot up to meet his. In their depths, he saw a maelstrom of fear and doubt.

"What is it?" he asked, his anger seeping away. "What are you so afraid of?"

Her reply caught him by surprise. "Why the hell did you tell Laura Sandoval of all people where Remy and I are?"

* * * * *

They drove west in a two-car convoy connected by terse cell phone calls and an urgent need to run. Jack had said he knew where they could go "to regroup and figure out what to do next," as he put it.

Maggie's thoughts were more primal as she took up the rear in the borrowed Blazer. *Run. Hide.*

But running wasn't an option. For the first half of their trip, Jack had Remy ride

shotgun with him. He didn't say it aloud, but Maggie knew a hostage situation when she saw one. Jack knew she'd never make a run for it and leave Remy to deal with Jack and whatever his overwrought sense of honor might compel him to do with the boy.

They drove for hours, winding their way through Mississippi back roads, backtracking and detouring until Jack decided there was no one on their trail. They'd stopped around Lucedale for gas and a quick trip to a grocery store for supplies. Jack let Remy move to Maggie's Blazer at that point, giving Maggie a warning look before he went back to his car to take the lead again. After that, there had been another hour of non-stop driving, always toward the setting sun.

Now the dashboard clock read 6:25 p.m. and Maggie's eyelids were starting to droop, any residual adrenaline from their frantic afternoon now long gone. She looked over her shoulder at Remy in the back seat. The boy had fallen asleep about an hour ago, somewhere around the Stone County line.

She gazed through the windshield at the narrowing stretch of highway ahead. The signs along the shoulder indicated they were nearing a junction with I-59. North would take them to Hattiesburg. South would take them to New Orleans.

Maggie was surprised to feel conflicted. When she and Remy had fled New Orleans, she had thought she'd never want to go back. But as they neared the interstate, part of her wanted nothing more than to head south toward the color and vitality of the French Quarter and the life she'd built for herself there.

She missed Velvet, the six-foot-four drag queen living in the garden apartment below hers who made the best seafood gumbo outside of a five star New Orleans restaurant and gave it away free to anyone who'd sit and listen to her stories. She missed Oleander, the palm reader on Dauphine. And Dashiell, whose talented feet tapped at the speed of machine gun bursts while he grinned and thanked everyone who dropped a few coins in the hat.

What she didn't miss was that feeling, during her last few hours in New Orleans, that her next minutes might be her last. So when she saw the sign ahead, reminding her that she was less than a mile from the interstate on-ramp, her stomach started turning queasy little somersaults.

The cell phone rang. Jack, of course. She considered not answering but relented on the third ring. "Yeah?"

"We're getting on the Interstate. Southbound."

Her stomach flipped again. "I'm not going back to New Orleans, Jack."

The cell phone's scratchy reception couldn't hide Jack's tension. "Stay close and watch for my turn signal." He hung up without saying goodbye.

Maggie punched the "end" button and dropped the phone on the seat next to her, growling under her breath as anger overcame apprehension. *Secretive, arrogant son of a--*

"That Jack?" Remy's sleepy voice floated from the back.

"Yeah. We're almost there."

"Where's there?"

"Can't help you with that." Maggie glanced at Remy in the rear view mirror. The glow from the Blazer's dashboard lights gave his face an eerie blue glow in the darkness, until he rubbed his eyes with his fists like a child, ruining the spooky effect. "I think we have another half-hour or so of driving. Why don't you try to go back to sleep? We've had a long day."

"It's not even seven." But he sat back and fell silent.

Maggie glanced in the rear view mirror and saw that he'd closed his eyes again. A rush of affection stung her eyes, and she blinked back the moisture.

For Remy, she reminded herself. It was all for the boy, who deserved a hell of a lot more out of life than he'd received so far. And if Jack could help her keep the boy safe, she'd follow him to hell and back.

* * * * *

Matthew Archer's lodge was more rustic than Jack had remembered. The house itself wasn't primitive; Archer hadn't spared any luxuries in the lodge. But the area around the house was pure piney woods, the driveway little more than a worn path through heavy underbrush heading deep into the heart of the DeSoto National Forest.

Jack cut the lights and got out of the Beretta as the Blazer pulled into the gravel drive next to him, its headlights sweeping over the wood-slab façade of the lodge. Maggie cut the engine, and night descended around him like a blanket.

She opened the car door and got out, standing in the glow from the car's dome light. "This is the middle of nowhere."

"My client likes his privacy."

"Your mysterious client." Her voice was dry. "What is he, a super spy?"

Jack chuckled. "A diplomat."

"Same thing." Maggie shut her door. The dome light faded, plunging them into blackness. Above, the overcast sky shut out what light the moon might have shed.

Jack felt his way to the Beretta's trunk and popped it open. Light spilled out, spreading a soft glow through the inky darkness. He pulled a flashlight from the trunk

and turned to look at Maggie and Remy, who remained standing next to the Blazer. "I could use help with the supplies."

Remy came around the car toward Jack. As the boy walked into the circle of light, Jack stifled a grin. Remy's hair stood in spikes, his left cheek sporting a red imprint from the Blazer's nubby upholstery. He blinked, looking like an overgrown puppy roused too early from a nap. "Where are we?"

"A hunting lodge in Pearl River County, Mississippi." Jack stepped back so the boy could pick up one of the grocery bags. "The closest town is Picayune."

Remy picked up a couple of bags and peered into the gloom. "This is a hunting lodge? I thought hunting lodges were, like, log cabins or something."

"There's a lot to be said for creature comforts." Maggie came up behind them, the faint scent of her soap-and-water essence giving Jack a heartbeat's notice of her approach. He turned to look at her, noting the purple smudges beneath her dark eyes and the weary lines creasing her brow.

Overwhelmed by a primal need to pull her into his arms, he clung to the fine rage that had boiled up from inside him when he'd realized she had been planning to run out on him without even saying goodbye, stoking the anger as a shield against her. The last thing he needed to do right now was let Marguerite burrow her way back under his skin. Too much was at stake.

He took the bag she had pulled from the trunk and handed her the flashlight in exchange. "Lead the way," he directed gruffly, picking up the final bag of groceries from the trunk.

He and Remy followed Maggie up the flagstone walkway to the front door. Jack set the groceries on the low porch and put the key in the deadbolt. The lock was balky at first; it had been several months since Archer would have used the lodge, and the area's constant humidity was hell on moving parts. But finally it gave, and Jack pushed the door open.

An electronic voice broke the quiet. "Armed. Stay."

Jack turned the flashlight's beam to a panel a few feet to the right of the door, searching his weary brain for the code.

He punched in five numbers. "You'll need to memorize this. Six-two-five-six-three, then enter." He moved deeper into the house's narrow foyer, shining the flashlight along the wall until he came to another, larger panel set into the wall. He opened the front of the panel and flicked a couple of switches. The whole house hummed to life, and Jack started flicking on lights to drive away the darkness.

"Fifty-four inch flat screen." Remy's voice was hushed with awe as he beheld the big

screen television that took up a large span of the wall in the great room. He moved closer, peering at the various consoles stacked next to the television. "An X-Box! And they have Squirrel Smash!"

Maggie caught him by the back of his shirt as he took a step forward. "You need to find a bed and be in it. Now."

"Squirrel Smash," Remy repeated. "Flat screen."

"Bed. Now."

"Actually," Jack interrupted, "hold off on bed for a minute. I have something I need to show you."

Chapter 7

"This is what you wanted to show us?" Maggie peered into the walk-in closet. It was empty except for a pair of metal hangers pushed to the far right wall.

"What do you see?" Jack directed the question to Remy.

"A serious dust bunny problem, dude."

Smiling, Jack tugged on one of the metal clothes hangers. The back of the closet slid open, revealing a dark, narrow space beyond. Jack entered and descended out of sight.

"Whoa," Remy said. He hesitated only a second before he followed Jack into the hidden space.

Curiosity piqued, Maggie entered the dark space and found herself at the edge of a narrow stairway. Remy and Jack gazed up at her from below.

"Comin', Doc?" Remy's face split with an excited grin.

Descending carefully, Maggie joined them at the bottom. Behind Jack appeared to be a black void. A doorway?

Jack touched the wall and lights flickered on in a wave that illuminated the void, revealing a concrete tunnel that stretched as far as she could see.

"Bolthole," Jack said. "It leads to a culvert a half mile east of here. I'll leave the Blazer there in case we have to make a run for it. Anything you want to go with you in a pinch --money, I.D., personal items you don't need everyday--stay in the Blazer. We each put two changes of clothes in the trunk in case we have to bolt from here without notice. Got it?"

Remy gazed up at Jack, his face flushed with awe. "You're freakin' James Bond."

"Told you your client was a spy," Maggie said dryly.

Jack waved at the exit. "Let's go put up the supplies."

Upstairs, they emptied the bags Jack and Remy had deposited on the kitchen table. Remy pulled out a box of hair color. "Who gets the purple hair?"

"Me." Maggie took the box. "It's burgundy, not purple."

"Whatever. Do I get Lemon Twist?" Remy asked with a grin, waggling the box showing a woman with platinum blond hair.

"Yeah, that's yours."

"Can I do it tonight? I'm not tired anymore."

"Okay," Maggie relented.

Changing their looks had been yet another source of disagreement between Maggie and Jack during the long trip west. At the grocery store, Maggie had insisted on buying the boxes of hair color, despite the dent the purchase had made in their dwindling funds. Jack had argued against it but eventually relented when their argument began to draw attention.

Remy reached into the bag and pulled out a third box. He held it up like an ad spokesman and grinned at Jack. "Wheat Toast," he said. "It says it's great for covering gray."

Jack shook his head. "No."

"Come on, man--me and Doc are doin' it."

"I'm not the person everyone is looking for. We're not permanently going on the lam. We're here to regroup. Period."

"But--"

Maggie put her hand on Remy's arm. "It's late. We don't need to start a new argument. Go on, Remy." She handed him the box of blond hair color he'd laid on the table. "You go first."

Remy grabbed the box and disappeared into the bathroom. Maggie turned to Jack and found him watching her, his blue eyes smoldering beneath lowered lashes. A surge of heat coursed through her in response, despite her simmering anger, or maybe even because of it. She looked away, digging deep for every nugget of rage left over from the morning's blow-up with Jack. She didn't like losing control of her own reactions.

She couldn't trust him, she reminded herself. He'd sold her out to Laura Sandoval and lied about it. For all she knew, his relationship with Laura had never ended. Nothing to say that it wasn't still going on . . .

Nothing except the way he'd held her that morning, his body hard and undeniably aroused as he slid his hand beneath her shirt to stroke her back.

Her inability to quell the slow burn of need his touch ignited in her body was

humiliating. It had made her feel twenty-one and out of control again, on the brink of throwing herself at his feet and begging him to choose her over Laura.

She had to get a grip before she did something stupid.

* * * * *

Laura Sandoval tied her robe and peered through the fish-eye lens to see who was pounding on her apartment door.

F.B.I. Agent Travis Cooper stared back.

She leaned against the door, contemplating the consequences of not answering. Cooper wasn't the sort to give up. Even if he finally left, he'd be in her office bright and early the next morning, looking for a little payback for his trouble.

She opened the door but didn't step aside. "It's late."

"Couldn't wait." Cooper stepped forward, crowding her.

Laura held her ground. The heat of his body washed over her, not an unpleasant sensation; Cooper was an attractive guy. But it was late, and he was obviously here for reasons that didn't include a tumble in her bed. "What's up?"

"I need information about Jack Bennett."

She shouldn't have been surprised. He was known for putting two and two together. "Why?"

"I think he may be in contact with Marguerite Cole and the kid who took her." Cooper leaned his shoulder against the wall, his face mere inches from hers. "Can I come in now?"

Laura stepped aside. He moved past her, selecting a large armchair, while she took the sofa across from him.

He studied her for a moment. The scrutiny was almost tangible, as if his hands and not his eyes were moving over her, slow and thorough, missing nothing.

She broke the tense silence. "What do you want from me?"

His smile was slow and deliberate. "Have you been in contact with Bennett in the last few days?"

Cooper wouldn't have asked the question if he didn't know the answer. "I called him when Marguerite first disappeared."

"Did you think he'd have any information about it?"

"I was lookin' for an excuse to call. The kidnapping seemed as good as any." The truth was the opposite; the last thing she'd wanted to do was call Jack. She didn't want to believe he was helping Naughty Marguerite.

Even if it might help her further her own agenda.

"Just small talk, then. Between former lovers."

"That's about it."

"Could he be with them?" Cooper asked.

"I don't know." Laura schooled her features, unwilling to let Cooper read her thoughts.

"I hear he's out of pocket for the next couple of weeks." He paused, looking at her expectantly. She didn't say anything, just returned his gaze without flinching.

"Don't you think that's odd?" Cooper pressed.

"I haven't seen Jack in years. I can't begin to predict his behavior." Not true, of course. The moment she'd heard Jack's voice on the phone, she'd known he was involved. No doubt Naughty Marguerite swished her cute ass and put on the poor little rich girl act, and Jack had fallen for it in a heartbeat. He'd always been a sucker for her.

"You don't have anything to add?" Cooper looked skeptical.

Laura stood and moved toward the door. "If I hear from Jack, I'll certainly inform the proper authorities."

Cooper followed her to the door, sticking close. "Just remember that I'm the proper authority."

"I know exactly who the proper authorities are," she replied, pleased at the steely strength of her own voice.

Cooper's gray eyes swept down to consider her lips for a moment. Awareness darted through her, settling in her breasts and her lower belly. When Cooper stepped away, cool air filled the space between them, scattering chill bumps across her skin.

He left without speaking. Laura closed the door and leaned against its solid strength, trying to gather her wits.

She shouldn't have called Jack. She should have known it would mean trouble.

And trouble was the last thing she needed right now.

* * * * *

Coming in from taking a quick tour of the grounds to check the security perimeter, Jack found Maggie in an armchair near the unlit fireplace, staring out the window facing the back, though there was nothing to see but a whole lot of darkness.

She looked good as a redhead. Red was one of the few colors she hadn't tried during his time on her security detail--a dozen different shades of blond and a couple of dalliances with black and brown, but never red. The home dye had turned her golden-

brown hair a deep, exotic burgundy, emphasizing her fair complexion and the russet glints in her dark brown eyes.

She'd also taken scissors to her hair, trimming a good four inches off the length, leaving her with a somewhat untidy bob that just brushed the tops of her shoulders.

He entered the room, his footsteps audible on the hardwood floor. "Remy in bed?"

Maggie looked up, no warmth in her expression. "Finally wore himself out admiring his new hair in the mirror."

Remy had talked Jack into giving him a buzz cut to go along with the dye job; the boy now had spiky blond hair that contrasted wildly with his swarthy skin and dark eyebrows.

Jack was beginning to understand Maggie's fierce affection for the boy. Remy was bright, basically good-hearted, and brutally honest. During the first leg of the trip west, riding with Jack, Remy had told him everything, from the previous arrest by Blevins to taking Maggie at knifepoint from the youth center, all without being prodded.

But Maggie had yet to tell him her side of the truth. And, based on the cold anger he still saw in her expression, she wasn't likely to do so any time soon.

Maggie looked away. "We should make a plan."

"A plan?" Frustration edged his voice. "We have cops after us who probably have enough evidence, trumped up or otherwise, to put us all away if they find us. Assuming they let us live. There is no plan to counteract that. Not until we find someone on the outside we can trust to help us."

She pinned him with her fierce gaze. "You mean Laura."

"Yeah, I mean Laura."

Maggie turned back to the fireplace, her back stiffening. "Are you still seeing her?"

"No. We broke up five years ago."

"It took you five more years?" She looked over her shoulder at him, one eyebrow arched with surprise.

He ignored the implied dig. "She called and left a message on my home answering machine the night you showed up."

"She was calling about me?"

"Not specifically. She'd heard about your situation and it reminded her of me. So she called to tell me about it."

"Just happened to think of you, huh? Convenient." Her smile wasn't kind. "You do think a lot of yourself, don't you?"

He sighed. "It was my idea to have her check up on Blevins, not hers." He'd also had Laura check Remy's background as well as Maggie's, but he kept those facts to

himself.

"And Laura Sandoval was your first choice to do that?"

"She was convenient," he said, deliberately using the word she'd used a moment ago. "She's a U.S. Attorney with access to a lot of information in New Orleans. Information we can use."

"She's not my idea of a trustworthy confidante."

"I didn't tell her you were with me."

"Well, she knows."

He couldn't quibble with that. He'd heard her message on his answering machine, caught her unspoken meanings.

"She sent those men," Maggie said.

He shook his head. "Laura had nothing to do with that."

"How did they know to look at your house? You have to at least consider the possibility."

He shook his head. "If you think she's mixed up with crooked cops, you're wrong."

"Well, I'd have liked a vote before you decided it was okay to tell her my secrets." Maggie's voice tightened.

Jack ran his hand over his face, tamping down frustration. "You can be a real pain in the ass, Marguerite."

Maggie stood, pressing her lips together, irritation flashing in her dark eyes. She headed for the door, brushing past him on the way out. His skin thrummed where their bodies touched. "I'm going to bed."

Jack followed her to the bedroom door. "Yeah, run away, like always. You just don't want to hear the truth. The last time I saw you, you were wild, impulsive and unreliable--do you really think I could just take your word for it?"

She didn't turn around. "Yes. I should've known better."

Jack clenched his teeth, controlling a sudden rush of anger. He took a step back from her to keep from grabbing her by the shoulders and giving her a good shaking. "Goodnight."

He didn't wait for her to enter the bedroom before he went to his own room. Careful not to wake Remy, he closed the door behind him and crossed in the dark to his own bed. He sat for a moment, heart pounding with frustration and anger.

He'd be damned if he was going to grovel for her trust. He'd done his share of that with Laura, and he had no intention of playing those kinds of games again.

"I'm a big proponent of the 'keep it simple, stupid' method," Jack said as he and Remy finished their warm-up exercises the next morning.

"I'll buy that." Remy grinned.

"Come on, Rem, concentrate. This is serious."

"Yeah, yeah." Remy looked over his shoulder at the back door. "She just gonna sit there all day?"

Jack followed his gaze. The screen door remained shut to keep out flies and mosquitoes, but on this mild spring morning, the main door remained open, letting the fragrant breeze flow into the kitchen where Maggie sat, drinking coffee and watching Remy's self-defense lesson.

She was still giving Jack the mostly silent treatment, speaking only when spoken to and sparingly. Her attitude went a long way toward helping Jack keep to his resolution of not letting her get under his skin anymore.

If only she hadn't looked so damned sexy this morning when she stumbled in from her morning run, hot from the exertion, a trickle of sweat sliding over the curve of her breasts where they disappeared beneath her t-shirt. His body had let him know pretty quickly that he hadn't yet developed full immunity to her considerable charms.

Jack looked away. "Maggie can do what she wants."

"Why doesn't she need lessons, too?" Remy complained.

"She's had self-defense training," Jack answered.

"Doc did?" Remy's eyebrows rose.

"Before she took the job at the youth center." Jack had gotten that much out of her earlier in the evening, before they'd gotten crossways with each other. He'd told her his plans for Remy's training the next day. She'd told him about her lessons at a dojo in New Orleans.

Behind him, the creak of the screen door signaled Maggie's presence. Warm awareness spread over the back of his neck and down his spine. His heart rate increased.

Make stress work for you, he thought. Then he said it aloud. Remy looked at him as if he were crazy.

He should have known the 'young grasshopper' bit wouldn't work for this kid. Jack tried another tack. "You're watching a slasher movie. Hot blonde chick opens the door and there's our boy in the hockey mask. What does she do?"

"Screams."

"Why?"

"Dude with the hockey mask is there and he's gonna slash her up."

Jack took a deep breath. "Because she's afraid he's gonna slash her up."

"Same thing."

"And this fear causes what reaction in her body?"

Remy grinned widely. "Is she wearing one of those thin t-shirts without a bra?"

"Remy--" Damn the boy and his teenage hormones. It was taking all of Jack's concentration not to think about Maggie sitting behind him, shorts cut halfway to heaven and her breasts firm and round beneath that way-too-thin t-shirt.

"Okay--um...her heart starts beatin' like crazy."

"Stress," Jack said, his heart beating like crazy.

Remy nodded. "Stress."

"Ever been in a car at night and the headlights catch an animal crossing the road? The animal looks at the light and what happens?"

"He freezes."

"Right. Stress can do that to you, too." *Stress could do a hell of a lot to you.*

"So that's why the hot chick just screams and stands there, waiting to get slashed instead of running and getting away?"

Jack grinned. "Well, that and bad writing. But when you get in a life-threatening situation, your body is going to experience stress. And before you even get to the fight or flight stage, you're going to feel yourself freeze up."

"What do you do so you don't freeze up?"

"Nothing you can do. It'll happen. But if you're expecting it, you can keep stress from becoming panic. Expect that moment of shock so that it doesn't immobilize you. Then you're better able to decide whether to fight or run."

Remy nodded. "Cool. I get it."

"Great." Jack sneaked a look behind him. Maggie sat on the low stoop, her coffee cup tucked close to her chest as if to warm her. She met his gaze, her expression unreadable.

He forced his attention back to Remy. "Pick your moments. Find your opponent's weakness and exploit it. Don't let him immobilize you. You're not in this to be a hero, so if you have a chance to run from danger, do it."

He took the boy through some of the simplest self-defense moves, gauging which techniques Remy performed most efficiently and honing those skills. Every now and then, he'd steal a look at Maggie, who remained seated on the stoop, quietly watching.

It got harder to turn his attention back to Remy.

After thirty minutes, Jack called a halt to the lesson. "Good work, Remy."

The boy beamed at him, then jogged over to the stoop and dropped next to Maggie.

"Did you see me, Doc?" He chopped the air, miming a move that Jack had taught him.

"I'm Jackie Chan!"

She smiled, her eyes warm with affection. "Good job."

"Jack says you got some moves." Remy leaned back, resting his elbows on the stoop. "Show me some."

Maggie looked at Jack. "Actually, Remy, why don't you go for a run? Jack and I need to talk."

"You gonna chew him another one again?" Remy asked.

"Jog, Remy," Maggie said, her voice raspy. "Two feet, pounding the pavement--"

"Ain't no pavement."

"Woods, whatever."

Jack's heart slammed against his ribs as he recognized the slow smolder in the depths of Maggie's dark eyes.

"I ain't even seen any of your moves yet," Remy grumbled. But he set off toward the woods as she'd asked. "How far should I go?" he called over his shoulder.

"To the creek and back," Maggie replied.

"That's two miles round trip," Jack murmured.

"I know, I ran it this morning." Fire flashed in her eyes. She carefully set down the mug and rose to her feet. "You want to see my moves, don't you Jack?"

Jack's heart hammered against his chest.

Uh oh.

Chapter 8

Maggie crossed the dewy grass until she stood inches from him. The heat of her body wafted toward him, warming the slight breeze. She smelled like chicory and sweet milk.

"I don't think--" he began.

"Good." Her voice was molasses thick. "Don't think."

Desperation mingled with a slow burning fire deep in his belly. He moved without warning, grabbing Maggie's wrists.

She stared up at him, pupils wide and inky. But she didn't struggle. Didn't try to break his hold as he pulled her to him.

"You're supposed to be trying to get free," he growled. His erection pressed into the softness of her lower belly.

The first flicker of unease flitted across her face. He held her too close for her to get a knee up between their bodies, but she tried to stomp his foot. He twisted out of the way, catching her even more off balance.

"Let me go," she gritted through clenched teeth.

"You don't like not being in control." He wrapped his arm around her waist, molding her to him. She resisted briefly before melting against him, her face lifting to meet his kiss.

Sweet. Spicy. Coffee and milk, honey and sex. Her mouth parted, her tongue sparring with his. Her hands--small, hot, oh-so-talented--moved under his t-shirt, tracing the sensitive contours of muscle and bone. It was like the first time they'd kissed, all over again. Sweetness and spice, strength and vulnerability, all wrapped up in an enigma named Marguerite.

That night when she'd turned a farewell dinner into a seduction, his judgment had left him at the mercy of his desire. It was a betrayal of his sworn duty, of his relationship with Laura. But when her lips had moved beneath his, warm and vulnerable, for a few crucial seconds he'd given into the need that filled his belly every time he looked at Marguerite Cole.

He should never have kissed Marguerite Cole. Biggest mistake of his life. But he'd never forgotten that kiss.

He'd never forget this one, either.

He kissed a slow, thorough trail across her jaw line and down the curve of her throat. Slipping his hand under her shirt, he traced the ridges of her spine, one by one, made a slow exploration of her rib cage until his knuckles brushed against the swell of her breast.

Maggie uttered a soft, whimpering noise.

He teased the hard nipple. Her breath caught.

"I don't want this to happen," she rasped, even as her hands slid between them and curved around his erection. She stroked him, eliciting a growl from deep inside his chest.

"Then you should really stop that," he grated, thrusting helplessly against her hand.

She tore herself away, stumbling backwards until her calves connected with the back porch stoop. She landed hard on her butt, her dark gaze locked on his face, full of accusation.

Breathing hard and fast, Jack fought to get his body back under some sort of control. "Go inside, Maggie. I'll be inside in a little bit." Turning, he started jogging toward the woods.

"Where are you going?" Maggie called.

"To find Remy," he answered.

At the creek. The nice, cold creek.

* * * * *

Maggie glanced at her watch for the sixth time in the last half hour. Nearly eleven-thirty. She peered out the window at the sun-dappled back yard. Still no sign of Jack or Remy.

She didn't know whether to be worried or relieved.

Jack was probably looking for excuses to stay away from the house, considering what had almost happened between them. She closed her eyes, trying to figure out

why she hadn't been able to control their encounter that morning.

It wasn't that she hadn't wanted to arouse him; it had been her primary intention. Get him hot and bothered and then slam the door in his face. Show him he no longer had power over her.

Then he'd kissed her, and the reins had slipped out of her hands, sending her hurtling into passion with no way to stop the runaway sensations. She hadn't felt so out of control in years.

She'd learned the hard way that men were untrustworthy by nature, always ready to move on to the next pair of perky breasts that caught their attention. After Jack, she'd tried one more time to find Prince Charming. His name had been Tim. They'd dated a year before he ended their relationship when he realized she just wasn't "First Lady material." Like Jack, Tim had told her to grow up, to stop believing in fairy tales. Marriage was about connections. Getting power. Keeping power. Love was a shell game only little girls and fools bought into.

Once the pain had subsided, she'd taken Tim's advice to heart. Created her own system of dating. No expectations. No emotional involvement. No thought of love. Just sex without strings. Leaving a man behind long before he thought about leaving her had rarely taken an effort or elicited any tears.

Could she walk away from Jack so easily?

The question terrified her, because Remy's problems added a dimension she couldn't control. She and Jack weren't just potential lovers. They were partners in taking care of Remy. She needed Jack's help to keep her promise to Remy. There'd be no walking away until they settled Remy's problem.

This was one problem she couldn't solve by running away.

She needed something to do to keep from thinking about Jack anymore. Unfortunately, there wasn't much she hadn't already tried. She'd fixed sandwiches and made a pitcher of tea nearly an hour ago, so making lunch was out. She'd already given the place a thorough cleaning as soon as she'd come back inside. She'd tried checking the news for more information about Remy's case, but the cable nets were rehashing all the same old stuff.

Then she remembered the Internet. Jack's client had a wireless set-up. Jack had used it the night before.

Jack's lap top computer was in the bedroom he and Remy had shared the night before, sitting on the bedside table. Maggie perched stiffly on the edge of the bed, trying not to breathe too deeply for fear some warm, spicy hint of Jack's aftershave might still linger in the sheets and pillowcases.

Waiting for the notebook computer to boot up, she ran down a mental list of questions they still had about Remy's case. Who had Blevins shot? Where was the body? Why had a "squeaky-clean" cop like Blevins shot him in the first place?

Blevins wasn't working alone--two men had broken into Jack's house, and Remy had seen three men the day his foster parents disappeared. Who else might be in on it? And how had the bad guys known to look at Jack's house for Maggie and Remy?

Maggie knew the answer to that--Laura Sandoval. Jack's former lover. The woman who'd shared Jack's bed and owned his heart for at least six years. Maybe owned it still.

Okay, enough of that. Focus.

She clicked the web browser icon and went to work, searching out Louisiana news sites on the web. She had just accessed the *Times-Picayune* site when she heard the back door open. Every nerve in her body went on high alert--and not because she suspected an intruder.

Remy's voice rang through the house. "We're home!"

Maggie started to close the window when a headline caught her eye: *Body found in Lake Pontchartrain west of Kenner.*

"Maggie?" Jack's voice boomed down the hallway.

"In here," she called. She hit the link and scanned the article. *Unidentified adult male body, Caucasian, late thirties/early forties . . . homicide suspected . . .*

Jack stopped in the doorway, bracing his hands on the doorjamb. "We're back," he said.

She took in his damp clothes and hair. He looked good enough to throw down on the floor and . . . She forced her mind away from dangerous territory. "I thought you were going jogging, not swimming."

"We did both," Remy answered for Jack, ducking past him and entering the bedroom. "Whatcha doin'?"

Maggie turned the lap top computer around so Remy could see it. "Someone found a dead body floating in the Pontchartrain."

Remy's eyes widened and his face went pale. "The Bakers?"

Maggie moved the laptop aside and stood, cupping Remy's cheek. "No, honey, not the Bakers." Not that she held out much hope they were still alive, but she should've thought of Remy's fragile emotions before she threw around words like "dead body."

"The man Remy saw killed?" Jack suggested.

Maggie steeled herself against the questions lurking behind his wary blue gaze. "Maybe. White male, late thirties or early forties. Definitely a homicide, according to

detectives quoted in the story." She rubbed Remy's back. "Sound about right?"

Remy nodded. "Yeah."

"I'll go see if any of the news stations have the story." Jack headed out of the room.

Maggie and Remy followed him out at a slower pace. Maggie ruffled Remy's damp hair. "Swimming in the creek, huh?"

Remy nodded. "Jack's idea."

Heat crept up Maggie's neck. She could guess why. She looped her arm around Remy's shoulders. "Have fun?"

"Yeah." Remy grinned up at her. "You were right, you know. Jack's okay. For an old geezer."

She let herself smile at that.

They entered the small den, where Jack was working his way through the satellite channels, looking for news. "It may not be a big story outside New Orleans," he warned.

As the channels clicked by, Maggie glimpsed her father. Tension bloomed like nausea in her stomach. "Wait--go back."

Jack backtracked, stopping on one of the cable nets. James Cole was talking to a bespectacled male anchor. "I'm hoping that the boy will get in touch with us. Tell us what he wants."

The station went to split-screen, showing a slightly fuzzy school photo of Remy. He looked a year or two younger, with a bowl cut hair-do and his eyes half-closed from the camera flash. The graphic below the photo said, "Abduction suspect."

"Oh, geez!" Remy groaned.

Maggie exchanged a look with Jack. "Remy, they still think you've kidnapped me. But it's okay--we'll sort things out."

"Well, yeah, I figured it'd go down like that." Remy rolled his eyes. "But man, did they have to pick that picture? I look like a total Poindexter."

Jack laughed. "Well, at least nobody would recognize you now as the same guy, right? Suits our purposes."

"Former President James Cole," Remy read the graphic under Maggie's father's image. "Doc, what's a president doing looking for you?"

Maggie looked at Jack. He arched one eyebrow. She looked back at Remy. "He's looking for me because I'm his daughter."

Remy grinned. "No, really, why's he helping look for you?"

"He's my father," Maggie said. "Really."

Remy's eyes widened. He looked to Jack for confirmation. Jack nodded. Remy

shook his head. "I'll be damned."

"Language, Remy," Jack reminded.

"Your old man was president? Cool!" Remy's eyes sparkled. "So you, like, lived in the West Wing and everything?"

"Second and third floors, actually," she corrected, "And I was in college during my father's term in office. But I spent holidays and summers there."

"And you had people waitin' on you and stuff?"

Maggie smiled at his enthusiasm. "Something like that." She looked at Jack. He'd turned back to the TV, but she could tell by his posture that he was listening to the conversation.

"Hey, you musta had a bodyguard, right?" Remy asked.

"I did," she affirmed. Jack turned and met her gaze.

"I bet he was a big ol' gorilla."

Jack's brow furrowed with mock indignation.

Maggie grinned. "Not quite. Matter of fact, Remy, you've met him." She gestured toward Jack with her head.

Remy turned around to look at Jack. "No freakin' way."

"Yep," Jack affirmed. "I was her bodyguard when she was twenty-one. Longest year of my life." He shot her a wry look, softened by an unmistakable twinkle in his eyes.

"So that's how you know each other." Remy nodded, putting everything together now. "Hey, I bet that's why you call her Willow, right? That was her code name."

"Yep," Jack confirmed.

Remy looked back at the television, frowning slightly. "Then how come your last name's Stone, not Cole?"

The answer to that was complex, so Maggie settled for part of the truth. "I didn't like the attention that comes with being the president's daughter. I changed my name so I could pretend that my father was just some regular guy."

Remy looked at her as if she were nuts. "If my old man was the president, I'd have t-shirts printed up or something."

Chuckling, Jack turned back to the television as the segment with Cole ended. He began switching channels again.

"Didn't you have even a little fun having the president as your dad?" Remy asked.

"I sometimes enjoyed the parties," Maggie admitted. "I liked to hear the music and the food was always good."

"Stop!" Remy gestured at the television. "Go back one."

Jack flipped back a channel. On screen was a drawing of a man's forearm bearing a large tattoo in the shape of a coiling snake. The reporter's voiceover revealed the tattoo had been one of the only identifying marks on the body found in Lake Pontchartrain early that morning.

Maggie turned to look at Remy. He wore a huge grin.

"See that tat?" Remy asked. "It's the dude Blevins popped."

* * * * *

The iced tea at the Mercury Grille was strong and sweet, with a bright hint of peppermint. It was the best thing the hole-in-the-wall dive had going for it, though the burgers and cheese fries were decent. Mark Blevins shared his fries with the bald man sitting across the table from him.

"We think the Donatellos may be back in town," assistant D.A. Clint Cambridge said around a bite of cheeseburger. "Whoever popped our d.b. knew exactly what he was doing."

"The Donatellos?" Blevins' voice betrayed no tension. Grace under pressure had moved him up in the force, put money in his pocket and just might fix the problem that had washed up on the shores of the Pontchartrain earlier that day.

Cambridge wiped a trail of ketchup from his chin. "The headshot was a pro job. Base of the skull, out the mouth. No bullet to test. That's a Mickey Lombardi style hit."

Blevins had worked mob cases in his early days and remembered Lombardi's signature style. Easy to pick the bullet out of the mess beneath the body and toss it into a soda can in a trash bin miles away after dumping the body into the lake.

He'd put a lot of thought into taking out Tamburello. Played the hick southern cop, lulled the nasty little thug into a sense of control, then took him out with one shot.

He felt no regret. Offing Tamburello was like shooting a rat. Rigging it to look like a Lombardi hit was grave, siccing the Feds on another scumbag who needed taking out.

Now to snip the last dangling threads.

"Any I.D. on the d.b. yet?" he asked Cambridge.

"Not, but it's a matter of time. He's in pretty good shape, considering how long we think he's been in the lake."

Better shape than he should have been, Blevins thought. The extra rain a week earlier had messed with currents in the lake. He'd figured the body would wash up eventually, but not for a few months yet, giving the lake and its inhabitants time to render his body almost unidentifiable.

Blevins had been smart enough to go out of town for a hitman. Unfortunately, Blevins' information about Tamburello hadn't included the man's penchant for blackmail. He'd paid Tamburello enough to keep the bastard swimming in cheesesteaks for a year. He'd never expected to see the Philly hit-man's face in New Orleans again, much less within a couple of months.

Picked up on a drug charge in Philly, he'd headed south as soon as he made bail, threatening to make a deal with the feds if Blevins didn't cough up another fifty grand. Blevins had answered with a one way trip to Lake Pontchartrain.

At least, he'd thought it was one way.

"We already have a lead on his tattoo," Cambridge added. "Looks like a biker tat-- we've got some feelers out."

The fry Blevins had just swallowed stuck in his throat.

* * * * *

Jack looked across the table from Maggie to Remy and back, his expression serious. Remy seemed oblivious, his attention focused on the turkey sandwich he was eating, but Maggie felt a quiver of alarm move through her stomach, driving away what little appetite she had. "What is it?"

"We need to talk about what to do next," Jack said. "We can't stay here forever, Maggie. We need to do something to get you and Remy out of trouble. The sooner the better."

"You could smuggle us into Canada," Remy suggested.

"You're not draft dodgers," Jack said. "We have to figure out a way to prove Blevins shot the man you saw. We need help."

Maggie shook her head. "No."

"We're the only ones in the world who believe Mark Blevins is anything but a saint. It'll take evidence to change that, evidenc~~t~~ we won't find sitting here eating turkey sandwiches."

"Because it worked so well the last time you called in reinforcements," Maggie countered bitterly.

"Laura didn't betray us." Jack glared at her.

"You called her on Sunday. On Monday, bad guys came calling. That was--what? Coincidence? Bad karma?"

"Who's Laura?" Remy asked.

Maggie and Jack both turned to look at him. The boy's expression was a mixture of

confusion and anxiety, as if he half-expected them to tell him mommy and daddy were getting a divorce. "Who's Laura?" he repeated.

Maggie touched his arm. "Someone Jack used to know. He thought she might have information about Blevins. She didn't."

Jack made a soft noise deep in his throat. "Actually, that's not all I asked her."

Dread slithered through Maggie's chest. "What d'you mean?"

Jack met her gaze, apology in his eyes. Her heart sank.

"I had her check up on you and Remy as well," he admitted. "I wanted to know what you'd been doing since you moved to New Orleans. I also asked her to find out if Remy had a reason to pin a murder on Blevins that the man didn't commit."

"And what did she say?" Her voice betrayed her growing anger more than she planned.

Jack's lips pressed together, a muscle in his jaw twitching. "You checked out fine. Remy's been up front with me about some of his previous problems, and they matched what Laura told me, too. I'm satisfied you're both telling me the truth."

"Mighty nice of you." Unable to hide her bitterness, Maggie wrapped her nearly untouched sandwich in a napkin and got up from the table.

"Are you going to eat that?" Remy asked.

Maggie handed him the sandwich and went outside.

Overhead, the blinding sun leached all color from the day. Maggie squinted, already regretting her behavior. She still thought Jack was wrong to trust Laura with information about them and their whereabouts, but she should have been able to handle the conversation without acting like a jealous teenager.

And she was jealous. She hated the thought of Laura Sandoval in Jack's bed, sharing lovers' secrets. That he still thought enough of Laura to trust her with their safety. Worse still, she hated how she was acting like the brat she'd been ten years ago, the girl who'd spent more than a few hours seething over the thought of him in the arms of the beautiful attorney.

She'd worked hard not to be that girl anymore, to struggle through fears and doubts to make peace with her pain. Unable to reach a rapport with her father, she'd found the strength to let go and stop putting herself at risk to get his attention. She'd learned from Tim's lies as well, learned how to take charge of her own life, her own emotions.

But here she was, acting pouty and hurt because Jack Bennett hadn't behaved the way she wanted him to. What next--tequila shooters and dirty dancing with the next jerk she met?

Almost on their own, her feet started moving, faster and faster until she was hurdling

the low boxwood hedge separating her from the edge of the woods. Her feet hit the narrow path through the underbrush and she picked up speed, the afternoon breeze whipping her hair into her eyes and out again.

Still running, she thought, remembering Jack's words to her just two short days ago.

Always running.

Chapter 9

Jack cleaned up after lunch, trying to ignore Remy's accusing gaze. The boy might be oblivious to most of the undercurrents flowing between Maggie and Jack, but he hadn't missed the pain in Maggie's eyes when she left the kitchen.

Jack hadn't missed it, either. Part of him wanted to go outside and take her in his arms, tell her he was sorry. But he wasn't sorry. He was furious. She'd pulled the sex-kitten act that morning, not him. Too bad if she didn't like having the tables on her. And too bad if she didn't like Laura Sandoval, either. His ex was their best hope of getting out of the mess Maggie had dumped into his lap. She'd just have to deal.

"You and this Laura had a thang, right?" Remy broke the tense silence between them.

Amusement deflated Jack's anger. "None of your business."

"If Doc says we can't trust her, it's good enough for me."

Jack stopped himself from saying something unkind about Maggie, as much for his own sake as for Remy's. If he didn't know Laura so well, he might question the timing of the two cops who'd showed up at his house the day before. But Laura hadn't betrayed them. So who was left?

Travis Cooper, the F.B.I. agent he'd contacted? Cooper wasn't a friend, exactly, but Jack had never known the agent to be dishonest or corrupt. Though maybe he didn't have to be. He could have mentioned Jack's call to someone connected to Blevins, maybe mentioned Jack's connection to Maggie, to explain his interest. It wouldn't have taken much creative thinking for Blevins to figure out Maggie might come to him for help--if they knew she wasn't really the kid's hostage.

It was a lot more believable than Laura Sandoval betraying him or her own ethics as

a U.S. Attorney.

"I'll go see what Doc's up to." Remy headed for the door.

Jack caught his shoulder. "No, you go find out more about the body they fished out of the Pontchartrain. If there's nothing on TV, check the Internet."

Remy frowned but obeyed, leaving Jack alone in the kitchen.

Taking a deep, bracing breath, Jack opened the back door and went outside. The sunlight was blinding, and he almost stumbled over Maggie on the back stoop.

Regaining his balance, he sat next to her.

She'd spent their time apart running; heat rose in fragrant waves from her body, and her skin glistened in the sunlight. A tempting trickle of perspiration traced a lazy path down the patch of skin bared by her V-neck t-shirt. He watched the droplet slide beneath the three-diamond ring Maggie wore as a pendant and disappear into the hollow between her breasts.

She turned to face him. "I don't want you to contact Laura again until we know what's going on."

He didn't like being told what to do. But he bowed to Maggie's suspicions for the moment. "Okay."

Though she quickly schooled her expression, he didn't miss the look of triumph mingled with surprise that crossed her face. Naughty Marguerite, getting her way again. He was already beginning to regret giving into her.

"Does Laura know about this place?" she asked.

"No."

"Is there any way for Blevins to find it? They'll be looking for places we can hide."

"It would take a lot of luck to connect us with this place. They'd have to subpoena my records, and even then, my company has a lot of clients. This isn't the most obvious place for us to have gone. Plus, we have good security and the bolthole if we need it." He looked at her. "But we *are* low on cash."

Between them, they'd been able to get eight hundred dollars from ATMs on the way out of town, but he hadn't had time to get the emergency cash he kept at the office. Going to another ATM was too risky now. Their stash was dwindling quickly, thanks to the gas-guzzling Blazer and Remy's voracious appetite.

"I can get more money if we can just--"

"They'll be watching your bank accounts."

She looked away, lifting her hand to her chest and worrying the diamond ring between her thumb and middle finger, a familiar, tell-tale sign of anxiety. She'd always treated the ring like a talisman, rubbed it for luck, touched it when she was confused, as

if she drew power or comfort from it.

He laid his hand on her back. "We'll know more once the New Orleans police identify that body they found."

She laid her head on his shoulder and slid her hand into the crook of his arm. "I'm just so tired."

"I know." He brushed her hair away from her forehead, his gaze drawn to her parted lips. They looked pink and soft, as sweet as he remembered. Did she have any idea, that first time she'd kissed him, just how hard he'd struggled to resist what she was offering? How hard he was struggling now?

Maggie touched his jaw. Awareness coursed through him like a brushfire. "We agreed this wasn't a good idea," he said.

"I don't know why we're fighting it." Her thumb snagged his lower lip. "It doesn't have to be anything but just sex." She drew his mouth down to cover hers.

A scrap of sanity in the recesses of Jack's overloaded brain shouted to be heard over the clamor of his hungry body. He forced himself to release her, to rise from the step and move away. He sucked in a deep breath to drive away the gauzy haze of lust fogging his brain. "I can't do this, Maggie."

Maggie rose slowly, her mouth curving in a knowing smile. "I sure didn't get that impression this morning."

He shook his head. "This is a distraction I don't need."

Her face went stony, but not before he caught a glimpse of pain dart across her face. He took a step toward her in spite of his best intentions. "It can't be just sex with us. We're not strangers meeting at a bar and scratching an itch. We end up in bed together, somebody gets hurt. We don't need that."

She narrowed her eyes. "You're right."

He didn't like the tone of her voice, but there wasn't much he could do but follow her back inside the lodge.

They found Remy in the great room. From the set of his shoulders, Jack could see something was wrong. "What is it?"

Remy waved at the television.

Maggie's father was on the news again, the graphic under his name noting he was now in New Orleans. "Marguerite told me more than once his behavior with her was inappropriate," Cole was saying. "I thought she was exaggerating, to my shame."

"You never reported his behavior?" the anchorwoman asked.

Jack stared at the television in disbelief. His photo was on the screen--his driver's license photo from three years ago.

"I didn't want to ruin the man's career. Marguerite was going through a difficult phase. I didn't think she was telling the truth." Cole looked into the camera.

"Marguerite, if you can hear me--I'm sorry I didn't believe you about Jack Bennett."

Jack looked at Maggie. Her expression suffused with guilt.

He dropped heavily onto the sofa. He shouldn't be surprised; she'd pulled a dozen such stunts to make his life hell during their time together. Guarding Marguerite Cole had done more to damage his career than anything else that had happened over the rest of his stint with the Secret Service.

"You believe Mr. Bennett had something to do with your daughter's kidnapping?" the anchor asked in voiceover.

"Perhaps not at first. But I believe he's with her now, and he hasn't taken her to the authorities, has he? I'm afraid Bennett has his own agenda where Marguerite is concerned."

Remy crossed and sat down across the coffee table from Jack, holding a paper sack. He reached into the sack and pulled out a box, setting it on the table in front of Jack.

It was the unused box of hair color.

* * * * *

Jack pitched the bottle of hair dye slowly from one hand to the other, taking a certain perverse pleasure at the smack off the cardboard against his palm. He glared at the tanned, blond pretty boy on the box, all dimples and blinding white teeth.

He was not going to turn himself into a Ken doll and run with his tail tucked between his legs just because the cops were looking for him. Hell, yeah, they were looking for him. They ought to be--he was aiding and abetting a kidnapping.

His life was out of control. Two nights ago, his biggest worry was whether or not to talk a client into a newer, more expensive alarm system. He had a handful of pending contracts and more in the negotiating phase. Yet here he was, sitting in a cramped little bathroom, staring at a bottle of blond hair color and brooding like some damned Victorian poet.

All because of a woman.

Well, it was over. He was taking control. Of the case and of the sexy game of cat and mouse he and Maggie had been playing ever since the night she burst back into his life.

He wanted her. She obviously wanted him. And it was only sex, right? Forget what

he'd said this afternoon. If she wanted him buried inside her, driving her to screams of pleasure, no strings attached, then he was damned well enough of a man to do it her way.

Damned straight.

He hurled the box of hair color at the bathroom door.

* * * * *

"I should go," Remy said.

Maggie looked up to find the boy standing at window. Waning afternoon sunlight filtered through the trees outside, casting the boy's profile in gold. He looked oddly beautiful, his dye-lightened hair shimmering like a halo.

And he looked young. So young.

Maggie's heart clenched with affection. "Go where?"

"Anywhere." He turned to look at her, his gaze unexpectedly serious. "I go away, the trouble goes away."

Her stomach twisted into a knot. "Remy--"

He smiled slightly. "I was thinkin' I could hitch a ride to Mexico. *Se habla* a little *Español*, you know."

Maggie shook her head. "No. We're a team, remember? You're not going anywhere without me."

"What about Jack? Is he on the team, too?"

Maggie wished she knew the answer. Jack had disappeared into the bathroom a half-hour earlier, carrying the box of hair color. They'd heard nothing from him since.

Suddenly, something smacked against the bathroom door, making Maggie jump. She turned around quickly, half-expecting to see a hole in the door. But it was intact. "Jack?"

"Dropped something." His voice was muffled by the door.

Maggie looked at Remy. "We're not through with this." She crossed to the bathroom and tapped on the door. "Jack?"

After a brief pause, the door opened. Jack loomed in the doorway, large and daunting, blocking her from entering. After a moment, he stepped back to let her inside.

As she entered, her foot kicked something on the floor. The unopened box of hair color, its corner now smashed in.

"I'm not dyeing my hair." Jack's voice was quiet but firm.

Maggie closed the door behind her, shutting them inside together. Unfortunately,

the combination of small bathroom and big, sexy man made coherent thought damned near impossible.

Jack seemed to surround her, the force of his restless emotions hitting her like a tidal wave and dashing her good intentions against the rocks of their relentless attraction. She'd come here to apologize, to explain, to discuss what to do next. Anything but to walk up to him, curl her fingers around his neck and rise to her tiptoes to kiss him.

But where Jack was concerned, she'd never been much good at sticking to a plan.

His lips moved roughly against hers with punishing pressure, but softened a moment later, pleasure replacing pain. He nibbled at her lower lip, soothing the nips with his tongue. Lifting her onto the counter, he nudged open her thighs and moved urgently between them, pressing against her, hard and hot.

She swallowed a low moan as liquid fire shot through her belly down to her aching center, spreading heat and moisture.

His hands roamed over and under her cotton t-shirt, branding her skin with his fiery touch. He slid his hands lower, cupping her buttocks, squeezing, pressing her against his hips until she felt the hard evidence of his desire.

She tangled her fingers in his hair as he rained kisses over her face and throat, then moved lower, his mouth dancing across the soft rise of her breasts through the thin cotton. More heat flooded her body, settling in the softness cradling his growing erection. "Is this really what you wanted from me ten years ago?" he growled against her breast.

Maggie drew his head up, forcing him to look at her. "I thought we decided this was a bad idea."

He gazed at her for a long, unnerving moment. His lip curled in a half-smile. "When did you start listening to me?"

Maggie's lips twitched. "I'm serious. We have to talk."

"I'm not the one who barged in here, hormones blazing."

She put her hands on his shoulders and gave him a nudge backwards. Sighing, he retreated to the wall opposite the sink. There was still precious little space between them, but at least he was far enough away that she could draw a steady breath.

"Why aren't you going to dye your hair?" she asked.

His chin jutted forward. "I'm not going to play fugitive."

"You are a fugitive."

His lips tightened. "I don't have to be."

Maggie's muscles tightened, but she tried not to show her fear. "So you're saying

this is the end of the road for you."

"It's got to be the end for all of us. You must see that."

"What I see is that there are only two possible ways that the New Orleans police connected you to me. Either your psycho ex-girlfriend sold you out, or those thugs who broke into your house are New Orleans cops with enough connections and clout to finger you without anyone asking any hard questions about how they got the information. Either way, we're screwed."

"Which is why we have to get help."

"From whom? Laura Sandoval is a U.S. Attorney, for God's sake. How much higher up can we go?"

"I'm telling you, Laura didn't sell us out."

"Hell hath no fury . . ."

Jack shook his head. "She'd have sent real authorities to pick me up, not a goon squad with lock picks."

"Those goons didn't have any trouble finding where you lived. They didn't have any trouble picking your insanely complex deadbolt locks. How far does their power reach?"

"They're cops. They know about beating locks. But they didn't know how to disable the alarm system, did they? They don't know everything. With the right help, we can beat them."

Maggie gazed at him for a long moment, wishing she could believe him. She was tired of being afraid. She hadn't been able to sleep soundly in days, subconsciously listening for the out-of-place noise, looking for the lurking stranger.

She wanted to go home to her cozy French Quarter apartment and pretend she'd never walked into the too-neat living room of the Baker house and plunged her world into a tailspin.

"What do you want to do?" she asked finally.

"We have to start high up the chain. There's an F.B.I. office in Mobile. I don't know any of the agents personally, but the office has a good reputation for integrity and competence. I can arrange to meet an agent alone first, if you want. You and Remy can stay here until I come for you."

Maggie could see the doubt in his eyes, but she couldn't tell what worried him most--that the F.B.I. wouldn't come through for them as he hoped, or that if he left Remy and Maggie alone, they wouldn't be here when he came back.

She could hardly blame him for that, she supposed. They'd tried to ditch him twice already. "What if things go wrong?"

"Regardless of your father's media blitz, I have a good reputation, people in high

places who'll vouch for my honesty."

She slid down off the sink and took a step toward him, closing the distance between them. She curled her fingers around his. "I don't doubt that. But I promised Remy I'd take care of him. We can't be wrong about whatever we decide to do next, for his sake."

He lifted her fingers to his lips. "You know I'll do whatever it takes to protect Remy, right?"

She nodded. "I know."

He released her hand. "So we call the F.B.I.? At least to get a feel for where we stand, legally?"

She took a deep breath and nodded again.

Threading his fingers through her hair, he drew her to him and pressed his lips against her forehead. "Brave girl."

"I really am sorry, you know," she murmured against the front of his shirt. "About what I told my father. I was a horribly messed-up kid back then. I was hurt that you didn't even blink when I made passes at you."

"Of course I blinked." He nuzzled her ear.

She looked up at him. "You did?"

"You were twenty-one, hot as a firecracker and a big fan of tight little black dresses. I'm a man. What do you think?"

The rush of pleasure coursing through her unnerved her, but she forced a smile. "I'll take that as a compliment. I think."

"I like you better like this, though." He smoothed one hand over the curve of her hip. "Not quite so scrawny. Or bratty." The corners of his lips rose. "Most of the time."

Something about Jack had changed, Maggie realized. He exuded power and confidence, without the flicker of doubt she'd always seen in the depths of his blue eyes during their other close encounters.

This new Jack was sexy. Irresistible.

And dangerous.

She drew away, retreating to the sink. Gripping the tile countertop behind her to give her hands something to do besides reach out for him again, she asked, "When do we call the F.B.I.?"

He searched her face for a moment before he answered. "As soon as possible, I think. Now that the Feds know I'm connected, it's a matter of time before they find this place."

"I thought you said we were safe here."

"From goon squads without the resources of the F.B.I., yeah, I think we're safe. But the Feds will almost certainly subpoena my personal and business records. It'll take a while to work through the files and put things together, but I wouldn't put it past some blue-flame ladder climber in the F.B.I. to finger this place. The owner's out of town for months, it's hidden away in the Nowhere, Mississippi--"

The hair on the back of her neck prickled. "So they could be heading our way as we speak."

"Not yet. But it's probably a matter of days, not weeks."

Maggie tamped down her rising panic. Even after Jack called the F.B.I., there'd still be time to back out if she believed it was the only way to keep Remy safe. Time to go over Remy's story one more time, to figure out what he might have seen or heard that would add credence to his version of events.

"Let's go tell Remy what we've decided." Jack took a step toward the bathroom door.

Maggie caught his arm. "Let's discuss it with him first. He needs to feel that he's part of the decision."

Jack smiled slightly. "You turned out a lot smarter than I thought you would."

"Thanks, I think." She opened the bathroom door and called Remy's name. Only silence answered her.

Chapter 10

Maggie's gaze darted around the empty great room. Apprehension rose in the back of her throat. "Remy?"

"Maybe he went outside." Jack headed for the back door, while Maggie checked the bedrooms and the bathroom off the smaller bedroom, heart sinking.

Remy was in none of those places.

Almost the last thing Remy said to her was that he thought he should leave. Had he run away?

Why hadn't she stayed out in the great room with him instead of cornering Jack in the? What was wrong with her?

She was losing control of everything. Her body, her mind and now her heart, all over a man who'd made it clear ten years ago that he didn't love her the way she loved him.

Focus, Maggie. Remy comes first. He has to come first.

As she returned to the great room, she heard the back door open and the sound of Jack's voice. Remy's younger voice answered, and Maggie nearly wilted with relief. She found them in the kitchen, Remy gazing up at Jack with a pleading expression. "Come on, it'd be just like camping."

"After the scare you just gave us, you think I'm going to let you out of my sight?" Jack growled. The tremor behind Jack's anger drew Maggie's gaze his way. The look he gave the boy was full of tender exasperation.

Her breath caught. How many times had he looked at her exactly that same way ten years ago? Back then, she'd seen only the frustration, the carefully controlled anger. How had she missed the affection so evident to her now?

Remy turned to Maggie. "I didn't run away or nothin'! I just went exploring. Tell him,

Doc!"

Maggie dragged her gaze from Jack's face. "No, Remy. You went exploring without telling anyone where you were going. I don't think you should be rewarded for that."

"You two were takin' forever in the bathroom." Remy made a face. "And what was that about, anyway?"

Flushing, Maggie glanced at Jack and saw the same tender frustration on his face that she'd seen when he was talking to Remy. But smoldering beneath it all was desire, fierce and unquenched by their bathroom encounter.

Remy went on, ignoring the heated undercurrent flowing between Maggie and Jack. "Aw, come on, I just wanted to look around. I found a big ol' bunkhouse in the woods, just a little ways behind the house, Doc. It's really cool! It's got, like, a bunch of beds and a bathroom and a wood stove! I never seen a wood stove before, except in books."

"You read books?" Jack asked, his voice gruff.

"One with a lot of pictures." Remy rolled his eyes. "Look, I'm sorry I freaked y'all out, but come on! I've always wanted to stay in a bunkhouse."

"Bunkhouse?" Maggie looked to Jack for more information.

"My client keeps this place for hunting. Sometimes he brings his wife and daughter for the weekend, so he built this house so they'd have somewhere comfortable and modern to stay. But when it's just him and his friends, here for a hunting weekend, they use the bunkhouse. It's closer to the green fields and has all they need for hunting."

"I could stay there at night so Jack and me wouldn't have to share a room." Remy crossed to Maggie, giving her his most wheedling look. "C'mon, Doc, say yes. You know you want to."

She looked at Jack again. "What about security?"

"There's a security perimeter around the entire property. We'll have plenty of warning if someone trespasses. He'd be safe," Jack admitted.

Maggie nibbled her lip, torn between caution and the need to give Remy a little enjoyment. After all, their reprieve was about to come to an end. Once Jack contacted the F.B.I., it might be a while before Remy had a chance for a little fun.

And the look in Jack's eyes made it clear that with Remy was out of the house for the night, he had every intention of finishing what they'd started in the bathroom.

She could stop it by telling Remy no. One simple word and she would be safe from Jack--and herself.

Instead, pulse pounding in her throat, she said. "Okay."

Remy yelped with excitement, pumping his arm in victory. He darted toward the door, but Jack caught him by the back of his shirt and directed him toward the bedroom.

"Get some clean sheets and a blanket. It's not well-heated and if there are sheets on the bed, they'll need changing."

Remy ran into the bedroom to grab bedclothes. Jack turned to Maggie. "When do we tell him about going to the F.B.I.?"

"Tomorrow," Maggie said. "Let's let him have one night of being a kid while he still can."

Remy barreled out of the bedroom, sheets and blanket wadded up in his arms, and made a dash for the back door.

"Wait, what about dinner?" Maggie asked. "Hot dogs?"

Remy grinned. "Can I cook them on the wood stove?"

"No!" Maggie and Jack said in unison.

"Be back here at five for dinner," Jack added. "And if you're late, you can kiss the bunkhouse goodbye."

Remy grinned at them both and headed out the back door, hitting the ground running.

Jack turned to look at Maggie, meeting her gaze. Amusement was evident in his expression. So was apprehension. And beneath it all, something dark and roiling and thrilling.

Something that reminded her that night was falling, cool, blue and inexorable.

* * * * *

Laura Sandoval paced slowly around the colorful French Quarter loft apartment owned by the woman who now called herself Maggie Stone. Larger than Laura's condo in the Warehouse District, the loft was furnished with a funky mix of expensive modern furniture and eye-catching folk art that adorned shelves, tables and exposed brick walls throughout the space.

She watched James Cole make a slow turn around his daughter's apartment, moving with an easy grace that Laura suspected came from decades of practice. When he spoke, he sounded humble. Sincere. "Thanks for letting me come here."

Laura wasn't fooled. Cole was a politician to the core, his words carefully chosen to illuminate or conceal, depending on his intentions. Even his expression of gratitude was carefully calculated to paint the picture of heart-sick father. She particularly liked the way he walked thoughtfully around the room, touching each piece of furniture with near reverence and just a hint of wistful nostalgia, although Laura would bet a year's salary Cole had never stepped foot in his daughter's apartment before this evening.

"What are you looking for, exactly, sir?" Agent Travis Cooper stood near the doorway, detached and watchful. Cole had contacted the F.B.I. agent with his request for a walk-through of his daughter's New Orleans apartment. Cooper, for reasons Laura hadn't yet figured out, had invited Laura to tag along.

"May I see her bedroom?" Cole ignored Cooper's question.

Laura inclined her head toward the open staircase ascending to the second floor. She followed the former president upstairs into his daughter's airy bedroom, where a platform bed dominated, surrounded by an eclectic mix of nice mahogany pieces interspersed with what Laura suspected were thrift store finds.

Cole paused by the bed briefly, just long enough to look like a loving father without drifting into creepiness. He turned to the dressing table, where a small collection of cosmetics lay scattered in front of a small jewelry armoire.

Cole looked through the necklaces hanging inside the armoire. Apparently not finding what he was looking for, he started opening drawers.

"Are you lookin' for something specific?" Laura ventured.

"Her mother's ring." For the first time, there was no artifice in his voice. "Worth over thirty thousand dollars."

Cooper cleared his throat. "And you're looking for it because--"

Cole turned on heel quickly, his expression lined with disgust. "Are you implying I'm here to scavenge for jewelry while my daughter's life hangs in the balance?"

"I'm just wondering what you're hoping to accomplish here," Cooper responded impatiently. "I thought you had something to add to our case by coming here, but what you think rifling through your daughter's jewelry can accomplish--"

"Do you believe the ring might be instrumental in helpin' us find your daughter?" Laura kept her voice gentle, though she was only marginally less annoyed than Cooper appeared to be.

"You said no money has been withdrawn from my daughter's bank accounts since the day she disappeared, correct?"

Laura nodded.

"What about Jack Bennett's bank accounts?"

"He withdrew five hundred dollars the same day he told his associates that he'd be out of pocket a few days. No withdrawals since that time; we have his account tagged."

"They're running low on money, then," Cole said.

"You speak as if your daughter's a willing participant in her abduction," Cooper commented.

Cole looked at the F.B.I. agent as if he were an idiot. "Of course she is. My

daughter is just naïve and gullible enough to believe that boy's lies and try to help him."

So the old man could tell the truth when it suited him, Laura thought. "Okay. They're runnin' low on money," she said aloud. "What would Marguerite do?"

For the first time, James Cole looked uncertain. He sat heavily on the edge of his daughter's bed. "I'm not sure. I hardly know my daughter anymore."

"You're looking for the ring," Cooper pressed. "Why?"

"It's the most valuable thing she owns besides her trust fund. And she'd know you'd have her bank accounts flagged."

"But she might try to sell the ring."

Cole suddenly looked his age. "It's hard to imagine her letting go of that ring. It has a lot of sentimental value. But maybe if she were desperate enough--" He slumped forward, head down, his forearms resting on his knees.

Laura crossed to where Cooper stood. She kept her voice low. "I'll contact pawn shops in a five-state area. I'll get President Cole to give me a detailed description of the ring."

"I'm going to be out of town at a meeting tomorrow, but I still want to be contacted directly with any hits," Cooper said. "I don't want this to fall through the cracks."

"Of course," Laura said. But she had her own ideas about who'd get the first heads up if Marguerite hocked Mommy's ring.

And it definitely wasn't Agent Cooper.

* * * * *

"Maggie?" Jack's voice cut through the residue of her dream, drawing her awake. It took a moment to regain her bearings, to recognize the comfortable great room of the hunting lodge, the nubby chenille throw clutched between her rigid fingers. Jack crouched in front of the sofa where she half-reclined, his expression concerned. "You cried out."

She rubbed her eyes, trying to remember what she'd been dreaming about. It was hazy but she had a definite sense of creeping danger. "I'm okay. Must have been a nightmare or something." She tried to smile, but sense of foreboding lingered like a bitter taste in her mouth. "Where's Remy?"

"Out in the bunkhouse." Jack smiled. "I told him it was too early to go to bed, but he kept yawning and swearing he could barely keep his eyes open." He rose and sat on the sofa beside Maggie. "Dishes are done and leftovers put away."

The feral gleam in his eyes drove away the last vestiges of sleep. She eyed him

warily. "I'm sorry I dozed off and left you guys to do the clean-up."

"You cooked, we cleaned. Fair deal." He tangled his fingers in her mussed-up hair. She let herself relax against him, pressing her forehead into the curve of his throat. His arms moved around her, holding her close.

"Remy doesn't sleepwalk, does he?" he murmured.

She shook her head. "Not that I know of."

"Good." He cupped her chin in the curve of his palm, tipping her head back to brush his lips against hers. Even that light, undemanding kiss was enough to send her reeling, as if the earth had fallen away beneath her feet and his arms were the only thing keeping her from plunging into oblivion.

Against her rib cage, the pocket of Jack's leather jacket began to vibrate, jarring her. She forced a saucy grin. "Is that a phone in your pocket or are you just glad to see me?"

Jack gave her hair a gentle tug and turned away just enough to reach into his pocket for the phone. He glanced at the display panel on the phone. His unsmiling expression gave Maggie a sudden chill. She craned her neck to read the caller I.D. display.

And saw the name "Laura."

Her stomach dropped and she looked up at Jack. His attention was on the phone, his brow furrowed and his jaw muscles tight. He waited for the phone to stop vibrating and stuck it back in his pocket. "It can wait." He sat back against the sofa cushions, but kept a little distance, his expression suddenly tense and faraway.

Maggie stood slowly, making a show of stretching, though her stomach was turning queasy little flips. She licked her dry lips, wondering if she should press him to tell her that the call was from Laura. Would he admit it? Or would he lie and say the call had been from someone else?

Maggie didn't want to know. She was exhausted, emotionally on edge. She didn't think she could bear it if he lied to her about Laura. She walked into the kitchen, making a show of wiping down the breakfast bar with a dish towel. But she kept her eye on Jack, trying to read his expression.

He chewed his lower lip, his expression bemused. Maggie could almost see his mind churning through his options. Call Laura back? Ignore the call altogether?

Unable to bear the suspense, she laid down the dish towel. "I'm heading to bed. Tomorrow's going to be a long day for everybody."

He looked up, surprised. "You're going to bed now?" He didn't add "alone" but the implication was there.

"Long day tomorrow. I'll talk to you in the morning."

She crossed to the bedroom, anxiety swirling in the pit of her belly. What would she do if he joined her inside, tried to finish what he'd started before Laura's call? Would she call him on his evasion, see if he lied to her face? Would she pretend she'd never seen Laura's name on the phone display and take whatever pleasure he could give her in the short time they had left before he went to Mobile?

But he didn't follow her to the bedroom immediately, though she left her door slightly ajar. Busying herself with undressing, she moved in near-silence, listening for any sound from outside.

Was he calling Laura? She strained to hear his voice, but all the only sounds coming from beyond her bedroom door were faint footsteps as Jack moved around the great room. Through the narrow crack in the doorway, she saw the lights dimming, one by one, until finally there was only darkness. A moment later, Jack's footsteps crossed to her door and paused there a moment.

Maggie froze, her heart suddenly racing.

The silence on the other side of the door became a living thing, enveloping Maggie with exquisite tension until all she heard was the jackhammer pounding of her pulse in her ears.

Please come in, she thought, forgetting her suspicions, her fears, even the danger they were in--everything but the way Jack's hands felt on her skin, the warm, slick slide of his tongue over hers, the rough timbre of his voice in her ear.

A floorboard creaked. The soles of Jack's shoes made faint squeaking sounds as he moved past her door to the other bedroom. A doorknob rattled. There was the soft click of a door closing.

Then, silence. Ordinary, uneventful silence.

Maggie dropped to the side of the bed, her knees giving out on her. She took several swift, deep breaths, forcing her rapid heartbeat to settle into a slower, steadier rhythm.

The scary part was, she was starting to like the way he made her feel--reckless, off-kilter, breathless and electric. Like a roller coaster at full speed, whipping around the curves so fast that she could barely hang on.

She used to hate that feeling, that loss of control.

Why didn't she hate it now?

* * * * *

By eleven, it was clear to Jack he wasn't going to fall asleep anytime soon, and the

oppressive silence of the bedroom was starting to slowly drive him mad. When Remy had announced his intention to sleep out in the bunkhouse, all Jack could think about was being alone, finally alone, with Maggie. Nothing to interrupt. Nothing to keep them from finding out just how deep and far their feelings for each other really went.

Then, Laura had called.

He should have taken the call. Maybe she knew people in the Mobile F.B.I. office. She could go to bat for Jack with one of the agents, make sure that he listened to what Jack had to say. He should have answered the damned phone.

But Maggie didn't trust her, so he'd ignored the call.

These days everything he did came back to Maggie. She knew more ways to get under his skin than he knew existed.

Jack closed his eyes, trying to shut out the thoughts and emotions destroying his ability to think clearly and rationally. *If I were trying to handle this situation for a client, what actions would I suggest they take to solve the problem?*

The answer lay against his hip, small, compact but oh, so powerful in this particular situation. He slipped his hand into his jacket pocket and pulled out his cell phone.

* * * * *

Breakfast was a tense, quiet affair, once Remy's initial outburst of protest at Jack's plan subsided. Afterwards, Jack outlined for Remy and Maggie his plan for the day, including the fact that he wouldn't be able to use the cell phone to keep in touch. "They probably don't have probable cause to get a wiretap warrant, but I don't want to risk it."

"I don't like this, Jack." Remy looked up at him, his eyes wide and dark with fear. No hint of his usual bravado remained.

"I know. I don't like it either." A fierce protectiveness surged through Jack, surprising him. Until this moment, it hadn't occurred to him that he was involved in this mess for any reason other than helping Maggie. But maybe he was trying to protect Remy, too.

Remy hadn't asked to have addicts for parents or to be shuffled around in the foster care. And despite it all, he wasn't a bad kid. Already, he had responded well to the combination of Maggie's tenderness and Jack's discipline, and what he lacked in manners he made up for in brains and courage.

Jack could think of worse things to be than Remy Chauvin's advocate.

He squeezed the boy's arm, giving him a reassuring smile. "We can't keep going like this. We have to have help."

"Promise you'll be careful." Beside Jack, Maggie's voice was quiet, low with tension. He let go of Remy's arm. "I will."

"Don't walk into a trap." There was an odd, almost defeated tone to her voice.

"They don't know I'm coming. I have the luxury of surprise." But her pessimism was apparently contagious; he felt the muscles of his abdomen grow tight with apprehension.

"Please be careful. There aren't a lot of people you can trust right now." Her eyes brimmed with an odd combination of fear and sadness. A shiver ran down his spine.

Maggie and Remy walked with him to the Blazer, the better vehicle to take since it was likely police had an A.P.B. out on the Beretta. He wished he had a moment alone with Maggie to talk her out of her anxiety. Despite his own qualms, he knew they couldn't go much longer without help. Their money was running low; filling up the Blazer with gas for the trip was going to put a big dent in what was left.

But with Remy there, he could only squeeze Maggie's hand and whisper his assurances that by the end of the day, they would all be safe. She responded by pressing her forehead against the side of his neck. "Be careful."

He stroked her hair. "I will."

She stepped back, robbing him of her soft warmth. The day seemed colder than ever as he slid behind the wheel of the Blazer and started down the gravel drive. He cranked up the heat, letting its artificial warmth drive away the bone-deep chill that had crept over him as he watched Maggie and Remy grow smaller and smaller in the rear view mirror as he drove away.

He felt like a soldier going off to war, leaving his family behind, not sure he would ever see them again.

Chapter 11

Dark clouds rolling in from the Gulf of Mexico blanketed the piney woods around the lodge with unrelenting gloom. Rain threatened, but so far it had held off. Maggie glanced at her watch. Almost eight thirty a.m. Jack would be nearing the Alabama state line.

She pulled his leather jacket tightly around her, breathing in Jack's unmistakable scent, a spicy blend of soap, aftershave and man. She filled herself with the smell, the memory of him, evoking images old and new. She missed him desperately already.

What would she do if he never came back?

Her skin crawled with the need for someone else to share the space around her, fill it with warmth and noise. With Jack gone, the lodge felt empty and dead.

Remy's still here, she reminded herself. *Remember him?*

But he'd gone back to the bunkhouse after breakfast, still kid enough to find pleasure in something as simple as new, interesting surroundings.

She should check on him, she thought, heading outside.

A brisk breeze ruffled her hair as she followed a lightly-worn path into the woods. Settling deeper into Jack's coat, she picked up her pace, her quicker movements making the edges of the jacket flap. Something in the right pocket slapped against her thigh with each step. She reached into the pocket, her fingers closing around a cool, smooth shape.

Jack's cell phone.

Maggie pulled the phone from the jacket pocket, gazing down at its blank display panel. Laura Sandoval had called him on this phone last night. Had he called her back?

It would be easy to find out. Push a button and have the answer to the question that had plagued her all night.

Rubbing her thumb across the power button, she hesitated. Jack had put a lot on the line for her and Remy, and she owed him a little trust. But she also had a right to know if he had betrayed them to a woman who might be the enemy.

She pushed the power button. The phone hummed to life.

Maggie took a deep breath. *Please don't be there.* Clicking through the "recent calls" menu, she found a call placed at eleven-forty five p.m. to a New Orleans area code.

Heat swept up her neck into her cheeks, made her ears ring and her head feel light. Her chest tightened. Her vision blurred. She dashed the moisture away with her fingertips.

Jack had made his choice. His loyalties still lay with Laura Sandoval. Maggie and Remy couldn't depend on Jack, since obviously they weren't his number one concern.

Maggie had always known she might have to go it alone.

Time to put plan B into motion.

* * * * *

Jack reached the Water Street exit off I-10 a few minutes after nine. From there, he had only a few blocks' drive to the sprawling building that housed the F.B.I.'s Mobile Field Office.

"The only agent I know by name is Kevin Dewberry," Laura had told him on the phone the night before. He'd been vague with his inquiry and Laura hadn't asked questions, just told him she'd known Dewberry from her time in D.C. a few years back. "I didn't know him well, but he seemed pretty straight up."

Jack hoped she was right about Dewberry, because he was less than a block from the F.B.I. building and in a minute, he was going to have to put his life--and the lives of Maggie and Remy--in the F.B.I. agent's hands.

Though there was plenty of parking at the F.B.I. building, Jack pulled into a lot across the street instead and parked the Blazer in the middle of a sea of cars and trucks. His view of the F.B.I entrance remained unobstructed, however, allowing him a good look at what he'd begun to think of as enemy territory.

This wasn't who he was, this wary creature peering out at the law-abiding world through suspicious eyes. He was the lawman, the one who protected and served. The F.B.I. and police were his allies, not his adversaries.

When had it all gone wrong? The minute he gathered up Remy and Maggie for the dash across south Mississippi? Lied to his co-workers? Switched car tags? Or had it been when he'd welcomed Maggie into his life with open arms and raging libido?

God help him, he'd do it all again for her. Maggie was in danger. Someone with a whole lot of connections didn't want her back in New Orleans talking to the wrong people and asking the wrong questions. She needed Jack's help and protection, and he was going to give her all he had.

It's what he did best.

* * * * *

"Laundry?" Remy looked at her as if she were crazy.

"There's a laundry place down the highway. It'll be nice to have clean clothes to meet the F.B.I. agents once Jack sets things up." She forced herself to smile at the scowling boy, not wanting him to catch a glimpse of the bitter anger driving her into action. He didn't need anything more to worry about.

During her sleepless night, Maggie had given a lot of thought to all the possible outcomes of Jack's trip into Mobile. It would have been nice to comfort herself with the rosier outcomes she'd considered, but the odds weren't in their favor.

Especially now that she knew Jack called Laura Sandoval last night, putting them all into grave danger.

If everything went to hell in Mobile, Maggie needed a back-up plan, a way to get Remy and herself to a safer place. For all his attention to details, Jack hadn't given much thought to what they would do if something happened to him in Mobile.

But Maggie had.

Remy scowled. "I don't think Jack'd want you drivin' around. The cops'll be looking for his car."

His concern made Maggie's heart turn flips. Sweet kid, trying to be the protector like his hero Jack. "It'll just be a couple of hours. I'll wash and dry and be right back." She guided him toward the sofa in front of the television. "Just think, two hours of non-stop Squirrel Smash on the big screen."

Remy's lips twitched. "Better get a little game time in while I can. I don't reckon they have an X-Box in the cages."

She cupped his face. "I promise, Remy, you won't be going to jail. I won't let that happen, no matter what."

Moisture pooled in the boy's dark eyes, and he looked away. "Just be careful, Doc,

okay? Don't run any stop signs or--"

She gave him a swift hug, blinking back tears of her own. "I'll be back before you even miss me." She grabbed the garbage bag full of dirty clothes and headed out to the car.

She dashed away tears as she pulled the Beretta onto the main road leading to the highway south to Picayune. She hadn't been lying; she had seen a sign for a Laundromat on their drive to the lodge. She was even going to wash clothes.

But the Laundromat wasn't her primary destination.

* * * * *

The traffic in front of the F.B.I. building was moderately heavy, normal for a weekday morning after rush hour. Five minutes of simple surveillance of the building and the street that ran in front of it had revealed nothing to give Jack reason for alarm. So why did he suddenly have a very bad feeling about what he was about to do?

Think like a security expert, he reminded himself. What was one of the first rules of security?

Safety in numbers.

They'd run out of options and nearly out of money. They just had to take a risk and ask for help from the authorities.

He stepped out of the Blazer into bright sunlight, squinting until his eyes adjusted to the glare. Weaving through the parked cars between the Blazer and the street, he'd made it to the next to the last row of cars when he spotted a man striding down the sidewalk in front of the F.B.I. building. He was tall, with sandy brown hair cut military-short and an air of authority evident even from Jack's position several yards away.

Heart racing, Jack changed course, moving behind the bulk of a Land Rover to his right. He peered around the windshield just as the man turned his head, giving Jack a good look at him.

Travis Cooper, New Orleans F.B.I.

As Cooper turned up the walk and entered the building, Jack sagged against the Land Rover, mind racing. What were the odds a New Orleans F.B.I. agent would just happen to be in Mobile the day after Jack asked his old girlfriend for the name of a Mobile F.B.I. agent he could contact?

As much as he didn't want to think it, he was forced to face a very unwelcome possibility: maybe Maggie was right.

Maybe Laura Sandoval had been setting them up all along.

* * * * *

The pawn shop was a small cinderblock building a few doors down from First Federal Bank. A sign towered over the building's face, visible from the highway, with "Lowry's Title and Pawn" written in sprawling red block letters. Paint on the large front windows promised big savings on furniture, heirloom jewelry and "like new" electronics. Heavy iron bars fortified the building's front, a reminder that even in a small, friendly town like Picayune, Mississippi, crime was a fact of life.

Maggie took a few deep breaths to settle her nerves and walked into the pawn shop. A bell tinkled overhead as she entered, drawing the attention of the grizzled man perched on a stool behind the cashier's counter, reading a newspaper.

He looked up with mild curiosity, gave her a quick once-over and returned his attention to the newspaper.

Maggie fingered the ring in her pocket, pressing the sharp ridges of the platinum setting, the pain giving her focus. She walked up one of the aisles and looked over the items for sale. Mostly junk, things people pawned all the time for quick cash--radios, cameras, musical instruments.

Near the front, however, Maggie found some nice antiques, items that would go for hundreds of dollars even in a place like this. The glass case in front of the clerk held even more valuables, including jewelry, guns, and collectibles, some marked with prices in the thousands.

Tears pricking her eyes, Maggie pulled the three-diamond ring from her pocket and clutched it in her palm, tightly enough that the stones bit into her skin.

She glanced at the pawnbroker. He was reading the sports page, the rest of his paper lying at his feet. The front page lay face down, neatly folded as if he'd simply extracted the sports page and thrown the rest away. So he wasn't a big news reader.

That could definitely work to her advantage.

She approached the counter. "Checking up on spring practice?" She nodded toward the sports page.

The man made a face. "L.S.U. ain't gonna be worth a tinker's damn this year. You a Southern Miss fan?"

"No, Tigers all the way." She leaned against the counter. "I think we've got a chance at the Sugar Bowl."

He snorted and waved her off. "Sugar, Bama's gonna take it this year, I'm afraid. Tiger's ain't got a defensive line." He folded the sports page and laid it on the counter next to him. "But I don't reckon you're here to talk football with an old fool like me. You

buyin' or sellin'?"

Maggie licked her lips, took a deep breath and opened her hand, letting her mother's ring slide onto the counter. "How much can you give me for this?"

* * * * *

Rain settled in by midday, hard and steady, drenching the Gulf Coast. By four p.m., the downpour began to abate, leaving behind localized flooding and a few downed trees along highway embankments. From Louisiana to Florida, flooding had snarled traffic, according to the newscasts Maggie watched all afternoon when it became clear that Jack wasn't coming back.

She tried to tell herself he was stuck in the miles-long traffic jams plaguing the interstates and major highways. There was flooding in Mobile area; maybe he'd had trouble reaching the F.B.I. building. Or he'd decided not to go to the F.B.I. after all and was stuck somewhere on I-10.

Maybe he'd never even gone to Mobile at all. Maybe he'd met up with Laura and the cops somewhere and they were planning the raid on the lodge to take Remy and her into custody. Not out of the question, was it? After all, Jack had his reputation and his business license to protect, right?

She fed her anger with that thought, let the heat of it drive away the icy dread sitting like a stone in the pit of her stomach. Believing Jack had betrayed her was a hell of a lot easier than facing the remaining possibility.

The possibility that Jack was dead, a victim of Laura Sandoval's treachery and Mark Blevins' murderous intent.

She closed her eyes, unable to hold back the full force of terror roiling in her gut, a sick, cold sensation that flushed through her veins and made her bones ache. Jack was power and vitality and strength.

The idea of him lying somewhere, cold and immobile . . .

There was another explanation. There had to be.

Maggie lifted her hand to her throat automatically, her fingers finding only a serpentine chain lying flat against her collarbone. Tears pricking her eyes, she dropped her hand to her lap. She had spent most of the morning trying to convince herself that the four thousand dollars the pawnbroker had given her for the ring was what mattered. Four thousand dollars could get her and Remy to Mexico if Jack's plan went wrong.

Funny, now that she feared that she and Remy really were on their own, she was beginning to wish she'd never sold the ring. It had been like a good luck charm most of

her life. That ring had gotten her through some of her roughest times. She could touch the ring and conjure up a comforting memory of her mother's gentle eyes and musical laughter.

Tears ran down Maggie's face, uncheckable. She clutched the gold chain between her fingers, tugging convulsively, as if to conjure up the old magic. But she found no comfort there.

By eight p.m., she gave up all hope.

She found Remy in front of the X-Box in the great room, playing Squirrel Smash with a manic concentration she knew masked his rising anxiety. He didn't seem to notice her approach, though her footsteps echoed on the hardwood floor.

She touched his shoulder and he jumped, whirling to gaze at her with wide eyes. "Geez, Doc, you scared the sh--you know what out of me."

She blinked back the tears pooling in her eyes. "Remy, pack your things. We're getting out of here."

* * * * *

Jack peered through the cheap binoculars he'd bought at a military surplus store a few hours earlier. He had left most of their remaining money supply with Maggie and Remy, so the binoculars had been purchased at the expense of lunch, leaving him cold, hungry and increasingly cranky.

He hunkered down between a couple of prickly holly bushes deep in the woods behind his office building, waiting for the last of his co-workers to leave the office for the day. The sharp points of the holly leaves dug into his arms, a painful reminder that he'd left his jacket back at the lodge.

Movement at the back door of the office caught his attention. Hank Carr was leaving for the day. As Hank locked up, he kept his head up, scanning the perimeter of the parking lot. Jack remained very still, knowing that the early dusk was not enough to hide him from the sharp eyes of the former Special Forces captain. Though his arms had begun to ache, he didn't even lower the binoculars, knowing that one flash of reflected street light on the glass lenses would reveal his position.

Hank paused in the middle of the parking lot, his hand moving to his back, where he wore his beloved Ruger. He peered into the woods, seeming almost to look Jack right in the eyes.

Jack stayed frozen, not daring to breathe.

Hank finally gave a little shrug of his shoulders, as if shaking off a weird sensation,

and crossed the lot to his truck. He slid behind the wheel, cranked the engine and drove away.

Jack lowered the binoculars and stretched out his cramping arms. He crouched a while longer, watching the office building for signs of movement. There were none. Jack started working his way through the dense underbrush as quietly as he could.

He'd spent twenty minutes hunkered down in the cab of the Blazer across the street from the F.B.I. building earlier that day, trying to figure out what it meant that Travis Cooper of the New Orleans F.B.I. had suddenly shown up the same morning Jack had decided to take his chances with the Mobile feds. Jack didn't believe in coincidences. And all his doubts took him back to the phone call he'd made to Laura the night before.

He didn't want to believe she'd betrayed him. There could be other explanations-- maybe she'd trusted someone in her office with Jack's plans and been betrayed herself. Or maybe there was someone new in her life, someone who'd overheard the late night call and put the pieces together.

Not that it mattered. The outcome was the same: Jack's plan was blown. He couldn't risk turning himself in now. Maggie and Remy were depending on him to get them out of this mess, not dig them in even deeper.

They couldn't stay at the lodge much longer, however. If the police hadn't already searched his files, they'd do it soon enough. It wouldn't take long for someone to check around and find out that one of his clients was out of town for six months on an overseas consultation. Investigators could follow the clues to Archer's lodge. Jack estimated they had maybe one or two days before they would have to find somewhere else to stay.

But first, he had to get the money.

* * * * *

Maggie took a final turn around the lodge, checking under beds and in the backs of closets for anything she and Remy might have missed while they were packing up. When Remy had offered to handle getting Jack's stuff together, she'd gratefully let him. She was already blinking back tears as it was.

She couldn't allow her emotions to paralyze her. She didn't have that luxury. She was all Remy had left, the only thing between him and the people who wanted to see him dead. No matter how scared she was, she would put everything on the line for Remy. She'd made a promise.

Any thoughts about leaving Jack behind, she pushed aside with stubborn resolution.

Right now, she needed to be strong. Thinking about Jack would make her weak. There'd be time for thinking later, after they were safely away from the lodge.

She took a steadying breath and finished looking through the lodge for anything that might betray the fact that they'd ever occupied the place. Satisfied that they had left nothing behind, she went out to the great room where Remy waited for her. He'd already taken their bags out to the Beretta and now sat on the sofa watching television, flipping channels in a slow, almost rhythmic cadence, staying on a station only long enough to hear a few words before moving to the next.

He glanced over his shoulder at her, then looked back at the television screen. "Almost nine." He pushed the channel button on the remote and the channel switched again. Maggie caught sight of Jack's face. Her heart skipped a beat.

". . . sources are reporting that the investigation into the kidnapping of Maggie Stone is officially expanding to look into the possible involvement of retired Secret Service agent Jack Bennett," a pretty brunette correspondent reported. "Bennett, who retired from the Secret Service a little over three years ago, now runs a security firm in Fairhope, Alabama. F.B.I. sources say Bennett became a person of interest in this investigation after New Orleans police sources received an anonymous tip that Ms. Stone had been seen with Bennett in the Fairhope area after her abduction."

So it was no longer just her father's conspiracy theory, Maggie thought. No surprise, really--having Jack in the F.B.I.'s crosshairs would be a plus for Blevins.

Tightening the noose around them, inch by inch.

Well, she could cross one more theory off her list; apparently, Jack wasn't colluding with Laura against them. Small comfort, that. Because it made the other possibility, that Jack was dead, all the more likely.

She closed her eyes, willing away the paralyzing images the thought of Jack's death sent racing through her brain. *Don't think about it now. You can think about it later.*

Remy shut off the television. "Bastards."

She didn't correct his language. He wasn't saying anything she wasn't thinking. How had Blevins and his crew of thugs gotten this kind of power? Contrary to public perception--and its own checkered history--the New Orleans police department had made huge strides in recent years. Systemic corruption was no longer the rule. In her own dealings with the N.O.P.D., she'd found most cops to be honest and helpful, if deeply cynical.

But Maggie and Remy weren't going to get any help from them. They'd already proven that cops stick together.

Remy crossed to where she stood. "Ready to go?"

She nodded. Slipping her arm around his thin shoulders, she walked with him to the door. She set the alarm and followed him outside, locking the deadbolt behind them with the key Jack had left with her when he headed out fourteen hours ago.

Funny, it seemed more like fourteen years ago.

A lifetime ago.

Would that be how she viewed things from now on? Would she see her life in two distinct parts--life before Jack left for Mobile, and life after?

She made herself slide behind the steering wheel, belt herself in and crank the engine. She turned the car around and headed down the narrow driveway from the house to the main road. The driveway was a winding, grassy path through the woods, at least a quarter of a mile long if Maggie's memory served her. She should be nearing the road--

A pair of lights suddenly sliced through the darkness ahead, bright enough to make her squint.

Headlights.

A car was moving up the driveway toward them.

Chapter 12

Maggie slammed the car into reverse. It lurched, the tires sliding on the grassy undergrowth as she put the gas pedal to the floor. How could anyone have found them so soon?

The headlights kept coming, two bright orbs in the blackness. She gripped the steering wheel tighter, holding the car to the path as she backed up the drive. Could they get inside and get to the bolt hole before whoever was behind those blazing headlights could reach them? And what then? There was no vehicle waiting at the other end of the tunnel, since Jack had taken the Blazer to Mobile. *Think, Maggie.*

The bolt hole was still the best option. Nobody would find it right away, giving them precious time to reach the other end. Jack had said the bolthole exited a hundred yards from a main road. It would be a long walk to Picayune, but she had enough cash to pay a motel clerk to keep his mouth shut.

The headlights kept pace with them as she backed into the side yard and slammed the car into park. She released her seat belt and opened the car door. "The bolthole!"

They made a dash for the door. She rammed the key into the lock, cursing violently when the deadbolt wouldn't give.

"Go, go, go!" Remy rasped, jittering from foot to foot.

The other headlights reached the edge of the yard. Her heart kicked into a frantic rat-a-tat rhythm as she tried to turn the key again. The deadbolt gave a rusty moan and turned.

The car at the edge of the yard cut its engine and the headlights blinked out, plunging them into darkness alleviated only by the weak blue light of the waxing moon.

Maggie pushed the door open and ran inside, not bothering to turn on any lights.

She and Remy had the advantage in the darkness, knowing the lay of the house pretty well by now. She grabbed the boy's hand and raced for the trap door. They descended the hidden staircase into a void as black as pitch. Remy stumbled into her at the bottom of the stairs.

Where was the switch for the tunnel lights? Jack had merely touched the wall and the lights had come on. Damn it, she should have paid attention instead of sulking like a brat.

She felt along the cool brick walls of the tiny anteroom, feeling for something--a loose stone, a raised spot, anything that might be the switch that would save her from the smothering darkness wrapping around them like a shroud.

Then she heard it. The click of a door unlatching behind them. Footsteps moving quickly down the hidden staircase.

Maggie grabbed Remy's arm and darted into the tunnel entrance, which was visible only as the blackest part of the blackness surrounding them. They staggered and stumbled for several yards, feeling their way in the utter darkness.

The tunnel lights came on, blinding her. She skidded to a stop, her heart a quivering block of ice in her chest.

"Maggie!" Jack's voice washed over her, deep, authoritative and the most beautiful sound she'd ever heard.

Remy made a beeline for the tunnel entrance, calling Jack's name. But Maggie froze where she stood, afraid if she moved, she'd discover she'd imagined Jack's voice calling her name.

Then he was there. Walking toward her, his blue-eyed gaze pinning her in place with its intensity. Remy followed at his heels, looking like a wriggly, grinning puppy.

Fat tears slid down Maggie's cheeks as Jack closed the distance between them in long, purposeful strides. He lifted one hand to stroke her cheek. "Sorry I'm late."

The strange paralysis lifted, and she threw her arms around his waist, pressing her damp face to his throat.

* * * * *

"Where we gonna go next?" Remy set down his bag of clothes on one of the bunkhouse beds and turned to look at Jack. With his blond buzzcut, hungry dark eyes and tough-guy posture, he should have looked like a street punk, but all Jack saw was a scared little boy trying hard not to cry.

His heart gave a little squeeze. "I think we need to get a little closer to New

Orleans."

"No way. We got five grand now. We can go places."

"It's not enough money to run forever."

"It's enough to get to Mexico."

"Mexico has extradition laws, you know. The cops won't stop looking for Maggie. Her father was the president."

Remy sank to the bunk opposite Jack. "We're so screwed."

"We can figure out a way to prove what you saw, but we have to be close to where it happened." Jack sat on the opposite bunk. He owed Remy the truth about what would happen next. "We know there's a body now, so we're ahead of where we were a few days ago. Maybe by the time we settle in the next place, we'll have an I.D. on the body and we'll have a name to work with."

Remy dropped his chin to his chest. "You really do believe me? It's not just 'cause you want to suck up to Maggie?"

"If I didn't believe you, you'd already be in jail. I'm not in this for brownie points. We're all in danger now. I'm here to get us all home safe and sound."

As soon as he heard the snuffling sound escape Remy's throat, he realized what he'd said. *Home*. Remy didn't have a home anymore, thanks to Blevins and his bunch of thugs in blue.

Rage surged through him, the old fire in the belly he used to get when he was put on a dangerous protective detail. Every sense heightened, on guard for whatever danger might approach.

Only this feeling was stronger than he'd ever known. Fierce, blazing hot, infusing every fiber of his body with deadly purpose. Because this wasn't just a dignitary or a government official. This was Maggie. And Remy.

His family.

Jack clenched his fists at his side, struggling to control his fury as he watched Remy fighting not to cry. Blevins would pay. The son of a bitch was going to get what was coming to him when this was all over. Targeting a scared kid for telling the truth when cops were supposed to reward people for putting their necks on the line for the truth.

Targeting Maggie.

The need to be with her, right now, swamped him, nearly forcing him to his feet. Only the sight of Remy's tear-bright eyes kept him seated. "I can stay awhile if you want."

Remy waggled his brows. "You don't gotta to baby-sit."

"I know. I just thought--"

"You shoulda seen Doc while you were gone. Complete whackjob. You might oughta check on her."

Jack grinned. "Complete whackjob, huh?"

Remy nodded his head toward the door. "Go on."

Jack stood there a moment, filled with fierce affection. Mark Blevins would pay for trying to hurt this boy. For trying to hurt Maggie.

No matter what it took.

Candles cast a warm glow across the fresh bedsheets and sent shadows undulating across the walls. Maggie snuffed the match and surveyed her handiwork with a pounding heart.

Jack had risked staying in Mobile to get the money. Of all the things he had told them about his day, that point had stuck in her mind, refusing to let go. He'd put himself in danger to get the money to keep them going. His sacrifice made her own trip to the pawn shop look small and dirty in comparison.

Jack had promised she could trust him, but she had waited less than an hour to show how little trust she had.

A bitter place inside her opened, rife with pain. That wasn't fair. Everybody looked out for themselves, even Jack. The money would keep him out of jail until he got out of the mess she'd gotten him into. Nothing noble about it.

It all came down to self-interest. As long as she remembered that, she could walk away from him.

Once she got what she needed.

* * * * *

The great room of the lodge was mostly dark when Jack entered, only a lamp by the door still burning. Was she asleep? He quelled his disappointment, reminding himself that they'd all had a long, stressful day.

He paused at the closed door of her bedroom, pressing his ear to the wood to see if she was still moving around inside. Though he heard nothing, he was tempted to knock. But she needed her sleep. She'd had a hard day, and tomorrow was going to be another long one. Reluctantly, he pushed away from her door and went into his own bedroom.

A dozen flickering candles cast bands of light and dark across the bedroom walls.

Maggie sat on the end of his bed, wearing only panties and scrap of a camisole that did nothing to hide the ripe curves beneath. She rose and walked toward him, bathed in golden candlelight. "I thought you'd never get here."

His heart rate doubled by the time she reached him. "You're the one who sent me to tuck Remy in."

She flashed a sexy grin. "Shut up and kiss me, Jack."

Heat poured through him as she unzipped his fly and slipped her hand inside, stroking him through his boxers.

Naughty Marguerite was back.

* * * * *

Jack wrapped one hand around the back of Maggie's neck and held her slightly away from him. "Maggie--"

She touched his lips. "Shh. Let's not talk." She ran her fingers up and down the length of him, watching with satisfaction as his eyes darkened and his neck flushed.

He hesitated a moment, his gaze locked with hers as if trying to read something hidden deep within her. She could almost feel him inside, searching the dark pockets of her soul.

Looking for what?

He pulled her against him suddenly, trapping her hand between their bodies. His low growl, thick with desire, rumbled through her body. "You're a very wicked girl."

"You like that about me." She kissed his throat.

"I do."

Under her fingers, he was coming to life, fast and hard, filling her with a heady rush of power.

Yes, she thought. *This is what I want.*

To be in control.

She curled her fingers in the silk boxers, felt him through the soft, fiery-hot fabric. She traced the length and the breadth of him, watching his response. His eyes were chips of onyx rimmed with blue. She closed her hand and squeezed, smiling at the pleasure-pain that flickered across his face.

His breathing harsh, he pulled her hand from his jeans, bending to cover her mouth in a deep, demanding kiss. She melted against him, opening her mouth to feast on his passion.

A low thrumming vibration built in her belly. Sparks shot through her from the

junction of her thighs to her fingertips as Jack explored her body slowly, thoroughly, finding sensitive spots she had forgotten she possessed. He moved his hands beneath her shirt, fingertips gliding over her ribs and up to the swell of her breasts. His thumbs circled her nipples once, twice, then swept away, finding a spot on the underside of her breasts that sent pure pleasure sparking down her nerve endings.

She focused on the physical sensations, trying to ignore the flood of emotions pouring through her. If she let the emotions take over, she'd lose control.

"You like that?" he murmured against her throat.

"Yes," she gasped as he stroked her again. More than she expected. More than ever before.

He slid his hands lower, hooking the narrow waistband of her panties and sliding them down her legs. He followed the fabric down, pressing hot kisses against her belly, her hipbones, the sensitive flesh of her thigh.

"How about this?" His breath warmed her core.

Her legs began to wobble, but he caught her, his hands splayed across her hips, holding her steady. He lifted his face and pinned her with his searing gaze.

She trembled, barely able to catch her breath.

Then he covered her with his mouth.

Heat flooded her entire body. Her legs turned to jelly, and she fell back against the mattress. Jack moved with her, continuing his maddening assault on her senses. A low groan rumbled from her throat as tingles spread through her body.

Control fled, leaving her adrift on a raging sea of sensations. Madness crept up on her in dark, crashing waves as Jack's mouth and fingers played over her, sure and skillful, drawing out each tremor, each swell, until she found herself cresting, hurtling toward the unseen shore.

Her muscles tightened, strained for release as an explosion built inside her, slow and rumbling, gathering force as it rippled from the center of her being and slammed her into a wall of pure, shimmering sensation.

She came back to herself slowly, her body rippling with pleasure. Her eyelids felt heavy, but she forced them open.

Jack gazed down at her, his expression tender. He stroked her hair, pushing it back from her face. "You okay?"

The tender concern in his voice was her undoing. Fat tears filled her eyes and spilled down her cheeks. She laughed self-consciously, brushing away the tears as if they meant nothing.

But she knew better. They meant everything.

He meant everything.

Though her heart felt like lead, she kept her voice deliberately light, so he wouldn't guess. "I'm great. No--*you're* great. Incredible, really." She plucked at one of the buttons of his shirt. "Incredibly overdressed, too."

He unbuttoned his shirt and shrugged it off, while she clutched a handful of denim and silk and pushed them both down over his hips, fighting the tears that flooded up from some untapped well of emotion deep in her soul.

She felt as if she were plunging off a high cliff into darkness, afraid she was about to hit the bottom--and even more afraid that she'd never land at all, just keep falling into the darkness until she unraveled and was swallowed by black.

She clung to him, to the solid feel of his flesh beneath her hands, the sound of his breathing against her ear as she drew him down to her.

He pulled away from her a moment, reaching into the pocket of his jeans to retrieve a square foil packet. Jack, the protector, she thought, nearly losing what little control over her emotions she had left. She grasped desperately at the one tool that had always kept her on top before--sex. She was good at making sex work for her. Giving it. Withholding it. Rationing it.

She could make it through this night if she just remembered who she was. She could reach the bottom of the abyss and walk away. She was sure of it.

She forced a smile as he put on the condom and covered her body with his. "Always suspected you were a Boy Scout."

"If you're good, I'll let you see my badges."

Curling her fingers in his hair, she pulled him to her, trying to pretend he was just another man she'd chosen to satisfy her occasional need for physical release. His mouth wasn't really softer. His touch didn't mete out more exquisite torture than the others. The smell of him didn't fill her mind with fierce desires and old, sweet memories.

But the effort was futile. He wasn't just another man. He was Jack Bennett, the only man she'd never been able to forget. The voice that murmured words of endearment against her throat was the same voice she'd heard that first day outside her father's office--warm, gravelly, with undertones of quiet understanding that had chipped away at the ice around her heart. The scent that surrounded her, fired by the heat of his passion, was the same spicy elixir that had greeted her each time he entered her apartment in Tribeca--intense, powerful and male.

Her composure drowned in a flood of whispered endearments and feather light kisses, talented fingers and relentless lips. When he moved between her thighs, she arched her back and sheathed him in her heat, gasping as he filled her again and again,

his name branded on her soul, undeniable. Inescapable.

He slanted his mouth over hers, drawing her lower lip into his mouth and sucking lightly. She clutched his shoulders and rocked her hips in counterpoint, feeling him beginning to unravel in her arms. He was close. So close.

And she could bring him to completion, she realized with wonder, a different sense of control pouring through her. This she could do. She knew how to draw it out, make it last, make him beg for mercy--and beg for more.

She focused her entire being on his body, the tell-tale signs that he was nearing his climax, the way his respiration quickened and roughened until he was breathing in soft, keening gasps. The tightening of his shoulder muscles beneath her fingers. It was familiar and alien at the same time.

Because it was Jack.

A twisting sensation snaked through her, unfamiliar and devastating. More than pleasure, more than satiation, thrilled and terrified her at the same time. She was coming apart, molecule by molecule, consumed by the heat of their passion.

Jack's hands cupped her buttocks and held her tight as he let go, his teeth sinking into her shoulder as his body shuddered with release. She wrapped her legs around his hips, holding him inside her as his shudders began to subside.

He kissed her shoulder where he'd nipped her, laving the flesh with his tongue, then kissed a trail across her collarbone and up her throat. "Still okay?" he murmured against her neck.

She couldn't find her voice, so she answered by stroking his hair. She clung to him, skin to skin with him, her fingers tangled in his hair, his body still joined with hers.

Bit her heart was a fist in her chest, clenched tight and aching with dread.

* * * * *

When Jack woke a few hours later, he was alone in the bed, surrounded by flickering candles bathing the bedroom walls with a kaleidoscope of light and shadow. He scanned the room and acquired his target: Maggie, standing at the window, a blanket wrapped around her as she peered into the inky night.

"Marguerite?"

She looked at him, her expression shuttered. "It's raining again," she murmured, turning back to the window. The low, cool tone of her voice did nothing to relieve his sudden anxiety.

He pushed off the bed sheets and crossed to her side, smoothing his hands over her

shoulders. The flesh beneath his fingers quivered, but after a long moment, she leaned back against him and caught his hand, drawing his arm around her.

"I love to watch it rain." She brushed her temple against his jaw. "It's reassuring-- the world grows dry and the heavens take pity. Like something's out there watching over us."

"That's what people say."

"I don't know if I believe it. I wish I did."

"I believe it." He kissed her temple. "We're here. Alive and together. That's got to mean something, right?"

She turned in his arms to look up at him, her eyes dark and pensive. "How did things end with you and Laura?"

A sliver of old pain nicked his heart. "With her lies."

"Why did you let her treat you the way she did?"

"I fix things. You know that. I spent a year trying to fix all your problems. You weren't exactly grateful."

"I misunderstood your efforts."

"Probably not as much as you think."

She slanted a look at him.

"I wasn't immune to your charms, Willow. I just had a lot of good reasons for resisting them."

"Like Laura."

He nodded. "And my job. But yeah, mostly Laura."

"You loved her."

"I know you can't understand why, because you saw only one side of her. I saw another side, sweet and smart and vulnerable. I wanted to protect her." He sighed. "Imagine, a Secret Service agent wanting to protect someone. But I couldn't protect her from herself."

"What did she do to make you give up?"

"I was up for a new assignment. More pay but a lot more travel. Laura wanted me to turn it down. When I refused, she cheated on me." Five years later, he could still feel humiliation prickling up his neck. "She thought it would make me jealous. It just made me sick."

"I imagine so."

"I decided then I wouldn't be anybody's hero anymore."

And yet, here he was. Playing hero to Willow.

She turned in his arms, drawing his mouth to hers. She caught his lower lip between

her teeth and suckled, sliding her tongue over his flesh as she lifted her arms to circle his neck.

The blanket she'd wrapped herself in fell away, leaving them skin to skin. As he gazed into her dark eyes, her solemn expression cracked apart, revealing Naughty Marguerite in all her saucy glory. "Tell me you're a really good Boy Scout."

"I am." He laid her back against the sheets.

* * * * *

When Laura Sandoval stepped from the shower around seven a.m., a phone was ringing. Not her home phone and not the personal cell phone tucked in the purse on the bedside table.

It was the dedicated cell phone from her office.

"Laura Sandoval."

"Miz Sandoval, this here's Grady Lowry. I run a pawnshop in Picayune, and I found your fax when I got in this mornin'."

Laura sat on the edge of her bed, trying not to get her hopes up. "Have you seen the ring I described?"

"Yes, ma'am. I paid a gal four thousand dollars for it just yesterday. Real pretty little thing."

She tightened her grip on the phone. "Did you keep a copy of her photo I.D. for your records?"

"Yes, ma'am, I did. Maggie Stone. Five-six, a hundred and twenty pounds, brown hair, brown eyes--"

Bingo. "You said you're in Picayune?"

"Yes ma'am, just west of the interstate."

Laura calculated the mileage. She could be there before nine. "Why don't you tell me exactly how to get there?"

Chapter 13

"Where's the ring?" Jack's voice roused Maggie from a hazy place somewhere between sleep and wakefulness.

She opened her eyes. "Ring?"

He tugged at the empty gold chain pooling in the hollow of her throat. "The ring you wear on this chain."

Guilt swamped her in a dark, queasy wave. "I took it off yesterday and didn't put it back on." Not a literal lie--she'd just left out the part about pawning it in Picayune.

She gritted her teeth and tried to force the rest of the truth through her reluctant lips, but Jack interrupted. "It belonged to your mother, didn't it?"

His question brought hot tears rushing to her eyes, threatening to spill over. She blinked them back.

He fiddled with the chain, his fingertips brushing the ridge of her collarbone. "I'm sorry--I shouldn't have--"

"Yes, it was my mother's. It's one of the last things she gave me before she died." *And I sold it for four thousand dollars because I didn't have the guts to trust you.*

The tears she'd been fighting slid down her cheeks.

Jack brushed away the moisture with his knuckle. "You were, what, nine when she died?"

She closed her eyes. "Yeah. My father had just started his second term in the California House of Representatives. He was already moving up to leadership positions--a real rising star. Becoming a tragic widower didn't hurt."

Jack's swift intake of breath at her bitter tone niggled at her conscience. Was she being fair to her father? James Cole hadn't been the best of husbands--his good looks

and privileged background had made it all too easy to stroke his ego with a series of discreet dalliances--but to his credit, when Maggie's mother had grown gravely ill, he'd been there for her, faithful and untiring, missing house votes and sidetracking his career to stay with her until the cancer took her.

"He was good to her at the end," she said aloud. "I can't fault him for anything he did those last few months."

Jack kissed her shoulder. "That ring means a lot to you."

The enormity of what she'd done hit her like a blow to the gut. Tears spilled down her cheeks. "It's priceless."

She slid away from Jack and rolled off the bed, dashing away her tears with angry jabs of her fingertips. No more crying about this. No more feeling sorry for herself. She'd betrayed more than Jack with her decision to pawn the ring. She'd betrayed her mother. And herself.

But it was time to put it behind her now and move on. She gathered up her underthings and slipped them on. "We need to get going." She turned back to face Jack.

He stood on the other side of the bed, pulling on his jeans. "Yeah. I think showers for everyone, and then you and Remy can repack the stuff we unpacked last night while I take all the towels and sheets to a Laundromat."

"Laundromat?" Maggie felt a flush of guilt, remembering her cover story for her trip to Picayune the day before.

"Yeah. Someone's going to link this place to me eventually. We don't need to leave proof we were here. When I get back, I'll wipe the place for prints before we leave."

"Let me take the laundry." Maggie's mind raced as the idea crystallized. She still had the four thousand dollars from the pawnbroker, plus enough extra cash to pay any interest owed. Mr. Lowry might balk at such a quick payback, but she had a built-in sob story made all the more powerful because it was true: she'd sold the last thing her mother had given her before her death and would do anything to get it back.

Jack paused in the middle of putting on his t-shirt. "I'm not sure I like the idea of sending you out there by yourself--"

"You're the one who knows how to wipe the place down for prints. Let's not waste any more time. You get the place wiped down while I do the laundry." Maggie tried to hide her growing excitement. She could stop at the pawn shop on her way to the Laundromat and have her mother's ring back around her neck, where it belonged, within an hour. And if she got the ring back this way, Jack would never have to know what she'd done. It was her chance to start over. Do things differently. Become a different

woman altogether.

A woman Jack Bennett just might be able to love?

She tried to push the thought away, tuck it safely into the place deep inside where she'd relegated all her foolish dreams over the past ten years, but hope was already beginning to take root, filling her with a jittery energy as her mind raced ahead, planning the route she'd take to trim minutes off her trip to the Laundromat to work in the stop at the pawn shop.

"Okay," Jack agreed. "I'll go get Remy up and start putting the bunkhouse back in the shape we found it. Why don't you take the first shower?"

She crossed the room in a hurry, throwing her arms around Jack's neck. She rose to her tiptoes for a hard, swift kiss. "Sure you don't want to join me? Conserve time and water."

She felt his body's quick, unmistakable response right before he nuzzled her throat and murmured, "My kind of environmentalism."

As they threw off the clothes they'd so recently donned, Maggie felt the weight of fear she'd been sinking under over the last twenty four hours begin to lift. By the time she got back from Picayune, she'd have her mother's ring safely returned to the chain around her neck again. She'd be with Jack, working side by side for a way out of the danger they were in.

Her mind was screaming warnings even now, begging her to start running, keep running until she was safe--from Blevins and his goons, from the crushing responsibility of keeping Remy safe, from the insanity of falling in love with Jack all over again. But for the first time in ten years, her heart--and her feet--refused to listen.

* * * * *

Laura Sandoval was on the road out of New Orleans by seven-thirty, moving at a steady pace since she was going against traffic instead of stuck in the flood of suburbanites flowing into New Orleans for the work day. By eight, she was breezing through Slidell, well ahead of schedule as her Infiniti ate up miles of interstate at a brisk clip despite the light rain.

But traffic grew heavier as she neared the Mississippi line, eventually slowing to a near-standstill. Laura peered into the rain-washed gloom ahead, trying to see what might be causing the hold-up, but several eighteen-wheelers ahead blocked her view. In the left lane, a few cars were illegally crossing the slick, grassy median to the southbound lanes.

Just as Laura was working her way over to the left lane to do the same, her cell phone rang. Venting her frustration with a vicious jab at the talk button, she growled, "Sandoval."

"Good morning to you, too." Agent Travis Cooper's voice buzzed in her ear.

"Got any idea why I-59 north is a parking lot, Cooper?"

There was a brief pause. "Big rig jackknifed near the state line around six this morning. Spilled its whole load--bags of sugar everywhere. I think both lanes are blocked. Don't you watch the morning news?"

Most days, yes. But she'd had other things to think about this particular morning.

"Any idea when it'll clear?"

"Should be getting close; they were projecting the mess to be out of the way by nine. Do I get paid for playing traffic reporter?"

Laura uttered a curse.

"You kiss your mama with that mouth?" Cooper's voice flattened to a Texas drawl he kept in check most of the time. "Listen, you asked for a heads up if we got an I.D. on that body pulled out of the Pontchartrain the other day. I just got word out of Philly--name's Nicky Tamburello. Used to be part of the biker mobs giving the wiseguys a run for their money up in Philly before he started doing hits for Joey Scarpelli. They got cross-wise about a year ago. Something to do with a woman."

"Ain't that always the way?" Laura murmured.

"Philly lost track of him about two months ago, after he skipped bail on a drug charge. They figured he got out of town before Scarpelli got a notion to whack him. I'd sure like to know how he ended up as fish food in the Pontchartrain."

"You and me both." Laura peered ahead as the vehicles in front of her began to creep along again. "Looks like I'm movin' again. Anything else about Tamburello?"

"Not yet. We're shaking down our contacts to see if Nicky was down here trying to hook up with the southern branch of the Family tree."

Laura had a feeling there was another reason Tamburello had come to New Orleans and ended up belly up in the Pontchartrain. Something that had everything to do with Marguerite Cole and the boy she was trying to protect.

* * * * *

The sign on the door of Lowry's Title and Pawn read "OPEN" when Maggie arrived a little before ten a.m. She'd gotten a later start than planned, in no small part because of the extended shower she and Jack had taken together.

Not that she had any regrets about *that*.

Maggie parked the Blazer in front of the store and dashed through the light drizzle to the entrance. She shook off the raindrops, scraped her shoes on the welcome mat and went inside.

The same grizzled old man sat behind the front counter. He looked up at the sound of the tinkling bell over the door, his eyes widening--no doubt surprised to see her back so soon.

She patted the roll of bills stashed in her pocket. She'd added another hundred to the four thousand, in case he charged a penalty for early redemption. She wasn't going to argue with him about his business practices. All she wanted was the ring.

She hurried forward to the counter, her gaze automatically going to the tray of jewelry in the glass display at the front of the counter. It was probably too soon for the ring to be there--wasn't there a mandatory waiting period before they put items on display?--but she couldn't stop herself from looking.

"Hi again," she greeted the proprietor. "I know it's only been a day but I've come back to redeem my ring."

The proprietor's gaze shifted slightly, looking at something just behind her. At the same moment, Maggie smelled a delicate whiff of sandalwood. The hair on her nape rose.

"This ring?" a woman's voice spoke just behind her.

Maggie whirled around to face the speaker, her heart skipping a beat as she recognized the soft drawl.

Laura Sandoval stood behind her, holding her mother's ring.

* * * * *

"So, how many more places like this you got up your sleeve?" Remy paused in the middle of packing supplies into a cardboard box Jack and looked at Jack.

Jack picked up the duffel bag he'd just filled and placed it on the dining room table. "Like this? None. But I was thinking we could pick up a tent somewhere and camp out for a while. The weather's supposed to be nice the next few days." Though he made a point of sounding confident and in control for Remy's sake, he felt anything but. A few days camping out weren't going to solve their problems.

"When you think Doc'll get back?"

Jack glanced at his watch. Ten a.m. "I think at least another hour or so. She's got to give the laundry time to dry."

Remy made a face as he closed up the cardboard box. "I don't know why we had to do laundry again. She just did it yesterday."

Jack glanced at the boy. "She did?"

"Yeah. I think she was just lookin' for somethin' to get her mind off you bein' gone."

Jack frowned slightly. She hadn't mentioned anything about leaving the lodge the day before. He pushed aside a flicker of unease. "You sure you got everything from the bunkhouse?"

"Pretty sure. I'll go give it one more look-through." Remy headed outside.

Jack picked up a second duffel bag and went into the master bedroom to pack up Maggie's clothes, still frowning. If he'd known Maggie had already been to the Laundromat the day before, he would have insisted on being the one to go into town today. If someone saw a strange woman in town two days in a row, they might start asking questions, and scrutiny was the last thing they needed.

He sat on the edge of the bare mattress and opened the dresser drawer to retrieve the small supply of clothes Maggie had unpacked last night after Jack's arrival aborted their attempt to leave the lodge. A pair of shorts and a couple of faded t-shirts, an extra pair of white cotton panties and a bra, all from the rag-tag set of thrift store clothes Jack had picked up back in Fairhope before they'd had to pick up and run. Not even a week ago, he realized with some surprise. Had it really been such a short time ago?

In some ways it felt like a lifetime.

He finished packing away Maggie's clothes and looked around the bedroom for anything he might have missed. Her mother's ring should be around here somewhere; he remembered noticing that the chain Maggie wore around her neck was still empty when she left for town a half an hour ago. But he didn't find the ring anywhere in the bedroom or the bathroom.

Was it lost? His stomach tightened at the thought.

Maggie would be devastated if they had to leave without it.

* * * * *

"Give me my ring." Maggie glared at Laura Sandoval, rage overcoming terror for the moment.

"Technically, this ring still belongs to Mr. Lowry there." Laura nodded toward the man behind the counter. Maggie turned to look at the pawnbroker, who looked as if he wanted to be anywhere else.

How the hell had Laura found them? Because of the ring?

Of course, she realized, her heart sinking. She'd had to show her driver's license before she could pawn the ring. The pawnbroker hadn't seemed to recognize her name, but he may have seen something on the news last night and put things together.

But why had he called Laura Sandoval, of all people? She was a lawyer, not a cop. And if she was here to take Maggie into custody, why weren't the police with her?

Maggie crossed to the counter and pulled the money from her pocket, slapping it down on the countertop. "There you go, Mr. Lowry. Thanks a lot." She didn't bother to keep the bitterness from her voice.

But she regretted the harsh tone immediately when she saw the look of hurt cross Mr. Lowry's face. As he took the money from the counter, she added, "I'm sorry. Really. It's not your fault. It's all mine."

He looked at her with gentle concern. "You take care, miss, all right?"

She gave a little nod and turned back to Laura. "What do you want from me?"

"We have a lot of questions for you."

Maggie looked around the empty pawnshop. "We? I don't see anyone but you."

"I didn't want to descend on the place with sirens blarin'."

Maggie shook her head. "I'm not leaving with you. I don't trust you."

"Where's Jack?"

"You don't really think I'm going to tell you that."

"Is the boy with him?"

Maggie pressed her lips together and didn't answer.

Laura's expression grew tight with annoyance. "Fine." She reached into her jacket pocket and pulled out her cell phone. "I'll ask him myself."

"He won't answer. He doesn't trust you, either."

Laura just looked at her as if she were an idiot. She pushed a single button-- obviously had him on speed-dial, Maggie thought blackly--and waited.

Laura's look of confidence began to slip when there was no answer to her call, Maggie noted with smug satisfaction. She couldn't hold back a smile when Laura punched another button to disconnect the call, a scowl furrowing her brow.

"He knows you're the one who set him up," Maggie added. "He's not going to take any more calls from you."

"Set him up?" Laura's look of confusion was almost convincing. "What are you talkin' about?"

"Sending that F.B.I. agent to Mobile the same time Jack was supposed to arrive. It had to be you. You're the only one he told about wanting to go to the Mobile F.B.I."

Confusion lingered for a moment in the other woman's expression. Then a light

went on behind her eyes. "Cooper."

That was the name of the agent Jack had seen. "You're admitting it?"

Laura shook her head. "I didn't send Cooper, but he may have gone on his own. He's investigatin' your 'kidnapping.'" Contempt tinged the last word. "I had a feelin' you weren't an innocent victim, Marguerite."

"Maggie. Maggie Stone. And the only thing I'm guilty of is trying to save an innocent boy from being murdered."

Laura's eyes narrowed but she didn't comment, instead lifting her phone and punching buttons.

"I told you he's not going to answer your calls."

Laura shrugged and kept punching numbers. "No problem. He'll get my message loud and clear anyway."

* * * * *

The second time Jack's phone rang, the ring tone sounded different. He looked at the display panel and found that the text message icon was blinking.

"Is it Maggie?" Remy crossed from the kitchen area and looked over Jack's shoulder.

Jack shook his head. He was certain it was Laura again. He'd ignored her previous call, but the blinking text message icon was too great a temptation. He displayed the message.

I have Marguerite. In Picayune. Call ASAP.

Behind Jack, Remy gasped. "What the--"

Jack punched in Laura's cell phone number, his pulse pounding in his ears.

She answered on the first ring. "Hi, Jack."

Nearby, Maggie's voice rang out. "Don't tell her anything, Jack!"

"I want to talk to Maggie," Jack told Laura.

"Sure."

There was a brief pause, then Maggie's voice greeted him. "Don't do anything she tells you to do."

"If you think I'm going to abandon you--"

"Please, Jack, I'll be okay. Don't listen to her!"

There was the sound of a brief tussle on the other line before Laura spoke. "I would suggest you ignore Marguerite's histrionics, Jack. I'm here to help you. All of you."

"Where are you?"

"Lowry's Pawn Shop in Picayune."

"Pawn shop?" Jack frowned. Why in the world was Maggie at a pawn shop?

Then all the little discrepancies that had been nagging at him all morning fell into place. The trip to the "Laundromat" the day before. The missing ring.

He knew the answer before Laura said it aloud.

"It seems Marguerite pawned a thirty-thousand dollar ring here yesterday for a measly four grand. Today, she came back to redeem it."

Jack sank into one of the dining room chairs. "What's the name of the pawn shop again?"

* * * * *

Maggie stared at Laura, sick with anger and shame. Of all the ways for Jack to find out what she'd done . . .

"Lowry's Pawn Shop," Laura repeated into the phone, apparently answering a question from Jack. "Just off the main highway. You'll see it from the road." She cut her eyes toward Maggie as if to make certain she hadn't made a run for it.

God knows, Maggie was tempted. She didn't know what she dreaded the most-- finding out just what Laura had planned for them all or facing Jack now that he knew she'd lied to him. She leaned against the counter, fighting a bitter rush of tears.

Laura disconnected the phone and slipped it into her pocket. She cocked her head slightly as she looked at Maggie. "You know, I'm really not the bad guy here."

"Oh, please."

"I'm not holdin' you in custody, am I? I haven't done anything to hurt you."

Nothing physical, anyway. Maggie glanced over her shoulder. The pawnbroker was watching them, his brow wrinkled with concern. "Not while there's a witness," she murmured.

Laura shook her head, her expression betraying her exasperation. "Don't be such a drama queen. I'm trying to help you out here, believe it or not. As soon as Jack gets here--"

"You know he won't let you do anything to me."

Laura actually flinched. She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and looked toward the pawnbroker's front counter, her brow furrowed. "I know that."

"Why are you here alone? Why no cops?" Maggie took a step away from Laura, trying to keep an avenue of escape open in case she needed one.

"I'd rather handle things my way without gettin' anyone else involved."

Maggie cocked her head. "I can't say that sounds very reassuring."

A flicker of amusement lightened Laura's dark eyes. She stepped toward Maggie, closing the distance Maggie had just put between them. "I guess not. So how about this? I think Remy Chauvin is tellin' the God's honest truth about Mark Blevins."

Chapter 14

The Beretta could do over a hundred, and Jack was tempted to give it a try, but good sense prevailed. Nevertheless, he kept his speed above seventy, not particularly worried about being chased down by a speed cop. Compared to leaving Maggie alone with Laura Sandoval one moment longer than necessary, a high speed chase seemed like the lesser evil.

"Do you think she'll hurt Doc?" Remy clutched the dashboard with one hand, his knuckles white. His eyes were large and dark in his anxious face.

"I don't think so." He didn't, really. Even if Laura was part of the mess Remy had gotten himself into, it was in her best interests to keep Maggie alive until he and Remy arrived. Laura surely knew that he wouldn't step foot into whatever trap she was setting until he saw Maggie alive and well.

"There it is!" Remy pointed.

Jack followed his gaze and found the sign. "Lowry's Title and Pawn" in large red letters, just like Laura said. He took the next turn and followed the winding access road, pulling into a gas station a few businesses up from the pawn shop.

"What are you doing?" Remy asked.

"Playing it smart." Jack pulled up behind a large pick-up truck and shut down the engine. From this vantage point, he had a pretty good view of the pawn shop, but someone at the shop couldn't easily spot him.

He dialed Laura's number again. "Are you inside the pawn shop?" he asked when she answered.

There was a brief pause, and then Laura said, "Yes."

"I want you to send Maggie outside."

"Or what?" Laura's voice was tight with anger.

"Or I'll come get her. You don't want me to do that."

Laura laughed. "For God's sake, Jack. Marguerite's drama queen complex must be contagious. We'll both come out. Okay?"

There was a murmured exchange; Maggie seemed to be resisting. "Let me talk to her," Jack said.

Maggie came on the phone. "She wants me to go with her."

"Do it. It's okay."

Jack held his breath, waiting to see what she decided. Obviously she still didn't trust him, or she wouldn't be in this mess in the first place. Maybe he really wasn't anything more than a notch in her bedpost.

After a long moment, the door of the pawn shop opened and Maggie walked out, Laura behind her. Laura was holding her cell phone but didn't seem to be armed.

Jack scanned the road with watchful eyes for any sign that Laura had set a trap. At ten a.m. on a Thursday, traffic on the access road was light. A handful of businesses lined the road, but there was no obvious place for an ambusher to hide.

"Jack?" Laura's voice sounded impatient.

"See the Chevron station up the road?"

Laura peered toward the gas station. "Yeah.

"Walk to that station. Go inside the food mart and wait."

As he watched, Laura told Maggie what to do. Maggie grew tense. Over the phone line, he heard Laura say, "Look, Jack said do it, not me. Don't tell me you don't trust him, either."

Maggie's shoulders slumped. Then she straightened, lifted her chin and started walking toward the Chevron station.

Jack lost sight of them briefly when they crossed in front of the pickup truck in front of the Beretta. "Get down where you can't be seen," he told Remy, opening the driver's door as quietly as he could. Rounding the car, he padded up behind the two women. He watched their reflections in the food mart windows the food mart, waiting for one of them to notice him.

Maggie saw him first. Her eyes widened, and her steps faltered as she stepped up on the curb, almost making her trip. He shook his head, and she caught herself, turning to Laura as she reached for the door handle. "What now, we grab a Slurpee and chill out waiting for Jack's next move?" she asked Laura.

Laura spoke into the cell phone. "Now what, Jack?"

Jack slid in the door behind them before it closed. "Now you tell me what the hell

kind of game you're playing," he murmured in Laura's ear.

She whirled around, eyes wide. "God, you scared me!"

He pulled Maggie behind him. "You're lucky that's all I did to you."

Laura's eyes narrowed. "You do love playin' knight in shining armor, don't you?"

"Cut the old crap and tell me why we shouldn't walk out of here right now."

"I don't see why we don't," Maggie muttered.

"I believe Remy Chauvin is tellin' the truth." Laura lowered her voice. "I think he saw Mark Blevins shoot a man named Nicky Tamburello, a Philly mob hit-man who turned up dead in the Pontchartrain a couple of days ago."

A hit-man? Something about that information nagged at the edges of Jack's mind. It was important somehow . . .

"We aren't sure why he killed Tamburello, but we suspect it has somethin' to do with Blevins' extracurricular activities. He's dirty as mud, and I've spent the last six months tryin' to prove it." As a customer entered the store, passing close, Laura nodded toward the door. "Let's take this outside, okay?"

Jack put his arm around Maggie, keeping her close, and followed Laura outside. He spared a look at Maggie, meeting her wary eyes. She looked afraid and ashamed.

She should. Shame was nothing next to the sick ache that had settled in the pit of his gut when he'd realized his hopes she might actually feel something real for him were nothing but a fool's wish. Forget loving him; she didn't even trust him. Their lovemaking had been nothing but another one of her games.

He forced himself to move past the festering pain. There would be time to work through his regrets later. Right now, he had to figure out whether Laura Sandoval was friend or foe.

* * * * *

Maggie leaned against the passenger door of Jack's Beretta, her body placed strategically between the car and Laura Sandoval so that the other woman couldn't see Remy hunkered down in the floorboard in front of the passenger seat. Not that it made much difference. Laura had eyes only for Jack, drinking him in like she'd been stuck in the desert for weeks without a canteen.

"I didn't send Cooper to Mobile," she was saying, her voice low and oozing sincerity. Maggie curled her lip in distaste.

"You think Cooper may be part of this thing?" Jack asked.

"I don't think so. But he's not in on my investigation."

Jack's teeth worried his lower lip. Maggie knew that expression. He was considering his next move, thinking it through like moves on a chess board. "What do you want us to do?" he asked Laura.

"Come back to New Orleans with me."

"No," Maggie said. "We're not going anywhere with you."

Jack gave her an admonishing look. Her first flicker of anger was quickly swamped by shame. It poured through her, hot and relentless. Jack had every reason to be disappointed in her for lying to him, every reason not to listen to her opinion on anything. She'd just have suck it up and deal with it.

"What good would it do for us to come back with you?" Jack asked Laura.

"What good is it for you stayin' out here with people lookin' for you?" Laura countered. "I have extra sofas and a guest room. You're safer there than out here on the run."

"I doubt that," Maggie growled, putting aside her regrets to focus on the trouble at hand. Jack may not want her opinion, but she'd be damned if she was going to keep her mouth shut. Too much was on the line. "How do we know this isn't a trap?"

"If I wanted you in custody, I'd have the cops with me."

"Custody?" Maggie asked. "I think you want us dead."

"Maggie--" Jack began.

"Think about it," she interrupted. "Why *didn't* she bring the cops? Afraid they might ask inconvenient questions?"

Laura threw up her hands. "You are certifiably insane."

"Maggie has reason to worry about her safety," Jack said softly. "Someone broke into my house while she and Remy were there. They weren't looking to steal the silverware."

"Okay, fine. You have reason to be paranoid. So how do I prove I'm tellin' the truth?" Laura addressed Maggie directly.

Maggie considered the question. Was there really anything Laura could do to prove her honesty, or was that impossible, given the combination of circumstances and past history?

"For starters," Jack said, "leave your car here. Maggie drives. I sit in the back where I can keep an eye on you."

Maggie wasn't sure she liked the sound of that, but she had to admit it was definitely safer than letting Laura have any sort of control over their drive back to New Orleans.

"Deal?" Jack asked.

Laura looked from him to Maggie and back, her eyes narrowed and her lips pressed

tight with annoyance. She turned her gaze back to Maggie once more, her dark eyes flashing. "You're really more trouble than you're worth."

"Deal?" Jack repeated.

Laura sighed and looked back at him. "Deal," she said.

Maggie's heart skipped a beat.

They were going back to New Orleans.

* * * * *

Laura's apartment building had started life as a turn of the century textile mill in New Orleans' Warehouse District. The sprawling building spanned nearly a whole block, its red brick façade still looking more like a mill than an apartment complex. A tall brick smokestack stood in one corner of the grounds, its top half visible above the wall that circled the entire place.

From the backseat, Laura pointed out an ornate iron gate set into a brick wall near the middle of the block. "Punch in my key code at the security panel. Four three nine five."

Maggie pulled up to the concrete pillar that housed the keypad and punched the code. The gate swung open slowly and Maggie drove the Beretta through, trying to tamp down the feeling that she was driving into a trap.

Inside the gates, the factory atmosphere gave way to a funky urban jungle of ivy-draped balconies and haphazard flower gardens strewn with an eclectic collection of yard art, from kitschy gnomes to sweeping abstracts constructed of scrap metal and spare auto parts. An Olympic-sized pool occupied almost the entire west corner of the courtyard, a modern oddity plunked down in the middle of living history.

Laura led them inside the apartment building through a covered walkway from the parking garage. She said little as they walked. In fact, she'd been uncommunicative for most of the drive from Picayune--annoyingly so, for it seemed to Maggie that sixty minutes was plenty of time for Laura to explain just what, exactly, she was up to.

She had managed to find time to catch up with Jack during the drive, wasting no opportunity to remind him of the old times they'd shared. Maggie's jaw ached from clenching her teeth for forty miles, swallowing every snide, jealous remark that occurred to her so that she wouldn't blurt it out and make herself look even worse in Jack's eyes than she already did.

After all, Jack had done his share of walking down memory lane, damn him, warming to the subject as the miles rolled past and they neared the Crescent City. If

Remy hadn't kept up a constant patter of questions and comments from the passenger seat, Maggie might have felt completely invisible.

Obviously, Jack was furious at her. And the drive to New Orleans hadn't done much to improve his feelings, judging by the careful distance he kept from her as they followed Laura into the apartment lobby.

His cold-shoulder act was starting to make her angry. Yes, she'd lied about the ring. Yes, she'd failed to tell him she was going to the pawn shop to redeem it on her trip into Picayune. But she'd had time to think on the drive back to New Orleans, to consider the options she'd been faced with when Jack left for Mobile. There'd been no guarantee that he'd come back to her. Anything could have happened in Mobile--look how close he'd come to walking into a trap.

She'd had Remy to think about. They had needed money in case they needed to make a quick run for it. Even Jack had understood that, or he'd never have risked sneaking into his office to get his own stash of safe money.

The only difference between them was that she'd lied.

Was that really unforgivable?

Laura led them up two flights of stairs, turning to look at Jack as they reached the hallway. "There's somethin' I need to explain--"

Jack stopped so abruptly that Maggie stumbled into him from behind. "Son of a bitch," he growled. He reached back and grabbed Maggie's arm, keeping her still behind him.

"What is it?" She found she was whispering, though she wasn't sure why.

"Cooper," Laura breathed.

Maggie heard shoe soles clacking against the hardwood floor of the hall, slowly coming closer. Panic rippled through her gut. Cooper? The F.B.I. agent Jack had seen the morning before in Mobile?

"Go back to the car. Now!" Jack told Maggie.

"No," Laura said quickly. "I think Cooper's one of the good guys. And we'll need his connections before this is over."

Jack hesitated, his fingers still closed around Maggie's arm. She peered around him to see a tall, sandy-haired man dressed in a gray silk suit walking toward them, his steps unhurried and his expression a mixture of surprise and curiosity. He didn't look particularly threatening, but by now, Maggie knew that danger didn't always wear a scary face. She curled her fingers in the back of Jack's t-shirt, reaching behind her to make sure Remy was out of the line of fire.

"Jack Bennett." Agent Cooper's voice was low and well-modulated, his accent

mostly neutral, although Maggie thought she caught a whiff of Texas twang in his vowels. He looked like a Texan, rangy and confident, closing the distance between them with unhurried, long-legged strides.

"Travis Cooper," Jack responded, his voice gravelly with tension. His grip on Maggie's arm tightened. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised to see you."

"Funny, I'm surprised as hell to see you." Cooper turned his gaze to Laura, his stern expression belying his light tone of voice. "You never call, you never write . . ."

"Why are you here?" Laura asked.

He held up a bag of doughnuts. "Called your office; they said you were working from home. Thought I'd bribe you with sugar-coated goodness and see if your troll through the pawnshops had netted any leads." He cocked his head slightly, turning his gaze back to Jack. His gray-eyed gaze slid past Jack to meet Maggie's. "You must be Marguerite Cole."

The sound of her former name on the F.B.I. agent's tongue snapped the tension that had been building in Maggie for over an hour. She pulled her arm free of Jack's grip and stepped out from behind him, lifting her chin. "Maggie Stone," she corrected. "And I'd like to know what you plan to do with us."

Cooper's shapely lips curved in a half-smile. "Damned good question. Any suggestions?"

"Well, you could let us go and pretend you never saw us."

His smile turned into a chuckle. "Bzzzzt. Try again."

"How about protecting us?" Jack suggested. "We're not the bad guys here."

Cooper crossed his arms. "Well, let's see, the boy there took Miss Co--Miss Stone captive at knifepoint." He looked pointedly at Jack. "You compounded the problem by spiriting them away to--" He glanced expectantly at Laura.

"Picayune," she supplied.

"--Picayune instead of calling police," Cooper continued. "Do you know how freaked out her father is at the moment?"

"Do you know what an accomplished actor my father is?" Maggie spat back. "He knows if I'm with Jack, I'm safe."

"Well, he might if you hadn't lied to him about Jack puttin' moves on you," Laura murmured.

Maggie glared at the other woman. "He didn't believe me."

Laura held up her hands. "Look, let's get out the hallway, okay?" She moved forward, toward the doorway at the end of the hall, pulling her keys and something small and black from her purse. Cooper fell in step with her. After a moment's hesitation,

Jack started toward her as well, tugging gently at Maggie's elbow, urging her to follow. Remy brought up the rear.

Laura entered her apartment and turned in the doorway to face them, her index finger lifted to her lips, shushing them. As Maggie watched with growing confusion, Laura walked slowly around her apartment, the black gadget in her left hand extended. She waved the device over table tops, under shelves, along the back of the chic tomato-red sofa and coordinating cream chairs that comprised the seating area nearest the door. Maggie couldn't see much beyond that part of the loft apartment from her position behind Jack and Cooper, but she could tell from their expressions that Laura continued her odd ritual throughout the rest of the lower floor.

"What's she doin'?" Remy whispered in Maggie's ear.

"I think it's some sort of voodoo ritual," she whispered back, only half-joking. Jack glanced back at her, his expression stern but a slight twinkle of amusement in his blue eyes. It was the first hint of a positive emotion from him in over an hour. Maggie hugged it to her heart.

Laura reappeared in the doorway. "It's okay. You can come in." She stepped aside and let them enter.

Cooper put his hands on his hips. "Want to explain what that was all about?"

"You think your place may be bugged," Jack surmised.

"I know my place may be bugged. My phone is."

Jack cocked one eyebrow. "By whom?"

Laura kicked off her pumps and dropped gracefully onto the sofa, propping her feet on the cream-colored ottoman with studied nonchalance, as if she weren't fully aware of how artfully the pose displayed her shapely legs. "Let's say it wasn't anyone who went to a judge for permission."

"Blevins," Maggie murmured.

Laura nodded. "Or one of his men."

"Blevins?" Cooper echoed, sounding doubtful. "Mark Blevins, the cop?"

"Mark Blevins, the very dirty cop," Laura responded. She patted the sofa cushion next to her, her gaze directed toward Travis Cooper. "Let me tell you a story."

Cooper sat next to her, his lean body turned toward her expectantly. Jack crossed to one of the chair across from the sofa and sat as well, leaning forward. Even Maggie found curiosity tugging her into the circle. She took the chair next to Jack and motioned for Remy to sit beside her on the floor. As the boy sat, cross-legged, Laura began to speak.

"Eight months ago, the U.S. Attorney's office for Eastern Louisiana opened an

investigation of corruption in the New Orleans Police Department. Unlike past investigations, we were lookin' not at widespread criminal activities but somethin' smaller and, frankly, harder to pin down. The allegations were second-hand or third-hand, rumors more than evidence, datin' back for a couple of years. If we hadn't received such a sheer volume of tips, it's unlikely we would have thought an investigation was necessary--or legal."

"And you think Mark Blevins is part of this corruption?" Cooper still sounded skeptical.

"I can't prove it yet, but yes." Laura dropped her feet to the floor and sat forward, her hands clasped in front of her. "Four months ago, I stumbled into a very lucky break. A police detective named Gerald Phelps backed into a retaining wall at a convenience store in Slidell while I was getting gas at the same place. The impact popped his trunk and tangled his back bumper in some of the rebar holding the concrete wall together." Her lips curved slightly. "When he started freakin' out, trying to rip off the bumper to get free of the rebar, I got suspicious."

"Something in his trunk?" Jack guessed.

"A hundred kilos of street-grade coke, some of it with evidence tags still on them. And an athletic bag brimming with hundred dollar bills."

"Let me guess--he started singing?"

"Like a nightingale. I got the feelin' he's been wantin' out for a while. He's been workin' with us, helping us try to build a case against Blevins and the other dirty cops."

Maggie gazed at her, stunned and angry. Laura and her fellow attorneys had known all this time that Blevins was dirty and hadn't done anything to protect Remy?

The same thought apparently occurred to Remy, who pushed himself off the floor and took a step toward Laura, his hands curling into fists. "You knew the dude was a creep. Why didn't you people tell the cops to listen to me about him? You let him kill the Bakers, man! I can't believe this!"

Jack rose before Maggie could, placing his hand on Remy's arm. "Come on, son, let her finish. There'll be time for hashing out the mistakes later." He sat Remy in the chair and stood behind him, holding the boy's thin shoulders with a firm but gentle grip. "I assume you had a good reason for staying quiet?" he asked Laura.

"We thought so at the time. We don't yet have the evidence to arrest Blevins. Phelps hasn't been able to give us any sort of definitive proof that Blevins is even involved in the corruption, much less actin' as head of the operation. Phelps is too far down the food chain." Laura met Remy's glare, unflinching but not defiant. "Remy, I didn't think you could get a jury or a judge to believe you. There were too many strikes

against your reliability. I hoped that if you were discredited, Blevins wouldn't feel threatened enough to try to do something. I can't tell you how sorry I am that I was wrong."

"I don't know why I should believe you," Remy growled.

Jack's hands smoothed over the boy's shoulders, somewhere between a warning and a caress. "Why would Blevins be bugging your phone?"

"Because he thinks he has me under his control."

Chapter 15

An hour later, they took a break. Laura went to make a pitcher of iced tea, leaving Jack with Maggie, Remy and Travis Cooper to make sense of everything she had just told them.

If he didn't know better, Jack would have thought she was relating the plot of some fantastical movie she'd seen--an untouchable villain hidden behind the face of a saint, a criminal cabal protected by labyrinthine layers of secrecy, a group of helpless innocents swept up into a maelstrom of madness and murder, and a U.S. Attorney who set herself up for blackmail in order to get closer to the heart of the whole mess.

"Letting herself get nabbed with three ounces of heroin--she's either brave as hell or crazy as hell." Cooper stood and began to pace a tight circle in front of the sofa.

Jack crossed to the sofa and took the seat Cooper had just vacated. He looked at Maggie in the chair across from him, slumped and silent, her gaze fixed on the area rug beneath her feet. She had spoken little throughout Laura's recounting of the investigation into Mark Blevins' activities, her face growing paler as moments stretched into minutes. She'd had a long day and an eventful night, just as he had.

Oh, he was still angry about her lies. Hurt that she'd kept what she'd done for him. Did she think he wouldn't understand? Hell, he'd taken a foolish chance himself to get the money they needed to keep going.

She hadn't trusted him enough. Maybe she never would. And fixing her inability to trust was beyond his abilities; he'd finally learned his lesson about trying to fix people.

But that didn't mean he'd stopped loving her.

He touched her knee. Her gaze lifted to meet his, her solemn expression unchanged. "You okay?" he asked.

She dropped her gaze, but not before he saw her eyes grow bright with moisture. "I'm Fine."

"A lot to process, huh?"

She licked her lips. "Do you believe her?"

He sat back, his fingers trailing over the curve of her knee before letting go. "It fits with what we already knew."

Before Maggie could respond, Laura returned to the living room with a tray carrying five glasses of iced tea. She set the tray on a table next to the sofa and passed out the drinks.

"Blevins will never trust me enough to let me inside his organization." Laura picked up her story where she left off. "Which is frustrating, because I'm positive he keeps meticulous records on everything he's involved in."

"Would he risk a paper trail?" Cooper asked.

"I don't think he can help himself," Laura said. "It's not about money for him. It's about power. It's some elaborate puzzle, and he's the only one who sees where all the pieces fit. He gets off on that fact. For him, the records of his dirty transactions would be like trophies to a serial killer."

"Something to remind him of his accomplishments," Cooper said. "His superiority."

"And nobody has a clue where he'd keep his meticulous records?" Jack asked.

"Why'd he kill the hit-man from Philly?" Maggie asked. Every gaze turned to her, including Jack's.

"We don't know," Laura admitted.

"Let me rephrase. Why would *anyone* kill a hit-man?"

Jack felt the same niggling sensation at the edge of his mind that had been there when Laura first revealed the tattooed man's identity. There was only one reason to kill a hitman. "Tamburello could finger Blevins in a murder for hire."

"Milton Berry," Cooper breathed, his mind apparently following the same path as Jack's.

Two months earlier, in the middle of an unusually heated race for New Orleans Mayor, Milton Berry had made waves in the Republican primary. A charismatic black businessman with solid conservative credentials, Berry had looked likely to beat his primary opponent and clinch the Republican nomination.

Until he'd ended up dead in an abandoned building near the French Quarter with a bullet in his brain.

"Why would Blevins want Milton Berry dead?" Laura's tone was more curious than skeptical. "I thought everybody suspected his opponent in the primary."

"Rogers isn't the kind of guy who'd put out a hit. We scoured his background and his contacts. Squeaky clean."

"You finally settled on Klan elements, right?" Laura asked.

"Only by default."

Maggie made an impatient gesture, pulling out of her slumped position and leaning forward. "When I was trying to get protection for Remy, the D.A. told me if I was sure Blevins was a murderer, I should take it up with Mayor Davies."

Laura made a soft sound, drawing Jack's attention. Her expression lit up with understanding. "They're poker buddies."

Maggie nodded. "Maybe Davies didn't want to go head to head with Berry in the general election. He knew he could beat Rogers--he'd done it once already. But Berry was getting buzz."

"Reggie Davies is ambitious but I can't see him ordering a hit," Cooper cut in.

"He didn't," Laura said. "Blevins did it on his own."

"As a favor?" Jack asked.

"As leverage," Maggie said softly.

Jack looked at her. Her gaze was locked with Laura's, her face as alive with excitement as the other woman's.

Laura nodded slowly. "All he'd have to do is hint that the Berry assassination was his doing. He wouldn't have to say it outright. Davies would get the message, and he'd be at Blevins' mercy for fear he'd end up blamed for the murder."

Jack's stomach curled into a knot. If the new theory was true, Mark Blevins was thorough, careful and utterly without a conscience. He kept himself largely insulated from the criminal acts of his associates, which would make proving his involvement difficult at best. But Jack knew, gut deep, that the only way to get Remy and Maggie out of danger was to bring Blevins down. "We have to find those files."

"Believe me, I've tried," Laura said. "Gerald Phelps has put his own neck on the line tryin' to help me figure it out, but we can't pinpoint a place to look. Phelps has even been to his house and looked around."

"A guy that careful wouldn't keep the files in a place that could be connected to him that way," Maggie said.

"Why'd he cap the dude himself?" Remy interjected. He flushed a little as everyone turned to look at him. "I mean, this guy's so careful, like you say, keepin' his nose clean and sh--stuff--why'd he shoot Tattoo Guy himself instead of gettin' someone else to do it?"

Great question, Jack had to acknowledge. Getting his hands dirty wasn't Blevins'

style. "Maybe he didn't want anyone in his crew to know he was involved in this particular crime."

"He'd have to feel safe." Maggie's brow furrowed. "He wouldn't have done it himself if he thought there was a chance to be seen. He's into the details, right?" She directed the question to Laura, who nodded. "He'd want to be sure he was completely in control. That's why he's been so ruthless in coming after Remy, even though nobody believed him. Blevins doesn't do loose ends."

Another puzzle piece clicked into place in Jack's mind. He turned to Remy. "Where did you see the murder take place?"

Remy frowned. "In an alley between a couple of warehouses around Duvalier Street. Not far from the youth center."

"Do you remember the exact street?" Cooper asked.

Remy shook his head. "I was haulin' ass 'cause I was already late. But when I heard the shot--"

"I thought you saw the shooting," Cooper interrupted.

"I hear the pop, I look up and see the cop standin' over Tattoo Guy, holdin' a gun. I don't see nobody else--who d'you think shot him, Santa Claus?" Remy's look of unadulterated teenage disdain was comical, despite the seriousness of the situation, and Jack had to bite back a laugh.

"He didn't see you or you'd already be dead," Laura said.

Remy's look of exasperation faded, replaced by tension. "Yeah. Lucky me."

Laura's cell phone trilled, and the boy jumped. He grew red again and made a chuffing noise to hide his embarrassment, but Jack wasn't fooled. The kid had been through hell over the last week, and he was close to the limit of what he could take.

They were going to have to come up with a solution. Soon.

"Did you tell them you saw us?" Laura had moved away from the group to answer her phone, but her question came out in a tense, higher-pitched tone that drew Jack's attention to where she stood by the kitchen bar. Her body was almost rigid, her eyes wide and bright with alarm. "Okay, Mr. Lowry, thank you for the heads up." She shut off the phone.

"What is it?" Cooper asked.

"Two men showed up at Lowry's pawnshop in Picayune twenty minutes ago. They sniffed around my car and then went inside to ask Mr. Lowry some questions. Lowry told him I'd been there and that I'd picked up Maggie. But he didn't like the way they were actin', so he thought he'd better call to let me know."

"What do you think it means?" Maggie asked.

"Someone was tracking her car--probably some sort of real-time GPS system," Jack said as Laura dropped onto the sofa next to Cooper. "I have one on the Beretta for security purposes."

"And that means they know you're with me," Laura added.

"They know Remy's with you, too." Maggie's face grew ashen, and her eyes darkened with fear.

"So let's get y'all out of here." Cooper pulled his cell phone from his pocket. "I can arrange a safe house."

Laura covered his hand, stopping him. "Don't." When he looked at her like she'd lost her mind, she added, "I think there may be someone in your office who's tipping off Blevins."

"That's crazy."

"Maybe not," Jack said. "I contacted two people asking questions about Maggie and Remy--you and Laura. I don't think either of you told Blevins. But someone did. Did you talk to anyone else about my questions?"

Cooper frowned. "I had my secretary call Jim Becker at the D.C. office of the Secret Service. Just to make sure you were still in good standing. I mentioned you'd asked about the Remy Chauvin case because of your prior connection to Ms. Stone. But Carol's always been completely reliable."

"She wouldn't have thought that was classified information, would she?" Jack asked. "She might have told almost anyone in passing--a friend, her boyfriend . . ."

"Maybe we don't need a safe house," Maggie said.

Jack turned to look at her, surprised. He would have thought that running to the next rabbit hole would be exactly what Maggie would want.

But she met his look of inquiry with a steady gaze. "This won't be over until somebody takes Blevins down, right?"

"I'm afraid you're right," Laura agreed.

"So let's do it. Let's find his files."

"How? I don't have enough for a warrant. And if we start poking around, he'll move the files to an even safer place."

Maggie's lips curved with a smile so reminiscent of the naughty sex kitten who'd seduced him the night before, Jack's breath caught in his chest.

"That's what I'm counting on," she said.

* * * * *

The plan was simple. While Jack was out on the street, attaching the real-time GPS tracker under the front bumper of Blevins' car, Maggie would approach Blevins inside the restaurant where he was eating lunch. She'd tell him she'd figured out where he kept his secret files and that if he didn't leave her and Remy alone, she'd let the F.B.I. know as well.

"It's got to be somewhere around the alley where he killed Tamburello," Maggie had explained as she outlined her idea. "He felt safe there, safe enough to commit murder with his own hands. He knows that place. That's where he'd keep the files."

Even Jack had agreed, although he had balked at the idea of Maggie confronting Blevins. "Laura's the one who's built up the relationship with Blevins' crew--"

"Not Laura. He'd suspect a trap." Maggie shook her head. "But he thinks I'm vulnerable. He'll buy my trying to blackmail him to stay away from us."

"You are vulnerable." Jack shook his head.

"She's right," Laura said quietly. Jack shot the other woman a fierce glare that Maggie might have enjoyed seeing under different circumstances. But Laura stood her ground. "It's direct enough a threat that he'd check it out, but he won't think Maggie has the resources to set up a sting."

"We should wire Maggie so someone can listen in on the conversation with Blevins," Cooper suggested.

"That'll be me," Jack said. "I'll do the listening in."

"I can get equipment from a supply store we use. Tiny wireless mike shaped like a button." Cooper rose and headed toward Laura's front door. He stopped to look at Maggie, his gaze sweeping over her apparel. "She'll need a blouse with black buttons, Laura--do you have something she can borrow?"

"Yes. Go. We'll get her ready." Laura waved him out the door. She had called Gerald Phelps earlier and learned that Blevins was meeting Phelps for a 12:30 lunch at Michel's, an overpriced bistro uptown. Phelps had agreed to be late, giving Maggie time to make her move.

"Once I attach the tracker we'll have six hours of battery life," Jack said. "No time to hook it to the car battery, so that's the best I can offer."

"From what I know of Blevins, he won't waste time," Laura assured him. "He'll want to get the files moved immediately."

Maggie nodded. "Then we'll have him."

* * * * *

Twenty minutes later, Cooper returned with the wireless transmitter and handed it to Jack. "Where's Ms. Stone?"

"Upstairs." Laura had already taken Maggie to the second floor bedroom to lend her a black blouse. The upstairs bedroom was open, loft-style, with only a privacy screen to keep people on the first floor from being able to see upstairs from below.

However, there was nothing to block the view once a person reached the landing, as Jack discovered when he got there. His heart skipped a beat at the sight of Maggie in nothing but her bra and panties. Morning light pouring through the tall loft windows bathed her body, casting it in gold and cream. A small purple shadow marked her thigh and her mouth looked pink and slightly swollen--souvenirs of their midnight passion? God knows their lovemaking had left its own marks on him, wounds he feared might never heal.

Her eyes met his, her expression hard to read. But her voice was light when she asked, "Don't you know how to knock?"

He smiled slightly. "Knock knock."

Laura handed Maggie a pair of pinstripe trousers to go with the black silk blouse Maggie held. "This should match. I'll let you two figure out the hardware." She gave Jack a contemplative look before she headed back downstairs.

Jack handed Maggie the five extra buttons and the small sewing kit that came with the package. "You'll need to switch out the buttons with these--they match the microphone."

Maggie sat on the edge of the bed and opened the package. She used the kit's small pair of scissors to clip off the existing buttons. "Where does the microphone button go?"

He touched the curve of her breast before he could stop himself. He dropped his hand immediately. "About there."

She gazed up at him, her lips parted and her eyes dark with emotion. "Okay."

He stepped back, keeping a slight distance as her deft fingers made quick work of replacing the buttons. When she was finished, she stood up and slipped on the blouse, buttoning up to where he'd indicated. "How does this work?"

He took the button-microphone and slid the tiny clip at its back over the shirt where the next button should go. Once it was buttoned, there was no way to see that it was anything but another one of the black buttons at the front of the blouse.

He started to step back from her again, but she reached out and touched his hand. She lifted her gaze to meet his, her eyes shiny with unshed tears. "I'm sorry, Jack. For everything."

He shook his head, not ready to deal with anything but the job at hand. They had to get the sting against Blevins right or there'd be nothing else to talk about later. "There's no time to get into all this right now."

"I need to say it. We don't know how this will go down--"

"Yes we do," he interrupted. "We're taking Blevins down and then we'll have lots of time to figure out what comes next."

"Does anything come next?" Anxiety creased her pale face.

"I don't know." His voice was harder than he'd intended.

Her expression tightened. "I don't think I did anything so horrible." A hint of anger tinged her voice as she pushed to her feet. "You couldn't be sure you wouldn't be taken into custody the minute you got there. I couldn't chance being left vulnerable that way. Remy was depending on me."

"The business with the ring isn't the problem." He softened his voice. "I just don't know why you thought you had to lie to me. And until you figure that out, I don't see how we're going to be able to make anything between us work."

She licked her lips and looked away from him. A thick hank of hair fell forward, covering the left side of her face from his view. "I was going to tell you this morning. I really did know I couldn't keep lying to you."

"Why didn't you?"

"You mentioned the Laundromat." She looked up at him, her expression guarded. "I realized I could get to the pawnshop and buy back the ring. I thought if I could just get the ring back, it would be like it had never happened."

He lifted his hand and tucked the piece of loose hair behind her ears, his touch more tender than the words he had to say now. "I can take a lot from you, Maggie. But not your distrust. I don't deserve it. I've put my entire life on the line for you. I've left my family hanging, put my business and all the people who work for me in jeopardy, just to help you out. And if you can't see that, I can't help you. I told you, I'm not in the fixing business anymore. This is something you'll have to fix for yourself."

Tears welled in her eyes and trickled out the corners, tracing a damp path down each cheek. "I know." She touched his hand, curling her fingers around his. "I do trust you, Jack. I need you to know that."

He brushed away her tears, trying not to read too much into her words. "We've got to get moving."

She took a deep breath and stepped back from him. She slipped the pinstripe slacks on and tucked the blouse in the waistband. The clothes weren't a perfect fit, and their style was definitely more Laura than Maggie, but she looked presentable. And the

button microphone was undetectable, even from as close as he stood.

If things went according to their plan, Blevins would never get close enough to even wonder.

But things rarely ever went according to plan.

Chapter 16

Michel's wasn't as nice a restaurant as its prices might suggest. It occupied the corner of a sprawling brownstone not far from the Superdome, with curbside parking and valet. Gerald Phelps had assured Laura that Blevins never used valet parking, but up to the last minute, Maggie was terrified she wouldn't find the detective's blue Crown Victoria parked in front of the restaurant. With relief, she spotted the sedan and lowered her chin slightly, speaking toward the hidden microphone. "Fifth car from the corner. Blue Crown Vic, just like Phelps said."

They'd agreed it would be too distracting for Maggie to deal with an earpiece as well as the mike, but as Maggie took a deep breath and walked into the restaurant, she regretted not having Jack's voice in her ear. Intellectually, she knew he was listening. But emotionally, she felt utterly alone.

It took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the low light after walking a block in the bright Louisiana sunshine. She stayed near the entrance, not wanting to Blevins to see her before she spotted him.

The hostess approached her, menus in hand. "How many will be dining today?"

"I'm meeting someone. Detective Blevins."

The hostess lifted one perfectly-shaped eyebrow but didn't comment. She gave a shrug that Maggie read as a request to follow and headed toward the back. Maggie stayed in the taller woman's wake so Blevins couldn't see her until she reached the table. When they reached the corner table where Blevins sat, the hostess moved to one side, leaving Maggie face to face with the man who'd made the last week of her life a living hell.

Mark Blevins wasn't a particularly handsome man, though his features were pleasant

enough. He didn't look all that dangerous, either. When he stood, he was only an inch or two taller than Maggie. His navy suit was well-tailored, but he didn't fill it out well, his shoulders a bit too narrow and his waist too soft to pull off the power suit.

But his storm-gray eyes were as cold as the winter sea.

Maggie controlled a shiver and walked up to the table. She made herself hold that icy gray gaze. "Detective Blevins."

"Ms. Stone." He remained standing a moment, staring at her. His expression was nearly unreadable, but Maggie didn't miss the tightening of the corners of his mouth. He waved at the chair across from him, a silent invitation to sit.

Maggie took the chair, glad her back was to the room rather than the wall. She felt trapped enough as it was.

"Can I order you something to drink?" he asked.

Maggie shook her head. "I won't be staying long. I'm only here to tell you to back off."

He laughed, feigning confusion. "Back off?"

"I know you murdered Nicky Tamburello so he couldn't tell anyone you ordered the assassination of Milton Berry to help your good friend Mayor Davies." She bent forward to deliver the punch line. "And I know you keep very careful, very detailed records of your crimes in a warehouse off Duvalier in Algiers. In fact, I've hidden some of them in a safe place of my own."

"I don't know what you're talking about." His expression didn't change, save for a twitch in the corner of his left eye. But that was enough. Maggie knew she'd scored a hit.

"Here's how this is going to play. I won't tell anyone about the files you've squirreled away, and you'll leave Remy and me alone. I'll take him away from here for good. We won't come back. And you can do whatever it is you and your buddies are doing to this town until you screw up the next time." She stood up, hoping she'd given Jack enough time to plant the GPS tracker, because she didn't want to spend one more minute staring across the table at Mark Blevins.

There was nothing behind his eyes. No humanity. No soul.

She started away from the table, her stomach twisting into fist-sized knots. One step after the other. Twelve steps to the bar, fifteen to the front door. She emerged into bright sunshine, breathing deeply to quell her rising panic.

Her part was done. All she had to do was walk to the corner, take a right and meet Jack in front of the dry cleaner's three blocks away. "I'm out," she murmured, hoping Jack heard.

She had taken only one step toward the corner when the door to the restaurant opened behind her, soft sounds of conversation within spilling into the street. She had a second to glance up at the restaurant's glass façade and catch sight of Mark Blevins less than a foot behind her before his hand closed over her arm.

"Maggie Stone, you're under arrest for obstruction of justice." His fingers dug into her upper arm, swinging her toward the street.

She tried to pull away, but he was stronger than he looked. Nevertheless, she forced him to dodge her kicks and punches as he dragged her to the blue Crown Vic. He pressed the barrel of his gun to her neck, ending her struggle. "You have the right to remain silent." He shoved her toward the car. "Anything you say can and will be held against you in a court of law."

"Somebody help me!" Maggie cried out.

A man walking toward them sped up, looking concerned, but Blevins merely flashed his badge and the man scurried away.

Maggie started struggling again as Blevins holstered his gun to cuff her. He pinned her against the car with his body, stilling her struggles, but she fought his attempt to turn her around so he could bring her hands behind her. With a grunt, Blevins cuffed her hands in front instead and opened the back door of the Crown Victoria. He pushed her inside, not bothering to be gentle. She banged her cheek against the steel mesh partition separating the back seat from the front.

"You have a right to an attorney. I'm not going to pretend you can't afford one, because I know your daddy's loaded, but if daddy doesn't come through, you can have a lawyer on our tab." Blevins slammed the back door shut and opened the driver's door.

Maggie slumped against the back seat, her heart slamming against her ribcage as Blevins slid into the driver's seat. She tried to check the street behind them in the rear-view mirror, but the angle was wrong, the mesh partition distorting the view.

Not that it mattered. Jack had surely heard things go wrong. He was on his way right now to help her out.

And she believed that right up to the moment that Blevins pulled away from the curb and merged with the midday traffic, leaving Michel's--and Maggie's hope--behind them.

* * * * *

Stupid, stupid, stupid!

With each pounding step he took racing down the street toward his car, Jack cursed

himself for missing the obvious. Of course, Blevins wouldn't just let Maggie walk away. Jack had been depending on the crowded restaurant and the busy street to afford Maggie protection.

His mistake was in thinking of Blevins as a bad guy when he should have been thinking of him as a bad cop. A cop with handcuffs, a weapon and a badge to flash at anyone who might question why a woman was screaming for help while being pushed into the back seat of a car.

He pulled out his cell phone as he neared his car, punching the quick dial for Travis Cooper's cell phone. Cooper answered on the first ring. "Everything in place?"

"Not quite." Jack filled him in on Maggie's abduction. He reached the car and jerked the driver's door open. Behind the wheel, he pulled his Palm Pilot from his pocket and punched in his tracking code. A small blue light blipped on a digitized map of New Orleans. "I've got him tracking on the GPS. He's heading down St. Charles toward the Expressway, but I'm not sure what he has in mind."

"All you can do is follow. We're positioned off Duvalier around the Chaubert Industries Distribution Center. We'll sit tight until we hear from you."

Jack pulled the Beretta away from the curb and headed south. "Look, I know you have to tell Laura what's going on, but don't scare Remy, okay? He's had enough to worry about. Don't freak him out."

There was a brief pause on Cooper's end before he said, "I'll do what I can."

Jack hung up and checked the tracking map again. Blevins' Crown Vic had just turned off Charles Street and was heading for the Pontchartrain Expressway east toward Algiers, just as they'd expected.

He adjusted his earpiece, trying to pick up more of what was going on in the back of the Crown Vic. The sensitive receiver easily picked up the low hum of the car's engine and the rapid sound of Maggie's breathing, but she hadn't spoken for several minutes.

His heart kicked into a higher gear. He'd heard her soft grunt and the sound of a thudding impact when Blevins had pushed her into the car. She must have hit the steel mesh barrier in the back of Blevins' car.

Was she even conscious?

* * * * *

She should say something. Jack was probably listening, out of his head--assuming the hidden microphone was even working anymore. But she couldn't think of anything to say. Her mind felt cottony and thick, the air around her stifling and fetid. She

slumped lower in the seat, her eyelids starting to flutter and droop.

Shock, she thought. Maybe not physical shock as much as emotional. Adrenaline rush followed by black despair, wreaking havoc on her nervous system.

She shook her head, trying to clear her brain. Something tickled at her cheek and she latched onto the sensation, concentrating on the feeling. Liquid like tears, seeping from a painful spot in the middle of her cheek. She lifted her cuffed hands to her face and probed the tender flesh. She felt something warm and sticky-wet against her fingertips. When she drew her hands back, her fingers were bloody.

Somehow the sight of that crimson stain shocked her system back into full awareness. She straightened, glaring through the mesh at the back of Blevins' head. "Gonna be fun explaining to the booking sergeant how I ended up with a busted face. Big man, beating up the little lady. They'll be so proud."

Blevins didn't respond to her taunt. She hadn't expected him to. She wasn't sure if he was taking her with him to check on his files or if he was planning to kill her and dump her before he got there, but she was certain they weren't going anywhere near a police station.

"But you're not taking me to the station, are you?" She lifted her feet and kicked hard against the steel mesh, rattling it. "If you're going to kill me, admit it." She rattled the cage again. "Admit it!"

"Shut up!" His voice rose a notch above his normal speaking voice, and even through the mesh barrier, Maggie could see the back of his neck turning red.

Good. She was getting to him. Putting him off his game.

"You're a coward." She bent forward, putting her face as close to the back of his head as possible. "But that's your style, isn't it? You like to let other people do all your dirty work. You stay above it all, right?"

He didn't answer, but she saw a muscle in the side of his neck twitch.

She lowered her voice to a purr. "Maybe you were right to play it that way. The one time you do it yourself, it all starts to unravel. Guess you're just not cut out for the big leagues after all."

Blevins stomped on the brakes, sending the Crown Victoria into a squealing half-skid. Unrestrained and unprepared, Maggie shot forward, her face slamming into the mesh. Pain seared through her entire body. When he hit the gas again, she was flung back against the back seat, bouncing off and almost sliding into the floor.

She righted herself, blinking back tears of pain. Her nose had taken a hard lick, but when she checked her nostrils, she didn't seem to be bleeding. Her face had already been close to the mesh, limiting the impact.

"You think you're a big man," she said, as much to let Jack know she was okay as to keep up her taunts. "Real big man, knocking around the little lady. I bet you like seeing me bleed, don't you?"

Blevins didn't respond.

* * * * *

Jack glanced at the tracker display again. Still on the same road, still heading toward the area where Cooper and Laura were waiting. Despite the very big wrinkle in their plan, it seemed to be working.

But would Maggie be alive when it was all over?

He picked up the cell phone and dialed Cooper again. "He's crossing the river, heading your way. Maggie's hanging in there, but Blevins isn't saying what he has planned." He braked as the light ahead turned red, biting back a curse. He glanced again at the tracker display. The blinking light made a sudden move to the left. Jack grabbed the Palm Pilot and checked the street name. "He's turned left on Beaker Street, going north. Looks like he's definitely heading for Duvalier."

"Got it. We'll circle around, head up the parallel street. Keep on his ass!"

Jack hung up and banged his palm against the steering wheel. The red light lingered forever. He looked around, trying to see if he could maneuver around the traffic and take a chance at running the light. But he was hemmed in.

"Come on, come on--" The blinking light on the tracking map continued north for another block and then took a right. East up Duvalier, like they expected. Blevins should be getting close to the warehouses.

The light ahead turned green, and Jack maneuvered around the bottlenecked traffic, listening for anything new from Maggie. She shot a few more insults at Blevins, picking her words for maximum impact. Having been on the receiving end of a Marguerite Cole harangue himself, Jack had never thought he'd find her sharp tongue comforting. But every word she said was a sweet affirmation that she was still alive.

She delivered another stinging assessment of Blevins' manhood, making Jack grin. *Give him hell, Marguerite.*

"Where are we?" Maggie's voice in Jack's ear sounded suddenly tense. While she'd been taunting Blevins, she'd come across as confident, even cocky, over the radio. Not now.

Jack glanced at the Palm Pilot. The blinking light was fixed in one position. Just past the intersection of Duvalier and Robinette. Jack waited for the tracker light to

move, but it didn't.

The Crown Vic had reached its destination.

* * * * *

Blevins' only response to Maggie's question was to cut the engine. He opened the driver's door and got out of the car.

Maggie took advantage of the moment to herself. "Jack, we're parked near a construction trailer--on Duvalier, just north of Robinette, I think. Lots of warehouses, some active, most not--" Blevins reached for her door handle and she shut up quickly, forcing herself to concentrate on what she planned to do next.

She didn't know if they'd stopped because this was where Blevins intended to kill her or if this was where he kept his files and he wanted to check on them before he killed her. Either way, she didn't plan to go out without a fight.

Blevins reached in to pull her from the back seat. She considered putting up a fight right then, but discarded the idea. He was expecting trouble from her, so he'd be prepared.

Pick your moment. Jack's voice rang in her mind. *Find your opponent's weakness and exploit it.*

She let him bring her out, trying not to play her hand too soon. Blevins released her with one hand to shut the back door of the Crown Victoria. For a moment, her muscles bunched, her instinct to run almost overcoming rational thought, but his fingers tightened, perhaps in response to the tension in her arms, and she let the moment pass.

Jack was behind her somewhere. She knew that as surely as she knew her own name. If the tracker wasn't working, if the radio connection had broken--no matter. He was there. She could feel him with her, his strength filling her with renewed confidence.

Blevins gave her arm a sharp tug, pulling her toward the shabby-looking construction trailer.

"What is this place, anyway?" Maggie asked, stumbling on the cinderblock steps up to the trailer door in hopes of catching Blevins off guard.

He merely tightened his grip on her arm. "Get inside."

"I'm not going into that stinky trailer," she protested, holding back. She hoped Jack was hearing her; she'd given him a good clue that time. There was only one trailer in the area.

Blevins jerked her arm, propelling her up to the top cinderblock. He pushed open the trailer's front door and shoved her inside.

She stumbled for real, nearly slamming into the narrow desk against the wall opposite the door. She caught herself with her cuffed hands, preventing a fall, and whirled around to glare at Blevins. "If you think I'm just going to let you kill me without a fight, you're crazy."

Blevins closed the door behind him with one hand, pulling his gun from his shoulder holster with the other. He motioned toward the middle of the trailer with the barrel of the gun. "Move."

She did as he said, moving deeper into the trailer. As luck would have it, she hadn't been wrong about the smell of the trailer. It was musty, ill-used, faintly smelling of stale cigarette smoke and moist rot. She looked around her carefully, trying to figure out what kind of business Blevins might be doing in a place like this. Were the files here? She'd told him she had some of his files. She'd better figure out quickly if this was his repository, because he was going to want to know whether or not she was telling the truth.

"Stop right there."

Maggie stopped, the hair rising on the back of her neck. She sensed Blevins' approach, despite the noise-masking softness of the carpet beneath their feet. It was as if she felt the coldness of him, the empty blackness at his core. Chill bumps rose on her arms and neck. She barely controlled a shudder.

Blevins circled around her and motioned with his gun. "Pull it up."

Maggie followed his gaze, trying not to betray her confusion. He was looking at the floor. She looked down as well and saw a faint square shape barely visible in the expanse of mottled blue carpet covering the trailer floor. A trap door?

She bent and ran her finger along the faint line nearest her. The carpet moved, and she felt something hard and cool beneath. Metal--aluminum, from the feel of it. She pulled the carpet back to expose a square metal door in the bottom of the trailer. A small metal loop in one end served as a handle. She gave the loop a tug and the door opened, revealing the concrete-covered ground beneath the trailer. In the middle of the concrete, directly below the trap door, was a rusted manhole cover.

"Going down, I presume?" she murmured, lowering her chin so that she was speaking almost directly into the hidden mike.

"Stay right here. If you make a run for it, I'm within my rights to stop you with lethal force if necessary." Blevins moved through the trap door and dropped to the concrete, keeping his gun trained on her.

Maggie considered the odds of being able to get out of the trailer before Blevins rolled out from underneath and gunned her down where she stood.

Not good enough.

Blevins crouched down, his head clearing the bottom of the trailer. His gaze never left her face as he reached down and pulled at the manhole cover. It moved with stunning ease, sliding easily away from the opening. Plastic painted to look like metal, Maggie realized as Blevins flipped the cover onto its face, revealing a pale white underbelly.

It wasn't a real manhole, she realized. It was the mouth of an underground tunnel, no doubt leading to one of the four surrounding warehouses. But which one?

Only one way to find out, she realized as Blevins motioned for her to climb down through the trap door.

She followed him down into the tunnel.

Chapter 17

Jack paused at the stop sign, his pulse thundering. Thick silence had followed Blevins' threat, punctuated by the scrape of metal on metal. After that, nothing. No breath sounds, no footsteps, nothing to connect him to Maggie.

She couldn't be far ahead. A block distant, four warehouses flanked Duvalier like sentries. One of them hid Blevins' secret files, he was sure of it. But which one?

He parked just past the intersection. Grabbing the Palm Pilot, his cell phone and his Glock, Jack set out on foot toward the warehouses, looking for the trailer he'd heard Maggie mention over the radio. As he reached the corner of the first building on the right, he spotted a construction trailer parked between the two warehouses. It was the only one in sight.

In Jack's ear, the receiver remained silent.

Jack approached the trailer cautiously, looking signs of occupation. The door was closed and Jack could see no movement in or around the metal structure. He crept closer, alert to anything that might betray their location or any sign of ambush. For a moment, there was only the hum of distant traffic, the white noise of urban living.

Then he heard it. Breathing, soft and rapid.

It took a moment to realize the sound was coming from the receiver in his ear. He heard a door click shut, then Maggie's voice, low and bemused. "Throw me somethin', Mister."

Jack pressed his back against the trailer, puzzling through her comment. He heard tapping sounds, footsteps on cement, echoing in a cavernous chamber. They were inside one of the warehouses. And Maggie had given him a clue.

The largest of the four warehouses was as wide as it was tall, with industrial doors

spanning nearly the width of the building. The faded paint on the facade showed a laughing harlequin in time-worn green, gold and purple. No words to identify the place, but none were needed. Not in New Orleans.

"Throw me somethin', Mister," Jack murmured.

Maggie and Blevins were inside a Mardi Gras float den.

* * * * *

The false manhole beneath the construction trailer had led six feet down to a tunnel under the street. The pitch-black passageway closed in around Maggie as she'd stumbled along behind Blevins, dragged by her cuffs. He walked with the confidence of a man who'd navigated the tunnel many times before, reinforcing Maggie's growing certainty that he was taking her to the place where his secret files were hidden.

Blevins opened a door. Dim light spilled into the tunnel, illuminating the damp concrete walls of the narrow passageway. He pushed Maggie through the door in front of him.

The first thing she was a giant dragon's head, covered with glittery green scales rimmed with gold. Long white fangs and a blood-red tongue projected from its gaping mouth. "Throw me somethin', Mister," she murmured, moving closer to the float. It lay in pieces atop several wooden pallets.

She gazed into the dragon's red maw. "Fire shoots from its mouth. I wonder how they do that. It should be a fire hazard."

Blevins pressed something hard between her shoulder blades. The barrel of his gun, she realized, trying not to betray her fear. He gave her a push past the dragon toward a half-built float that looked like Cleopatra's barge. "Half the Knights of Prometheus are firemen."

Maggie took in as much of the warehouse as she could, trying to figure out where Blevins kept his files. Not in the dragon; the Knights of Prometheus had been part of the Mardi Gras schedule that year. Blevins wouldn't want to move his files every time the bacchanal rolled around. Not Cleopatra's barge, either. She'd seen that float this year as well.

"Time's up, Ms. Stone."

She turned to face him. "Are you going to kill me now? Quite a risk. If anything happens to me--"

"A letter will go to the *New York Times*, detailing my crimes? Please. Come clean--you don't have my files, do you? It was a bluff." He brushed her jaw with the barrel of

his gun.

She looked away, her gaze settling on a third dismembered float gathering dust across the warehouse floor. A gladiator in full armor, his dark hair flowing like sea waves down his back beneath the shiny silver helmet.

She remembered that float, she realized, though the memory wasn't recent. She'd been seventeen. Her father had accepted the state party chairman's invitation to take in a parades, bringing along the kids so nobody forgot he was a family man. Maggie had hated the noise, the crowds, the garish grotesqueries that had characterized Mardi Gras for her that day.

And the most garish and grotesque of all had been the gladiator float, with its defiantly bare-assed icon and its rowdy krewe members, a vivid mockery of her teenage misery.

The Krewe of Tiberius, she finally remembered. An older krewes, full of traditions and secret rituals. They were one of the last old krewes still holding out against the city's anti-discrimination laws. They hadn't paraded in years.

And Blevins would know that.

She met his impatient glare. "They're in the gladiator."

He went from flushed to pallid in the span of a second, his lips trembling as he reached for her. She darted away, heading for a side door she'd spotted earlier. Veering around a primitive work bench, she grabbed its corner and upended it, paint cans and pieces of float decorations skittering across the warehouse floor to slow Blevins' pursuit.

She reached the door ahead of him, sparing only a quick glance back to see him picking his way through the debris she'd left in her wake. She turned the door handle and tugged.

Nothing happened.

She put her weight into it. The door didn't budge.

Blevins' arm whipped around her neck. He pressed barrel of his gun to her temple. "Padlocked from the outside," he growled. "All of them."

His words zapped the energy from her. She fought the tide of despair, reminding herself Jack was nearby. Once she came up with a way to give him an opening, he'd find a way to complete the mission and get everyone home safely.

She trusted him. The thought rang in her mind, bell-clear. She trusted him. No doubts or fears. And not just with her life. Jack had broken through the walls she'd built around her heart, exposing her vulnerable core, then did what he'd always done, as long as she'd known him. He'd put himself in charge of keeping her heart safe, ready to

take a bullet if necessary.

She could trust him with her heart, too.

Blevins dragged her back to the gladiator float. Holstering his gun, he pulled her by the cuffs to a cast iron pipe running up to the ceiling to join a spider web of similar pipes spanning the warehouse from wall to wall.

He was going to check his files, she realized. Once he figured out she'd lied, he wouldn't hesitate to kill her.

And cuffed to the pipe, she'd be a sitting duck.

No way. If she was going down, she was going down swinging. A calm strength flowed into her, as if she felt Jack's back pressed against her own, guarding her rear and trusting her to take care of the danger in front of her.

Blevins tried to pull her arm up to the pipe. She resisted, dragging him off balance. It was the opening she was looking for. She rammed her knee up, catching Blevins between the legs. He gasped, his body hunching from the blow. Twisting free, she ran toward the hidden opening to the tunnel.

A loud crack sounded behind her, and something slammed into the metal wall just ahead. A point of light spilled in through the hole left in the wall.

He was shooting at her.

* * * * *

The gunshot came from inside the warehouse, muted but unmistakable. It rang even louder in Jack's ear, amplified by the microphone on Maggie's shirt. He jerked, nearly toppling from the rusty ladder on which he stood, trying to see through the dirty exterior windows of the den.

Inside, the warehouse was something out of a child's nightmare, giant, garish body parts littering every available surface. A table lay on its side, its former contents now scattered across the cement floor. Movement drew his attention to the far side of the warehouse, where a dismembered gladiator gazed toward the ceiling with a baleful glare.

There. Black top, charcoal slacks, hair shining burgundy in a shaft of light shining through a hole in the far wall.

Maggie.

She raced toward the far wall, where the giant body of an Egyptian queen lay scattered in pieces. Another gunshot roared and Maggie dived behind the Egyptian Queen.

Jack's heart clutched. Had she been hit?

He shrugged off his over-shirt and wrapped it around the Glock and his wrist. With two hard blows of the makeshift bludgeon, the window shattered, glass raining to the floor below. He whacked the surrounding glass free, making an opening to crawl through, then tucked the Glock back in his waistband.

The falling glass drew Blevins' attention. He swung his weapon to acquire the new target. Jack shifted to put the metal window frame between himself and Blevins, but the movement was too much for the ladder. The rusty metal crumpled with a groan.

Jack thrust the upper part of his body through the window to keep from going down with the ladder. Fragments of glass on the edges of the window frame cut into his belly as he dangled half in, half out of the window. But that the least of his problems, he discovered as another shot rang out and the window next to him exploded.

* * * * *

Maggie peeked from her hiding place inside Cleopatra's head, the mesh-covered eye openings providing a hazy view of the rest of the warehouse. At first she'd thought the sound of breaking glass had come from Blevins, but when Blevins' gun barked again and another window shattered, she realized something else was happening. She had to get a better look.

Slipping out of the shelter of the parade float head, she darted past Cleopatra's torso and hid behind one of her arms. She spotted Blevins first, ten yards away, peering toward the bank of windows lining the far side of the warehouse. Two of the windows had been broken, light pouring through to reveal a man's torso hanging inside one of the openings.

Jack.

Her heart jerked to a halt, then restarted at rocket pace. Dangling there, he was an easy target. She had to do something.

Maggie darted from behind the float.

"Don't move, Maggie!" Jack called out.

She froze, gazing at the window. Another gunshot rang out, impossibly loud, reverberating around the warehouse. Two feet from Blevins, Cleopatra's foot gave a jerk, shards of fiberglass spraying the crooked cop.

That shot had come from Jack, Maggie realized.

Blevins darted toward Maggie's hiding place. Ignoring the instinct to run, she realized she had the advantage of surprise. Distracted, with no idea where she was,

he'd be off guard. She just had to time it right . . .

Blevins slipped through a space between the torso and the arm behind which Maggie crouched, ready to spring. The moment he passed her, she shot up, looped her arms around his neck from the back and pulled the cuff chain hard against his throat.

He clutched at the cuffs with his free hand, grunting in pain. Maggie didn't loosen her grip, putting her whole weight behind the attack. Blevins tried to turn his gun on her, but Maggie jammed her knee up between his legs from behind. He howled with pain, his hand dropping back to his side.

Maggie fell back, pulling hard to bring him down with her. Blevins crashed back, half on top of her, his gun hand slamming into the floor. He lost his grip, the gun bouncing once on the concrete floor and skittering several feet away.

Maggie was tempted to go for the gun, but she knew it was more important to keep Blevins immobilized. Jack was here. He knew what was happening. All she had to do was keep Blevins from getting up again until Jack found a way down to the warehouse floor. She kept up the pressure on Blevins' throat, not stopping even when he started to claw at her hands.

"You can let go now." Jack's voice broke through her concentration. She found him a few feet away, holding both guns. A series of small tears bisected his t-shirt, blood staining the ragged edges. A cut over his left eyebrow oozed blood down the side of his face.

She'd never seen anything more beautiful. Tears spilled down her cheeks. "I love you." She hadn't meant to say the words, but she didn't regret them.

If she wanted Jack, it was time to start telling the truth.

A slow smile curving his lips as he crossed to her side and crouched, gazing at her with eyes full of relief and something else. Something rich and pure and amazing.

Something that looked a lot like love.

* * * * *

Cooper and Laura had arrived at the warehouse with bolt-cutters, forewarned by Jack before his climb up the doomed ladder. They'd called in back-up from the F.B.I., not ready to trust the New Orleans Police Department yet. Not until all of Blevins' gang was rounded up.

"That won't take long," Laura told Jack later at the precinct station when she came to let him know he was free to go. "Blevins isn't going down alone. He's naming names, his files are a gold mine, and we've already identified the officers in those photos you

took of your intruders in Fairhope."

"How deep does it go?"

"Deep enough. The good news is, the mayor doesn't seem to be directly implicated. But he's lucky this is his second term. He'd have be reelected after this." Laura settled in the chair across from him, cocking her head. "You look like crap."

He grinned. "I feel like crap."

She smiled slightly. "No, you don't. You feel like finding Marguerite and getting the hell out of here."

"Is she free to go?" They'd had to separate for their debriefings.

"Gone already. Her father took her home to her apartment." As Jack's stomach started to sink, Laura handed him a folded piece of paper. "She asked me to give this to you."

He unfolded the paper and read the two short sentences written in Maggie's sprawling script. "Meet me at my apartment as soon as they let you go. We have a lot to talk about."

Jack tucked the note in his pocket. "What about Remy?"

"His foster parents haven't been found yet, so he's gone to a group home 'til his status is sorted out. Nobody's inclined to press charges for the knife incident at the youth center."

"Can we see him?"

"I may be able to arrange something once he gets settled in. Maggie has all the information." Laura crossed to the door and opened it. "She loves you, you know."

The look he'd seen in Maggie's eyes back in the warehouse--God, he wanted to believe it was true. But he needed to see her again, see that look again. Hear the words. Just to be sure.

He joined Laura at the door. "I owe you an apology for claiming you were crazy all those years ago. I think maybe I've loved her the whole time and didn't know it."

"So go." Her smile was genuine. "You deserve to be happy. God help you, she seems to be the one who can make you happy."

Jack gave her arm a squeeze and headed off to find Maggie.

* * * * *

Maggie's apartment smelled musty. A layer of dust had settled over her furniture, disturbed here and there by the police and, later, Laura Sandoval and Travis Cooper. Laura had told Maggie how she'd found out about the ring. She'd also told her about her

father's genuine concern. Otherwise, Maggie might have refused her father's offer of a ride home.

He stood at one of the front windows, gazing at the street below. Afternoon sunlight outlined the strong, even features that had stirred many female hearts over the years.

"You could have come to me for help," he said, not looking at her.

Maggie didn't walk closer. "No, I couldn't."

He looked at her now, backlit by the window so that she couldn't read his expression. But hurt tinted his voice. "I've never been what you needed, have I?"

"I've always thought that was mutual between us."

He shook his head. "I'm good at politics. Shaking hands and telling people exactly what they want to hear. I'm just not good at being a father." He crossed closer, his expression genuinely regretful. "If your mother had lived, maybe my faults wouldn't have mattered as much. She loved you kids so much."

Tears slid down Maggie's cheek. She pushed them away with her fingertips. "Thank you for trying to find me."

"You didn't want to be found."

She shook her head. "You didn't know that."

He made a bitter sound that might have been a laugh. "Yes, I did." He touched her shoulder briefly and moved toward the door. "I'm glad you're home safely."

As he opened the door, she almost asked him to stay.

Almost.

Maybe someday she would. But today she let him walk out without stopping him. Sinking to her sofa, she let tears come.

A few moments later, someone knocked on her door. A quiver of alarm shot through her, a reminder that she still had things to fear. But when she saw Jack's face through the peephole, fear drained away.

Jack smiled when she opened the door. "Got your note."

"Good." She stepped aside to let him in.

He looked around her apartment, his expression hard to read. She tried to see the place through his eyes--the brightly colored folk art she'd collected over the years, the brick walls and the maple floors. It was important to her that he liked her place. She'd put so much of herself into it.

"Must have a hell of a trust fund." He eased the blunt remark with a grin.

She smiled. "Play your cards right, mister, and I can be your ticket to the good life."

His smile faded. "I'm not looking for a trust fund."

Her nerves jangled. "So what are you looking for?"

He touched her cheek. "The truth. Did you mean what you said in the warehouse?" What--that she loved him? Did he really have doubts about that after all that had happened?

She took his hand and gazed up into his wary eyes. "Yes, I meant it. I love you more than I ever thought I could."

He searched her face. "But do you trust me?"

A fair question. As much as she wanted to get on with building a life with him, she couldn't skip this crucial step. She took tightened her grip on his hand and spoke the words she'd never thought she could. "I trust you. Completely. And I'm never letting you go."

He pressed his lips to her brow. "You won't regret it."

"Neither will you," she promised.

He threaded his fingers through her hair and kissed her, hard and deep, branding her with his passion. She melted around him, answering his demands and staking a claim of her own, swept up in a flood of happiness and relief.

He drew back, gazing at her with eyes full of. "We're talking about forever, aren't we?"

She nodded, finally beginning to believe it.

He kissed her nose. "Rings and cakes and two-point-five little Bennetts running around this loft."

She quirked an eyebrow. "We're living here?"

"Wherever. Doesn't matter." He caught her hands and led her to the sofa, pulling her down into his lap. "I love you, Maggie. I think I've loved you all along."

She arched an eyebrow and flashed a sassy grin. "Could've saved us both a lot of trouble if you'd realized it before now."

"I thought those feelings you stirred up in me were anger and frustration." He shot her a wicked look. "Well, I was probably right about the frustration."

She kissed the tip of his nose. "So, this forever. Rings and cakes and kids--we're talking about marriage? Really?"

He nodded. "You probably want a nice wedding, and that's fine, but let's make it soon."

"Forget a big wedding--let's do this as soon as possible." She nestled against his chest, tucking her forehead into the curve of his neck. "Because I think we've already got a head start on the two-point-five Bennetts."

He went still. "Are you--? Can you know so soon?"

She grinned. "Remy, Jack. He needs a family. I thought maybe we could offer him

a permanent one." She drew away, looking at him for his reaction.

A slow grin curved his mouth. "You think we could?"

"I don't know. We can at least try. You want to?"

"Yeah. It doesn't feel right necking with you without wondering when he's going to come busting through the door." Jack cradled her face between his palms. "He's family."

He pulled her down for a kiss, and she gave it willingly, wrapping his words around her like a soft, warm blanket.

Family, she thought.

She'd spent her life looking for a family--a father who loved her for who she was, a mother to replace the one she'd loved so dearly and lost too soon, a brother who wasn't so swallowed up by his own demons that he had nothing to give her. Strange, to have found it in the middle of such a nightmare.

But that's what they were, she, Jack and Remy. A family, forged in fire, strong enough to weather any storm the future held. She believed it in her heart. Knew it in her gut.

This was what family felt like.