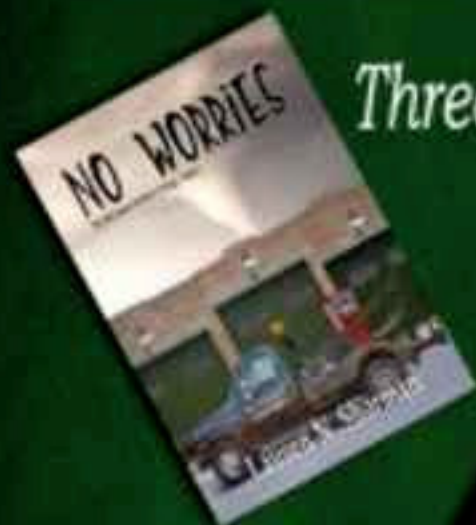


McCassey Brothers

Lauren N. Sharman

Three Complete Novels



No Worries
The Devil's Candy
Dusty Rose

Whiskey Creek Press

The McCassey Brothers Trilogy Megabook
by Lauren N. Sharman

Whiskey Creek Press

www.whiskeycreekpress.com

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* * * *

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THE McCASSEY BROTHERS TRILOGY MEGABOOK:

Three Complete Novels:

[NO WORRIES, THE DEVIL'S CANDY,

DUSTY ROSE]

by

Lauren N. Sharman

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by Lauren N. Sharman

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WHAT THEY ARE SAYING ABOUT

NO WORRIES

"...No Worries is an amazing example of romantic suspense done right. The entire McCassey clan captures your heart and brings you into their family ... Every page made me want to keep reading and I am looking forward to the next book about this wild family of brothers and cousins ... Lauren Sharman has a homerun with this novel. Everything works and there is no slack in the writing. This is one of those books that had me reading from start to finish in one sitting."

~~Reviewed by Kimberley Spinney for Ecataromance

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Growing Up Little

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to a good man in bad boy clothing; my husband, Joey. You are my hero, and I love you.

Julie, No Worries is for you, too. It's rare to find a friend dedicated enough to sit in a coffee shop at the mall with me and read a love scene out loud. But you did it! You helped me tweak everything in this book until it was just right.

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Acknowledgements

First, I'd like to acknowledge my kids, Tanner and Chloe. You two have always been very patient, especially when sometimes the 'five more minutes' I needed to finish writing something turned into an hour and five minutes. I love you guys.

Special thanks goes out to my dad, Terry, for sharing his knowledge of firearms.

A BIG thank you also goes to my sister, Renae, for patiently answering all my questions regarding crime, punishment, and prison sentences.

Mom, you're always the first one in line to read my manuscripts. Thanks for the support.

Jeff G., you're my favorite proofreader (and you work fast, too!)

I want to say hi to all my friends and cousins who took the time to read bits and pieces of No Worries when it was still a work in progress. Some of you even got to read the entire first draft! You were all very helpful with your opinions and suggestions. Thanks to Joey, Renae, Mom, Dad, Jeff G., Bobbi, Julie, Sarah, Ronnie, Jessica, Shelley, Robyn, Caryn W., Susan (Sooze), Chari, Jinger, Erica, and Deanna.

Thanks to my critique partners Sarah and Ronnie, too. It takes a tough breed to belong to a critique group with a 'brutal honesty' policy. I'm so glad to have found the two of you.

And finally, I'd like to give a shout out to my faithful friends and fans who are a part of 'Lauren's Literary World' message board, my FM 'boarder' friends, and everyone at the Laurel, MD and Mt. Airy, MD Curves. I cannot thank you all enough for the amazing amount of support you've given me.

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Prologue

April 1983

A fresh start.

A chance at happiness.

Was it really possible?

The heavy door squeaked shut and a thousand pair of eyes seemed to be watching as she made her way down the narrow aisle, clutching two knapsacks stuffed with everything she owned.

Gypsy Lance claimed the last remaining empty seat on the Greyhound bus, questioning her decision right up until the moment the driver released the air brakes and the bus began to inch forward. As they pulled away from the Baltimore Travel Plaza and merged into traffic on Interstate 95, Gypsy sank down into the worn, cloth seat and willed herself to relax.

Her mind racing, Gypsy reminded herself repeatedly that this was exactly what she'd planned to do. Did it really matter that she was doing it a few years ahead of schedule? And so what if she only had six hundred and fifty dollars to her name and no place to live? Wasn't her life worth sleeping in a shelter until she could get a job and get herself settled?

Gypsy knew the answers to the first two questions were no. She also knew that it didn't matter if she moved a hundred more times during her life; because wherever she was, she'd never be completely safe. She was, however, much safer today than yesterday, when an old friend called

with the information that prompted Gypsy to immediately begin searching for bus schedules the minute she hung up the phone.

And she'd slept in worse places than a shelter.

As thunder rumbled and droplets of water began beating loudly against the metal roof of the bus, Gypsy turned to stare out the window at the gray storm clouds rolling toward them from the west.

Was this storm a sign?

Had the rain been sent to wash away her old life in order to make room for the new one?

A quick, bright flash of lightning seemed to spark a revelation in Gypsy's mind. Suddenly, the answers she'd been searching for were there.

Everything was crystal clear.

There was no reason she shouldn't embrace the opportunity to start a new life. After all, the one she left behind meant nothing to her. The past eleven years had been filled with feelings of loneliness, a desire to belong and be accepted, and her painful reputation as an outcast; all stemming from a tragic childhood.

But where Gypsy was going, no one knew her. And no one had heard the rumors or cruel gossip that had kept other children from being allowed to play with her. To everyone she met, she would just be Gypsy Lance, the new girl in town. Sure, she still had her problems and fears, but nobody knew about them, either. This was her chance to finally fit in and be normal.

Confident now that she'd made the right decision; Gypsy smiled to herself and closed her eyes. Even if she never was completely safe, she was bound and determined to experience some happiness.

She deserved it.

And she would succeed.

As long as her past stayed where it belonged.

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Chapter 1

The man was poised for battle.

As Gypsy Lance stood frozen, staring wide-eyed and open-mouthed at not only his enormous size, but the length of the knife sheath on his belt, her first thought was that he was going to kill her.

Her second thought was to laugh at the irony.

She'd survived twenty-one years of living in the worst neighborhoods in Baltimore City without so much as a scratch. Now, after being a resident of the small western Maryland town of Hagerstown a mere eight hours, she was sure she was about to be raped, and God knew what else, by a man more than twice her size ... in the middle of heavily wooded private property that she'd intentionally trespassed on ... in a town where no one knew her, and no one would miss her if she disappeared.

The thought of turning around and running left her mind the instant the man noticed her. Chances were that those long legs of his would catch her in no time. And just where did she think she would go, anyway? They were in the woods ... his woods, and she was hopelessly lost; which was why she was still wandering around at sunset as the early April air was rapidly turning chilly.

She'd have to face him; sooner rather than later because his long strides had already closed half the distance between them.

Pretend like he doesn't scare you to death, Gypsy, she thought to herself. Take in everything you can about the man's appearance, just in case you survive whatever's about to happen and need to give the police a description of your attacker.

As he stepped over fallen trees and trudged effortlessly through ankle-deep brush, Gypsy watched him closely, making mental notes of his approximate age, height and weight, which she guessed to be close to thirty, six-foot-four, and maybe two hundred and forty pounds. She noticed he was wearing what looked like old work boots, a pair of faded, grease-stained blue jeans with holes in both knees, and a jet black T-shirt, the exact same color of the straight hair that fell to his shoulders. When he reached her, he quickly scanned the area then turned to look directly at Gypsy.

The pair of intense royal blue eyes staring at her had Gypsy paralyzed with fear, the violent thud of her heart making her entire body to feel as though it was vibrating.

She'd always avoided men so that she never had to feel helpless and at the mercy of someone again.

Could he hear her heart beating?

Had he seen the fear she was trying desperately to hide?

He took a step back and raised his hands in the air. "I won't hurt you."

Oh great, he'd seen it.

Was he telling the truth? She supposed that if he'd been planning to harm her, he would've tried to do so by now. And the look in those magnificent eyes wasn't one that threatened violence, it was almost ... was that concern she saw?

There was only one way to find out.

Keeping her eyes trained on him, she took a tentative step back, testing to see if he'd follow. When he didn't, she released the breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding and relaxed a little. Relieved he didn't seem to want to hurt her, at least for the moment, Gypsy dug deep and mustered all of her courage, offering a quiet, "Hi."

"Hi, yourself," he shot back in a voice laced with light sarcasm and just a hint of a southern accent. "Are you lost?"

Gypsy didn't miss the tone of his voice, but chose to ignore it. She nodded, hoping that being friendly would keep him from getting angry. "Actually, I am," she said, fighting desperately to keep the fear out of her voice. "Can you show me how to get out of these woods?"

He shrugged. "Yes, but what are you doing out here? You're not exactly dressed for a hike."

Gypsy could feel the heat of embarrassment creeping up her cheeks as she crossed her arms to cover numerous small stains on the bib of her overalls. She'd spent the morning cleaning her new apartment, which she'd been lucky to find on such short notice, and hadn't bothered to change before she left.

"I wasn't hiking," she told him, surprising herself by throwing back a bit of his sarcasm, "I was taking a walk and got lost."

What she left out of her explanation was that she'd been so preoccupied that she simply hadn't been paying attention. Walking through the town in a daze worrying about her

financial situation, she'd looked up and had no idea where she was.

"Look, I've been going in circles for hours. If you could just point me in the right direction, I'll gladly get out of your way."

When he didn't respond, she took a closer look at him and noticed the look of concern she'd seen in his eyes earlier had been replaced by a stoic, unreadable glare.

She took another step back.

Why had he turned on her so quickly?

Had he decided not to help?

Gypsy no longer thought he might hurt her, but if she made him angry, there was probably a good chance he'd refuse to show her the way out. Not wanting to spoil the chance of getting home sometime before dark, she willed her hand to remain steady as she extended it and forced a smile. "I'm Gypsy."

* * * *

Rebel McCassey had known by the loud, unmistakable sound of crunching leaves and snapping twigs that whoever was in the woods had no qualms about letting him know they were there. At first he'd thought it was one of his cousins; the land belonged to them, also, and one or two of them were always up there doing something. But he hadn't heard any voices. And the day any one of them went more than a minute or two without talking would be the day hell froze over.

It couldn't be one of the locals. Everyone knew this was McCassey property, and anyone who didn't want to get shot for trespassing stayed far away.

The sounds moved closer, and Rebel squinted against the fading sunlight, focusing on the person who'd invaded the woods. Surprised his uninvited guest was a young girl, he immediately stepped into plain view to avoid scaring her.

But it was too late. She'd stopped dead in her tracks the instant she spotted him, forcing him to approach her.

Now that Rebel had seen her up close, he realized she wasn't as young as he'd first thought. He didn't know who she was, but her shaking hands and wary look told him she was terrified. He admired the bit of backbone she'd shown by mimicking his sarcasm, but it was obviously an act. No matter how brave she thought she looked, he wasn't buying it.

Rebel didn't blame her for being afraid, and was sure the way he was staring probably added to her discomfort. But he couldn't help it. He was more drawn to her than any other woman he'd ever seen. She may have been dressed in ragged and dirty clothes, but she was beyond beautiful. The loose, fiery red curls that had escaped her ponytail had drawn his attention first. Rebel had never seen such a vibrant hair color. It accentuated her pale complexion and delicate features, reminding him of the treasured porcelain doll his great-grandmother had when he was little.

He wanted to talk to her, but hesitated. It had been a long day, and he wasn't in the mood to see the look of disgust women always gave him when they saw the dirt and grease embedded in his hands and under his fingernails. But she

stood, hand out, until he gave in and shook it. When he did, he was surprised that the calluses on her hand rivaled his.

"Rebel McCassey."

Rebel waited for the look; the one that usually followed someone finding out who he was. But it never came.

"McCassey?" she questioned. "Didn't I see that name in town somewhere?"

"You're not from anywhere around here, are you?" People for miles around knew the McCassey name; members of his family had been causing trouble in Washington County since before the Civil War. Rebel was no exception ... though most of the trouble he wound up being involved in was usually started by someone else.

"No," she answered shyly.

Well, what she didn't know wouldn't hurt her. After all, she was in no danger from him. He'd never hurt anyone intentionally, at least anyone who didn't deserve it. So he took her innocence for what it was and answered her question.

"My uncles and I own a garage," he held up his battered, grease stained hands for her to see. "I'm a mechanic."

When Gypsy smiled this time, she seemed a bit more relaxed. "Do you live around here?"

"Yeah, you're standing on my family's land right now. It's private property, Gypsy. How the hell did you get all the way back here?"

"I didn't mean to trespass on your land," she apologized. "I mean, I knew it was private property because I saw the signs. But I was out walking trying to familiarize myself with

the town and lost my bearings. I thought taking a shortcut through the woods would get me to my apartment on Franklin Street. I didn't think it'd be so easy to get lost in such a small town." She shrugged. "Guess I was wrong."

"Hagerstown is ten square miles in each direction, Gypsy, that isn't so small."

"It is where I come from."

His interest piqued, he asked, "Which is where?"

She seemed a little reluctant to answer, but eventually said, "Baltimore City."

Puzzled, Rebel wondered why this young girl had chosen to move all the way out to Hagerstown. It had the reputation of a backwoods, redneck town, and didn't offer any of the opportunities you could find in Baltimore. He wanted to ask more questions, but the look she was giving him suggested he change the subject. Now.

"Did you say Franklin Street?"

She immediately perked up. "Yes, are we far from there?"

"About three miles," he told her, taking a dark-colored baseball hat from his back pocket and placing it on his head backward. "I'll take you to the edge of the woods. Otherwise, you'll never find your way out."

The look of relief and thanks she gave him made Rebel feel good about himself; it made him want to do everything he could to help this innocent girl. He motioned for her to follow as he began walking, half-heartedly wondering if there was someone special waiting in the new apartment on Franklin Street for her to come home. Then he pushed the thought from his mind as quickly as it had entered.

As the two of them made their way through the woods, Gypsy seemed to gradually loosen up. She moved over to walk by Rebel's side instead of behind him, and every few minutes asked him a question or two about the town, what there was to do, and what some of the people were like, always pondering his answers before speaking again.

To his surprise, Rebel was enjoying Gypsy's company. It had been a long time since someone had been interested in him as an individual person. Usually, people were only interested in finding out if there was any truth to the bad reputation his infamous last name had earned him. He admitted to himself that he liked the feeling of not being automatically judged because of who he was related to. And although it was unlike him to open up to anyone, he found that he didn't mind sharing things with Gypsy, something he'd never felt comfortable enough to do with any other woman.

At ease with each other, they talked nonstop as they made their way through the thick woods. Once Rebel got the sense Gypsy was beginning to feel comfortable with him, he took a chance and asked about her life in the city and why she moved to Hagerstown.

Gypsy caught her lower lip between her teeth and remained silent, almost as if debating whether to reveal anything about herself. Several long seconds passed before she answered. "My mom died when I was ten, and because my father hadn't been around in years, I was put into the Child Welfare System and raised in a handful of different foster homes."

Rebel didn't know what he'd been expecting her to say, but it definitely wasn't that. Because he had a hard time hiding his surprise, the only response he could come up with was, "That must've been hard on you."

It made him sad to think about this beautiful, gentle girl not having a place to call home, so Rebel pretended not to hear the pain in her voice when she said, "I got used to it. I had to. There was no other choice."

He wondered why she'd lived in foster homes when she had a father, but didn't want to pry. Lord knew there were plenty of things in his past he didn't want anyone asking questions about.

"Are you still close with any of your foster parents?"

She shook her head. "I never was. Most of the families I stayed with only took in kids for the money given to them by the state."

"What about your friends?" he asked. "Aren't you going to miss them living way out here?"

Gypsy sighed. "To tell you the truth, as far as good-hearted, honest people I can call friends ... there aren't any. It's hard to get close to people when you grow up in foster care because everyone's shuffled around so much." She raised her head and looked at him. "I guess that makes me sound pretty pathetic, huh?"

He smiled down at her, thinking of how close he and his brothers and cousins had always been. He knew he was lucky to be part of a big family, even if he sometimes felt they were more trouble than they were worth. Gypsy wasn't pathetic,

but he could tell by the tone of her voice that she was lonely.
"Not at all."

He was unsure of what to say next, but was interested and wanted to keep her talking. "Did you just get out of foster care?"

"No, my last foster family asked me to move out when I turned eighteen so they could make room for someone else. I packed my bags that night and slept in the bus station. The next day, I ran into a girl who'd stayed in the same foster home as me a few years earlier. She and two other girls were looking for another roommate. That's where I've been living for the past three years."

"You're twenty-one now?"

"I will be ... at eleven sixteen tonight."

Rebel couldn't remember the last time he'd given a damn about a woman's feelings, especially those of one he didn't know. Taken aback by the protective emotions her story had stirred inside him, he suddenly wanted to gather her in his arms, tell her he was sorry for all she'd been through, and that everything was going to be okay. But a quick reality check forced him to keep his distance. He had a feeling that Gypsy's uneasiness when they first met was more than simply being afraid of a strange man. Her reaction had been one of terror, and he knew he'd have to walk on eggshells until she began to trust him.

Instead of offering comfort and reassurance, he settled for standing three feet away and wishing her a happy birthday.

The smile she tried to give him was the saddest he'd ever seen, so he changed the subject. "How'd you get all the calluses on your hands?"

Gypsy blushed again and jammed her hands into the front pockets of her overalls. "Working. Since I started living on my own, I've been cleaning houses during the day and waiting tables at night."

Rebel fell silent. He tried to imagine what life had been like for Gypsy the past eleven years. The people he knew who grew up without the love of a family had ended up bitter and hardened, but she seemed genuinely unaffected ... at least on the outside.

She snuck a quick glance at Rebel. "I told you too much, didn't I?" He turned in her direction but didn't get the chance to answer. "It's just that no one's ever really been interested in me, and I got carried away," she continued. "Please say I haven't scared you off by telling my entire life story."

His voice was low and reassuring when he said, "I'm not going anywhere."

She nodded and they fell into step together, continuing their walk in companionable silence until they came to a stream. Rebel crossed first, pushing off with his right leg and effortlessly landing on the other side. Then he reached out to her. "Give me your hand."

* * * *

Gypsy shook her head slightly, staring at his hand as if she would break if he touched her. "No thanks, I can do it."

Even though her limited experience with men had proven that they only did nice things for women when they wanted something in return, Gypsy felt that Rebel was trustworthy, and his offer to help was genuine. She'd taken a giant step today by opening up to him, but wasn't ready to let him help her. Not yet.

Rebel withdrew his hand and backed off at Gypsy's reluctance. Relieved, Gypsy took a deep breath and crouched down, preparing to jump over the stream. Then the rock she was standing on shifted and she lost her balance. "Oh!" she shouted, and began flailing her arms to keep from falling.

Rebel sprang forward and caught her around the waist as she started to fall, pulling her safely across the water. As momentum propelled them backward, Rebel wrapped his arms tightly around Gypsy to keep her in front of him, using his body to break her fall. When they landed in a pile of brush beside the stream, Gypsy immediately pulled out of his grasp and got to her feet.

"Thanks," she said, brushing herself off, "I can't swim."

Rebel stood. "Well, I doubt you would've drowned in two feet of water, but you're welcome anyway."

"Oh." When she caught herself giggling, she paused at the pleasant sound, wondering how long it had been since she'd been happy enough to laugh. "Right."

When they were both brushed clean, Gypsy walked a few feet away and sat down on a large boulder. "Do you mind if I sit for a minute? I've got so much hair in my face I can hardly see."

"Take as long as you need."

She undid what was left of her ponytail, lowered her head upside down to shake her hair, then flipped it right side up. Watching her slow, graceful movements, Rebel sat down beside her.

As she turned to face him, the breeze caused a stray, red curl to fall in front of her face. "What about you, Rebel, have you lived in Hagerstown long?"

"All my life."

"How many years is that?"

"Thirty."

"Do you have a lot of family here?"

Rebel swallowed hard, giving Gypsy the feeling she'd hit on a touchy subject. "Almost everyone I'm related to lives here. The rest of the family's scattered around the county. But I have to warn you, Gypsy, we're not very popular. Your reputation could be ruined just for talking to me."

She shrugged. "You've heard my story. If that isn't something for people to gossip about, what is? How do you know your reputation won't be ruined by talking to me?"

He grinned and raised his hand, brushing at her stray curl. "People have always looked down on me because of the family I was born into. You won't be able to ruin the bad reputation I've been trying to outrun my entire life, Gypsy." Then he winked at her. "But thanks for your concern."

"You're welcome."

"Aw, what the hell," Rebel said. "If you're going to be living here, you'll hear about my family's history sooner or later. I might as well tell you the truth before you're

subjected to whatever warped stories are floating around town."

Rebel scanned the ground and leaned over to pick a small tree limb. After inspecting it, he reached into his back pocket, took out a pocketknife, and opened it. Just as he began shaving off the bark, he turned to Gypsy and winked. "You want me to tell you a story?"

With a bright smile, Gypsy nodded. Just the way he'd asked her that question made her heart flutter. She'd never even been very interested in talking to a man before, but she just couldn't get enough of Rebel McCassey.

"My great-great-great grandfather, Patrick McCassey, won the very land we're sitting on in 1832 during a poker game at The Well, a saloon that used to be where the town hall now stands.

"There's ten acres in all, so that's what we call it, Ten Acres. This is good land, but it's never been used for anything but hunting. There's a one-room cabin in the middle of the property where my cousins and I stay in the fall during deer season."

She listened in awe as he told her of his family's troubled past, even forgetting to breathe occasionally when the tales became too intriguing.

"Wow," she said, wide-eyed, "horse thieves, army deserters, killers. That stuff is fascinating! But I have to admit, some of those recent stories made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. Does your family history have anything to do with how you got your name?"

The left corner of his mouth lifted into a lopsided grin. "Actually, it does. After so many years of giving birth to future criminals, the women in my family started naming some of their children after American outlaws. I have uncles and cousins named for Frank and Jesse James, Billy the Kid and Cole and Jim Younger.

"My eyes are blue now, but they were the color of Confederate gray when I was born. That's how I got the name Rebel."

"I love it," she told him. "Do you have a middle name?" He cocked his left eyebrow. "Do you?"

"Amelia," she said shyly.

"Raider."

"Wow, what a great name!"

Rebel turned his attention back to the branch. "Yeah," he said sarcastically, "real great."

"You're lucky you can trace your heritage back so many years. My mom ran away from home at fifteen and never talked about her family. My father only came around a couple of times, and I don't know much more about him other than his name. If I was part of a big family like yours, I'd consider myself the luckiest person in the world."

"I've never considered myself lucky before. At least not in the way you're referring to. Being surrounded by my relatives while growing up definitely had its advantages, but it's not as great as it sounds. McCassey's are nothing but trouble. We have been for generations. Not many decent people want anything to do with us."

Rebel neither admitted nor denied his involvement in any of the trouble he said his family had caused, but Gypsy had a hard time believing he was as bad as he made himself out to be. "If people don't like you, how does your garage stay in business?"

He chuckled. "No McCassey's were ever good enough to step foot in anyone's house, but we are good enough to crawl under their cars and fix them. That just shows the high opinion everyone has of us."

Sad because Rebel really seemed to be bothered by who he was, she gently laid a hand on his knee. "I didn't mean to upset you. I'd like to be your friend."

"My friend? I'd like that, Gypsy, but it's not a good idea. If you get mixed up with me, no one else will want anything to do with you. You should go home and forget you ever met me."

"Rebel, can I explain something to you?"

"Go ahead," he said, folding his knife and replacing it in his pocket.

"I'm new in town, don't have any family, and have been poor my entire life. Everything I own fits in two knapsacks and none of my clothes look any better than the ones I'm wearing. I've never had friends because nobody's bothered to look past those things and take the time to get to know me. You've been nicer to me in the past two hours than anyone has been since my mom died. In my opinion, that makes you a friend."

Gypsy knew it was probably hard for Rebel to tell her about his family, making her feel guilty for not being totally honest with him.

But she couldn't tell him everything.

Not yet.

Not until she was sure he would keep her secrets; the secrets that had almost ... and would someday ... destroy her.

* * * *

Rebel remained quiet as he seemed to be considering what she'd said.

"Reb," he said suddenly.

Confused, she looked at him. "Excuse me?"

"My friends call me Reb."

"If that's your way of telling me its okay for us to be friends, then I accept." Gypsy was so happy, that before she realized what she was doing, she'd kissed him on the cheek, surprising them both. She had never initiated so much as a conversation with a member of the opposite sex, let alone a kiss. But Reb had a surprisingly powerful affect on her emotions.

He stood abruptly, tossed the limb to the ground, and adjusted his hat. "Come on," he motioned for her to get up, "it'll be dark soon and you need to get home."

Another half hour into their walk, while Gypsy was telling Rebel about the job she'd found at The Tea Cup Diner in town, a sudden movement fifty yards away caught Rebel's

attention. Stopping in his tracks, he extended his forearm to stop Gypsy and put a finger to his lips. "Shhh."

They stood silently for a moment, then Rebel whispered, "My brother, Judd, is coming at us from that cluster of maples over there. Don't be afraid. His line of bull is all an act, he won't hurt you."

Gypsy looked up at Reb and held his gaze just long enough to let him know she believed him. She hoped he understood, because there was no time to explain. In the next second, Judd was upon them.

"Well, well, well, little brother. Where'd you find this cute little piece of ass?" Judd reached out to touch her hair, but Rebel smacked his hand away and stepped in front of Gypsy, putting himself between her and his brother.

"Lay off, Judd. What the hell are you doing out here?"

Judd looked at Rebel and laughed. "This is my land just as much as it is yours. So I could ask you the same thing."

"You could, but you won't get an answer. Beat it."

Amazed at how much the brothers looked alike, Gypsy watched them closely as they stared each other down. They were exactly the same height, and both men were noticeably muscular in their torso and forearms. Even their amazing, royal blue eye color was the same. The only difference was that where Rebel's hair was straight and so dark it looked black, Judd's was a thick, rich brown mop of little-too-long untamed curls.

Judd glanced at Gypsy, smirked, and looked back to his brother. "I got me a date, and I'm headed to the cabin. So unless you two are planning to use it, I'll be on my way."

Rebel took what seemed like a protective step toward Gypsy. "Yeah, you do that."

"It was nice meeting you, honey," Judd said as he took a pack of Marlboro's from his jacket pocket. "What'd you say your name was?"

Rebel grabbed the cigarettes from his brother. "She didn't. And you know better than to smoke around all this dry brush. Get the hell out of here."

Judd gave Gypsy one last, long look and turned to Rebel. "This isn't over." Then he walked away cursing under his breath.

Rebel watched Judd until he was out of sight then focused his attention on Gypsy. "Are you okay?"

"Fine," she said, trying to understand what just happened. "Why is he so angry with you?"

"Because I was born. Judd and I are only ten months apart. He's older. The two of us have been beating on each other since we were strong enough to make fists, but it doesn't mean anything. Just a little sibling rivalry is all."

"That's all? It looked to me like you two were ready to kill each other."

"Trust me, Gypsy, that was nothing."

"But—"

"But nothing," he said curtly. "Shit like that happens all the time; if not with Judd, then someone else." Without warning, Rebel grabbed her shoulders and yelled, "Dammit, Gypsy, do you see what I mean now? Hanging around me will bring you nothing but trouble."

She looked at him, blinking in confusion at the sudden change in his demeanor. "Come on, Rebel, that was nothing more than a brotherly fight. I'll admit it was scary at first, since I didn't know what was going on. But everything's fine. It was no big deal."

He shook his head. "It was just a brotherly fight this time. And it was no big deal this time. But you won't be able to avoid trouble or danger by hanging around me, Gypsy. Just like I can't."

Unafraid, Gypsy stared at Rebel as he lectured her. The emotions on his face and in his voice may have been anger, but his eyes showed something different. The concern she'd seen in them earlier had returned.

Gypsy wished she knew why this man she'd only known a few hours cared about her so much. But it didn't really matter. She was tired of being alone and not having anyone to share things with. And it wasn't like she had so many friends in her life that there wasn't room for another.

Rebel let go of Gypsy's shoulders as quickly as he'd grabbed them. "I'm sorry," he said, offering an apology she wanted to tell him was unnecessary. "I don't know why I did that."

She reached out and brushed his large, rough hand with hers. "I do. It was because you're right. I understand now that being around you can definitely be dangerous. But I don't care about your family's reputation, Reb, or how much trouble you personally have gotten into. None of this changes my mind. I want to be your friend."

He shrugged and put his hands out at his side. "I still don't think it's a good idea. But you seem to know what it feels like to be judged for things you have no control over, just like I do. So if you're willing to accept me, bad blood and all, then who am I to turn down your friendship? Just don't say I didn't warn you."

She smiled again, her bright green eyes sparkling in the twilight.

They continued walking and reached the edge of the woods a few minutes after their run-in with Judd. Rebel stopped and pointed in the direction of the rising moon. "Franklin Street is just over that hill."

Gypsy frowned. "Aren't you coming?"

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"I have to get to the garage. I drive a tow truck when I'm not fixing cars, and I'm on duty tonight."

"Well," she said, still frowning, "thanks for walking me out of the woods. Will I see you soon?"

He shrugged, giving Gypsy the impression he was trying to avoid encouraging her. When he had been silent just a moment too long, she decided to speak up. "Did I do something wrong? Is there a reason you don't want to see me?"

"Not at all, Gypsy. But I'm pretty busy. Sunday's are my only day off."

She didn't believe for a second that was the only reason they couldn't see each other. Crossing her arms, she tilted her head and stared at him.

"You don't believe me, do you?"

Gypsy did nothing more than shake her head slightly.

Rebel nodded. "The truth is that I'd like very much to see you again. But honestly, the less time you spend around me, the better off you'll be."

Not caring that the disappointment in her heart was probably written all over her face, Gypsy continued to stare. When Rebel finally said, "You're going to be working at The Tea Cup, right?" Gypsy felt her sadness melt away.

"All breakfast and lunch shifts Monday through Friday," she said excitedly, "I'll be there from five-thirty in the morning until three in the afternoon."

"The garage is right across the street," he told her. "I go in for breakfast every now and then. Maybe I'll see you there."

It wasn't much, but it gave her hope that she might see him once in a while.

"I'll save you a table." She turned and left the woods without looking back.

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Chapter 2

Rebel hadn't exactly lied.

He did have to work, but not until Jimmy's shift ended at eleven. In fact, he had every intention of going back to the garage and getting some sleep before his own shift started. But the more he thought about Gypsy walking home alone in the dark, the more uneasy he became. If she'd managed to get lost in the daylight, who knew what kind of trouble she could get herself into now that it was dark.

No more than twenty seconds after she'd left, Rebel decided to follow and make sure she got home safely. He walked hurriedly along the edge of the woods to catch up, watching until she was halfway up the hill. Then he crossed the road and tagged along at a safe distance until she made the right turn onto Franklin Street and entered the second, small, two-story, red brick apartment building on the right.

Rebel stood and watched the black shuttered windows, waiting for lights to go on in one of the four apartments. When he didn't see any, he walked around to the back of the building. Worried when he didn't see lights there either, he was about to go inside looking for her when someone raised a shade on the second floor and placed a lit candle in the window. Recognizing Gypsy's silhouette, he knew she was safe.

Rebel turned and left the yard.

He thought about stopping at a pay phone and calling Jimmy for a lift back to the garage, but it was only two miles away. The walk and a smoke would do him good.

After stopping at the convenience store on the corner of Franklin and Cannon Streets to buy a fresh pack of Marlboro's, Rebel started back to town. He walked slowly, drawing smoke deeply into his lungs and blowing rings as he exhaled into the cool, early April air. The walk was relaxing, but did nothing to keep his thoughts from drifting to Gypsy. Even if he never saw her again, those bright green eyes and the way she smiled at him would forever be etched in his memory.

But her looks weren't the only thing about Gypsy that Rebel found intriguing. There was definitely something special about her. What had really gotten to him was her bravery and fighting spirit. She'd shown it when they first met, and again after they ran into Judd. Most girls ... hell, most people ... would've been terrified if Rebel had grabbed them and started yelling. But Gypsy hadn't flinched. He could tell by the expression on her face that she'd seen through his act of anger. She'd looked into his soul and found the worry he felt for her safety and had been touched by it.

He knew how she felt because he'd seen it in her eyes.

She liked him, and he knew his heart was in trouble.

Thinking about his promise to be her friend, he snorted and tossed his cigarette butt into the street.

Some friend I am. Seeing the look on Gypsy's face when he said he wasn't going to walk her all the way home, made him feel like a dog. Oh, he'd wanted to go. But he knew the

people in this town. If anyone had seen the two of them walk out of the woods together, her reputation would've been ruined before she even got home.

So he'd lied about having to work instead of trying to explain again why it wasn't a good idea for her to be seen with him. She was also damn convincing, and he wasn't sure he would've had the willpower to say no if she thought he didn't have anything to do and tried to talk him into walking her home. The quick kiss she'd given him in the woods was innocent, he was sure, but the flip his stomach did when her lips touched his skin proved that his body was no novice when it came to responding to a woman's touch.

But for all of her innocence, Rebel knew there were things Gypsy was hiding. Her reluctance to trust him with her safety at the stream revealed more than Rebel felt he had a right to know. But if she had issues with trust, why, after only a few hours, did she feel comfortable putting all of hers in him?

And what about Gypsy's parents? The sadness in her voice revealed that she'd loved her mother, but something didn't sit right with him about her father. Gypsy said she didn't know much more about him than his name, but there was something else to that story, he could feel it.

* * * *

Happy to find her building exactly where Reb said it would be, Gypsy entered through the front door and walked up one flight to the second floor. She loved her new apartment. It was small, unfurnished, and in a crummy part of town, but it was the first thing she'd ever had that was all hers.

Instead of turning on the lights, she lit a candle. After all the money she'd spent that day—twenty dollars on a bus ticket, five hundred for her first and last month's rent, plus another hundred on the bare essentials she needed to live—Gypsy had thirty dollars left to her name. The last thing she needed was an electric bill she couldn't afford to pay.

New, gray carpeting cushioned her steps as she walked past the small kitchen and into her bedroom, the flame casting one lonely shadow on the freshly painted white walls of the empty room. After raising the shade and placing the candle on her windowsill, she lay on her new bed, a sleeping bag from the sale rack at Ames. It was the first new thing she'd ever owned and it felt wonderful.

Lying back, she folded her arms behind her head and stared at the ceiling, thinking about her first day in Hagerstown. She liked what little she'd seen of the town. It was much smaller than Baltimore, but large enough that you'd need to drive or take a bus if you wanted to go across town.

The best part of the day, without a doubt, was meeting Rebel McCassey. Not only was she interested in the man, but the anticipation of seeing him again made her stomach feel like there were a thousand butterflies inside trying to get out. Besides being good looking, he seemed to genuinely care about her feelings. Most importantly, he was honest with her. Something she hadn't been with him, not completely, anyway. Knowing how good it would feel to share the fear she'd been harboring for eleven years with someone she trusted, she longed to tell him everything. But Gypsy wasn't

sure she was ready to let anyone get that close. Her mother was the last person she'd completely trusted, and since then, Gypsy had kept everyone at an arm's length to protect herself. She wished she knew what it was about Rebel that made her throw caution to the wind and put all her trust in a man she just met.

What Gypsy knew for sure was that she was attracted to him. For that reason alone, she knew she should keep him at a distance. She'd never forgive herself if her past caught up with her, and he wound up getting hurt. Rebel may be accustomed to trouble, but it was nothing like what had been haunting her since the day her mother was murdered.

* * * *

Because she rarely slept well, Gypsy was already awake when the alarm buzzed loudly, telling her it was time to get up. Shivering, she crawled out of her sleeping bag, suddenly wishing she hadn't turned her heat down to fifty-eight degrees before going to bed. April nights still got pretty cold in the mountains, and although she was trying to save money, she didn't need to freeze to death doing it. Making a mental note to allow herself more heat at night, she dashed into the bathroom and got dressed.

Since she didn't own a heavy coat, Gypsy put two sweatshirts over her short pink and black waitress uniform to keep warm. She grabbed the navy blue knapsack with her change of clothes and left the apartment at five o'clock on the dot; figuring it would probably take a good thirty minutes to walk the two miles to work.

The streets were eerily quiet in the pre-dawn hour, and Gypsy found herself walking faster than normal. Part of the reason was because she was cold, but mostly ... she was afraid. She knew it was silly for a twenty-one-year-old woman to be afraid of the dark. But darkness hadn't been kind to her, and she had a good reason not to like it.

Gypsy had been walking ten minutes when the sound of a loud truck came up behind her. She thought about running into the woods until it passed, but it was too late. The headlights were shining in her direction, meaning the driver had probably already seen her.

* * * *

Rebel was in his tow truck returning from a call when he spotted someone walking down the street. It couldn't have been much above thirty degrees, and whoever it was wasn't wearing a coat. He thought about offering the person a ride, but decided against it. He'd learned a long time ago that trying to do something nice for anyone in this town was a big mistake.

Then he noticed the walker was Gypsy and slammed on the brakes. "What the hell?"

Gypsy looked like she almost jumped out of her skin when the tow truck came to a stop next to her. She'd been forced to stop walking and was staring at the passenger door as he leaned over and rolled down the window. Rebel saw the relief on her face when she noticed it was him.

"Gypsy?"

Holding a hand in the air that looked red and numb from the cold, she waved. "Hi."

"What are you doing out here?"

"I'm on my way to work. Today's my first day."

"Is something wrong with your car?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I don't have a car."

He could see she was shivering. "Hop in; I'll give you a ride."

"Well..." she seemed to hesitate.

"I thought we decided to be friends," he reminded her.

"What could one ride hurt?"

"Are you sure you don't mind?"

"I'm on my way back to the garage now. It's right across the street from The Tea Cup, remember?"

Rebel recalled how excited she'd gotten when he told her he occasionally went into the diner for breakfast. He was sure she hadn't forgotten and wondered if the possibility of seeing him sometime during the day crossed her mind a thousand times that morning the same way it had crossed his.

Rebel leaned over further and unlatched the door. Shivering, she climbed in and sat down on the black leather, bench seat.

"Where's your coat, Gypsy? It's below freezing out there." The second the words left his mouth, he wished he could've taken them back. Why the hell wasn't his brain working? The bulky sweatshirts should have clued him in to the fact that she probably didn't have one.

Gypsy turned away and stared at the floor.

Sorry for embarrassing her, Rebel ignored her actions and placed his heavy blue jacket in her lap. "It's too big for you, but that's okay. It'll keep you warm."

"Thanks," she said, shaking her head. "But I can't take your coat."

"I'm not using it." He touched her ice cold cheek with the back of his hand and frowned. It was so cold her face was probably numb. "Put it on," he ordered. But when she didn't move, he added, "Please."

* * * *

Because she felt frozen, Gypsy obeyed and was secretly glad he'd made her put on the polyester jacket that matched his blue mechanics coveralls.

She felt herself flush when she zipped it and saw the white oval patch where his name was written in red cursive. No boy had ever asked her to wear his letterman jacket in high school, but if he had, she imagined that this was exactly how it would've felt. The warmth of his jacket felt like two giant arms around her. And the scent on it was all male.

"Are you warmer now?"

"Yes," she said, smiling. "Much."

Rebel made sure she was settled in the seat before shifting the truck into first gear and slowly steering back onto the road. It took just a few minutes to drive the rest of the way to the diner. When they got there, it was still closed.

"It doesn't look like Sean's here yet."

He chuckled. "Yeah, ol' Sean has owned this place for the past fifteen years and not once has it ever opened on time."

"He didn't give me a key. What should I do?"

"Just hang out here with me. He'll be along soon."

"But—"

"Gypsy," he said, as he lit a cigarette, "the sign in the window may say the diner opens at five-thirty, but everyone in this town knows Sean. He never has any customers before seven because most of the time he isn't here to let them in."

"But don't you have to get back to work?"

"I am back," he said, pointing across the street.

She leaned forward and saw the large black and white McCASSEY'S GARAGE sign hanging under a light on the front of the red brick building.

"Oh, I forgot." She glanced at the small clock mounted on the dashboard ... five-fifteen. "Are you sure I'm not taking you away from anything? I feel guilty making you sit here."

Rebel took a drag on his cigarette and set it in the ashtray. "I wouldn't have offered to stay with you if I didn't want to. And the only thing you're keeping me from doing is sitting in the garage with Outlaw."

"Outlaw?"

"My German Shepherd. He guards the place when no one's around."

She smiled. "I like the name. Did you give it to him?"

"Yeah. I think it makes him feel like part of the family."

They both laughed. Rebel reached over and touched Gypsy's cheek again. Finding it warm, he leaned forward and turned down the heat.

They remained quiet while he finished his cigarette. When he threw the butt out the window, she asked him how long he'd been smoking.

"Since I was twelve."

"My mom smoked, too," she told him.

"Tell me about her," he said softly, "what was she like?"

Gypsy wrapped her arms around herself and leaned her back against the passenger side door. She rested the left side of her head on the seat and closed her eyes. Seeing her mother's face exactly the way she remembered it, Gypsy began talking. "Her name was Ella and she was from somewhere in California. She ran away from home at fifteen and hitchhiked all the way across the country by herself. She met my father soon after coming to Maryland and had me when she was sixteen." She opened her eyes to find him staring at her. "It was just her and me, two kids sort of raising each other. She worked hard and we scraped by, but there was never money for anything extra. It didn't matter, though. We were happy together."

"What about your father?"

Gypsy suddenly felt all the blood drain from her face, and hoped it was dark enough in the truck so Reb wouldn't notice.

There was no way she could avoid such a direct question. She hadn't wanted to tell him yet, but was afraid of losing his friendship if he somehow found out the truth before she had a chance to tell him. He'd taken a chance and told her the embarrassing truth about his family after they'd known each other only a few hours, and she owed it to him to do the same.

She just hoped he could handle it.

Gypsy pulled the long sleeves of his jacket over her hands and squeezed the cuffs as hard as she could, almost as if they were giving her courage. She never imagined the first time she told the whole story to someone that it would be at five-thirty in the morning, in the front seat of a tow truck with a man she hadn't even known twenty-four hours. But he was the first person she'd trusted since her mother died, and this felt right.

She licked her lips and tightened the death grip she had on the jacket cuffs. Breathing deep in an effort to bring color back to her face, she began her story. "My mother was a dancer at one of the strip clubs on Baltimore Street when she first moved to Baltimore City. You know, the area down the street from the city police headquarters that they call The Block." Gypsy looked at Rebel to see if he needed a more detailed description of the city's red light district, but it was obvious that he didn't.

"I'm familiar with The Block, Gypsy."

She nodded. "My father was one of her favorite customers. He paid a lot of attention to her, made a bunch of promises she believed he'd keep. She was naïve and didn't know any better and eventually got pregnant. He lived with us in a run-down apartment in East Baltimore until I was about a year old; at least that's what my mom told me. They had a big fight one night, and he stormed out. He never came back ... not even to get his clothes."

"That must've been hard on your mom," he said sympathetically, "seventeen years old with a baby to take care of by herself."

"When I was really little, she left me with a neighbor during the day and waited tables. The woman who owned the restaurant liked her and used to let her take food home sometimes. She didn't make much money, but we did okay."

"Just before I started kindergarten, the restaurant burned down. My mom needed to find a job fast. With a tenth grade education, dancing was the only thing she could do to make decent money. She'd put me in bed at eight o'clock, wait until I fell asleep, and leave for work. She was usually home by four the next morning. So she was always there when I woke up."

Gypsy paused and glanced at Reb, whose expression, from what she could see, revealed a mixture of anger and disbelief.

"I know what you're thinking. But people do the best they can with what they have. My mom took care of me the only way she knew how. But because she felt she didn't have much to offer me, she stressed everyday how important it was to stay in school. She made me speak correctly, too, because she said that no one would ever take me seriously if I sounded uneducated."

"I'm sorry, Gypsy," he apologized. "You shouldn't have to defend your mother. I'm sure she did everything she could to take care of you."

Then he changed the subject ... slightly.

"What about your father? Did you ever see him again?"

"He came by the night of my tenth birthday. I was supposed to be getting in my pajamas, but was hiding behind the door eating the piece of cake my mother told me I couldn't have. The bedroom door was half open, but I was too busy eating and didn't hear him come in. At first, I thought she was yelling at me, but then I heard a man's voice. They were standing in the living room, and I had a perfect view of them through the crack behind the door.

"I stood quietly and listened to them fight. Most of it was about stuff I didn't understand; something about a key she took from him and refused to give back. But the rest was about me. That's how I found out he was my father. She wanted him to start giving her money.

"He suddenly shouted, 'you'd been with every guy in that club, Ella. I don't even know she's mine!'"

"Then my mother yelled, 'What are you talking about? Look at her red hair, Johnny! She looks just like you!'"

"Then he told her she was nothing but a whore and wasn't getting a penny for her bastard kid."

Gypsy drew in a ragged breath. "My mom stepped forward to slap him across the face, but he caught her wrist in mid-air and threw her back against the wall. Her head hit first then her body slumped to the floor. I thought she was hurt, so I ran out of the bedroom to try and help her. My father was shocked to see me and grabbed my arm before I could get to her. I was crying by then, begging him to do something for her. He didn't do anything but throw me in a chair and threaten to hurt me if I tried to get up.

"I sat and watched as he stared at her as if he'd been inconvenienced by her death. When he walked into the bedroom, I jumped up and took off out the front door. He hollered for me to come back, but I refused. Then he yelled that he'd kill me, too, if I told anyone what he'd done."

"How could such a thing happen in an apartment complex without anyone noticing?" Rebel asked. "Didn't any of your neighbors come outside to see what all the yelling was about?"

"People yelled and screamed at each other around there all the time. No one ever got involved in anybody else's business if they didn't have to."

Gypsy looked at Rebel's face but was unable to read his emotions. "Anyway, I was scared and didn't know what to do, so I sat down on someone's front stoop, buried my face in my hands, and cried. People kept asking me what was wrong and what my name was, but I refused to talk. Eventually, someone called the police and I was taken to Social Services.

"It took my caseworker hours to get me to tell her what happened, because I was afraid my father, Johnny Cooper, would really kill me. The police questioned me for what felt like half the night. My father was eventually arrested. He was convicted of murder back in 1973 and sentenced to fifteen years in a Baltimore City prison.

"It had always been my plan to move out of the city as soon as I turned eighteen, but I didn't have enough money then. Since I knew my father was going to be locked up until I was at least twenty-six, I thought there was plenty of time to save enough to move to the West Coast. I don't think he's

ever been out of Baltimore City, so he wouldn't have found me out there.

"But a few days ago, the woman who'd been my caseworker called me. Her friend working at the prison told her that my father's up for parole in August. Apparently, he's been a model prisoner, so he'll probably be released.

"He swore he'd kill me if I went to the police, Rebel. He'll be looking for me when he gets out."

Rebel remained still and quiet for several long seconds after Gypsy had finished her story.

Unsure of how to read his silence, she responded with a hint of panic. "Oh no. I told you too much again, didn't I?"

He shook his head ever so slightly. "Tell me the rest."

It amazed Gypsy that Rebel had instinctively known there was more. She was in too deep to deny it, so she continued. "Foster families are always told what's wrong with the kids they take in, so everywhere I lived, people knew what I'd been through. Everyone always thought there was something wrong with me mentally because of witnessing my mother's murder. No one ever took the time to get to know me, including kids at the different schools I went to.

"I've spent my whole life wishing for a friend, Rebel, and feel that I've found one in you. Please tell me I haven't scared you away."

Rebel didn't answer. Instead, he opened his arms, inviting her into their circle of warmth and safety.

She went willingly, surprising them both.

Lying on her right side, Gypsy rested her head on Rebel's chest and relaxed. With her eyes closed, she concentrated on

the beat of his heart and the faint, masculine smell of cologne mixed with cigarette smoke and a hint of perspiration. In his arms, Gypsy found a comfort that had been missing since she was a little girl.

"I'm sorry for everything you've been through, Gypsy," Reb whispered, lightly kissing the top of her head.

The show of affection brought tears to her eyes, and she knew right then that she'd found more than a friend in Rebel McCassey.

But feeling the way she did about Rebel terrified her. She knew Johnny Cooper would come looking for her when he was released from prison, and although she wasn't sure he'd venture out of the city, there was always that chance. It wasn't fair to expose Reb to that kind of danger, so she would have to be very careful.

* * * *

Rebel felt Gypsy shiver and wondered if she was thinking the same thoughts he was ... would her father ever come looking for her?

He kept his arms wrapped around the girl who had suddenly become so special to him, holding her tightly against his chest until her light, even breathing, told him she'd fallen asleep. Careful not to wake her, he loosened his hold and gently leaned forward to look at the clock on the dash. Almost six. Sean was thirty minutes late.

Rebel swore under his breath.

He was going to wait right there with Gypsy until her boss showed up, and planned on having a word with Sean about

giving her a key. What the hell had that idiot been thinking? Any number of things could've happened to Gypsy if she'd been forced to sit alone in the dark waiting for him. It was a dangerous world, especially for unsuspecting, beautiful, young women.

Oh, God, what the hell was happening to him?

In less than twenty-four hours, Rebel's life had been turned upside down by a woman he hardly knew. Yesterday, he'd promised to be Gypsy's friend. But today, he knew that would never be enough. She'd done nothing except be herself, and had managed to work her way into his heart doing it. He no longer wanted to keep his distance to save her reputation; he wanted to follow along behind her with his fists clenched ready to take on anyone who mistreated her.

Gypsy stirred briefly when Rebel reached onto the dash for his pack of cigarettes. He lit up, but since he couldn't reach the ashtray with her in his arms, simply flicked the ashes onto the floor. When Sean's truck pulled into the parking lot thirty minutes later, Reb woke her.

* * * *

"I'm sorry," she said, sitting up. "I didn't mean to fall asleep. It's just that ... well, you were so comfortable." Sure that her face was turning ten shades of red, Gypsy was grateful for the darkness.

Rebel took one last long drag on his cigarette and flicked the butt out the window. "You obviously needed the rest," he told her. "Didn't you get any sleep last night?"

"A little. I don't like the dark and don't usually sleep well."

He squinted at her. "Why not?"

She might as well tell him. He already knew almost everything about her anyway. But what would he think of her when she told him the humiliating story?

There was only one way to find out.

"Let's just say that not all foster parents welcomed young girls into their homes because they wanted to help."

Rebel seemed to understand immediately. "Help themselves was more like it," he said angrily.

Gypsy couldn't believe she was about to say it out loud. She'd never told this story to anyone. She didn't even like to think about it.

Her voice was noticeably shaky as she began her story. "I was sound asleep the night one of my foster fathers came into my bedroom. I didn't even know he was there until I felt his hand between my legs. When I opened my eyes, he put a finger to his lips telling me to be quiet. I wasn't about to obey him, but then caught sight of a butcher knife he'd laid on the pillow next to my head. There was no doubt in my mind he'd use it. He had nothing to lose, really. My bedroom was on the first floor, and I slept with my window open all the time. All he had to do was slit my throat and say someone had broken in and attacked me.

"He unbuckled his pants, tore away my nightgown, then grabbed my wrists and held them above my head with his left hand. I panicked and started to struggle. He reached for the knife lying beside me but hit the nightstand instead and knocked the lamp to the floor. It woke his wife, who slept in the bedroom across the hall from mine in the summer

because it had a window air conditioner. She threw something heavy at her door and yelled that she'd come in and show me how to be quiet if I didn't shut up.

"Knowing his wife was awake was enough to change my foster father's mind about ... about..."

Fighting to keep his anger at bay, Rebel finished her sentence. "Raping you."

Gypsy took a deep, quivering breath and stared past Rebel out the window. When she finally spoke, her words came out barely above a whisper. "Yes. He only bothered me that one time, but it scared me enough to stay awake and keep my door and window locked every night for the next month; until I was sent to a new home."

"How old were you?" he asked.

"Fourteen."

"Did you tell anyone?"

Gypsy's head gently shook. "It wouldn't have done any good. My foster father would've denied it, and I would have had to stay in the home until someone found the time to investigate my accusation. Things would have gotten worse for me then, if you know what I mean."

She tried to bend her head and stare at the floor, but he reached out and put his hand under her chin. She paused, looking him in the eye.

"I didn't trust or allow a man to come close to touching me until I met you," she tried very hard to manage a smile, but failed. "It's hard for me to believe I just told you my deepest, darkest secrets. But there's just something about you. I trust you, Reb. I believe you're a good person."

Rebel ignored the compliment, allowing her to finish.

"Nothing bothers me in the daytime. But I'm always afraid something's going to happen to me in the dark. Even living by myself, I still can't relax enough to sleep much. I don't sleep in nightgowns anymore, either, just in case."

* * * *

Rebel was quiet as he thought about how Gypsy had fallen into a deep, peaceful sleep as he'd held her. She obviously felt safe in his presence. What was it about him that made her feel that way?

"Every time I think about what happened, I feel dirty. I don't ever want you to think..." she began, as her eyes filled with unshed tears.

"What I think," he interrupted, "is that your father should be shot for what he did to you and your mother. You never would've been in that situation if it wasn't for him. Don't ever be ashamed of anything that happened to you, Gypsy. None of it was your fault. You're here to start a new life. No one has to know anything about your past."

The tears finally broke free and spilled down her cheeks. She hurried to wipe them away. "Sorry," she apologized, "I can't even remember the last time I cried. I guess I just didn't realize what a relief it'd be to finally tell someone."

A loud knock on the window startled Gypsy, causing her to jump.

Rebel turned his head toward the sound. "It's Sean. Get yourself together. I'll go talk to him."

"Wait," she said, sniffing and brushing away the rest of her tears. "I'll go with you."

Rebel nodded his approval. There was that bravery he'd gotten a glimpse of the day before. She was tough. He liked that.

"Good girl." He gave her a wink, grabbed his cigarettes, and opened the door. When he was out, he turned to Gypsy, who was still wearing his jacket, and offered her his hand. She took it and jumped down, standing quietly next to him.

"Nice of you to show up, Sean," Rebel commented.

"Shut up, McCassey." Then to Gypsy, he said, "I'm sorry. I forgot you were starting today, or I would have tried to be on time. My mind just isn't what it used to be."

Rebel laughed out loud. Sean O'Grady wasn't more than fifty, hardly old enough to be suffering from memory loss.

Sean gave him a dirty look and pointed toward the garage. "Your parking lot is across the street. What are you doing here?"

Gypsy watched in amazement as Rebel's demeanor changed instantly. He had taken a defensive stance, and the soft expression he'd worn as he comforted her was gone, replaced by a stoic, unreadable glare.

"I was keeping your help company," he said in a voice that sounded like he was fighting to stay in control.

Ignoring Rebel's irritation, Sean turned to Gypsy again. "I'll give you a key to the diner. That way you won't have to wait outside for me anymore."

"Good idea," Rebel said.

Sean continued to ignore him. "I'll see you inside, Gypsy." He walked away, leaving them alone.

In the pink streaks of early sunrise, Rebel and Gypsy stood silently next to the tow truck until the lights went on inside the diner.

"What was that all about?"

"We don't get along," Rebel said, staring at the building.

"It's okay if you don't want to talk about it. It's none of my business. I should go inside and get to work anyway. Wouldn't want to get fired on my first day."

By the time Rebel turned back to her, his expression had softened. "Just make sure he remembers to give you a key. I don't want to wait outside again when I drop you off tomorrow."

"Drop me off?"

"Here," he said, pointing at the diner. "I'll be by to pick you up at five-fifteen tomorrow morning."

"You're going to pick me up and bring me to work?" Gypsy looked at him and blinked in bewilderment. "Why?"

"Because I have transportation," he said, patting the hood of his tow truck, "and you don't. Because you walking alone in the dark worries me ... and because I want to."

* * * *

Gypsy was flattered by his offer, but afraid to accept it. Never before had she been able to depend on anyone but herself. This man was definitely dependable, and she knew it would be very easy for her to come to rely on him.

"I appreciate the offer, Reb, but I can't ask you to do that."

"You didn't ask, Gypsy. I offered. And I don't offer to do things I don't want to do."

"But—"

"Keep my jacket, too. I don't wear it while I'm working."

Gypsy gave up on the idea of telling Rebel she could manage to get to work on her own. The truth was, she enjoyed being with him. And if all the time he had to spare for her was a five-minute ride in the morning, she'd take it.

"Okay. And thank you, Reb ... for everything."

He nodded, climbed up into the truck and started the loud diesel engine. "No worries, Gypsy."

"See you tomorrow." She waved, turned away, and disappeared into the diner.

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Chapter 3

Gypsy liked the short, middle-aged man with salt and pepper hair who was her new boss. They didn't have any customers the first half hour she was there, which gave them a chance to talk. One of his first questions was, "How'd you get involved with Rebel McCassey?"

She'd known that was coming and told him the story of how Reb found her lost in the woods the day before. In return, he repeated a lot of the things about the McCassey's that Rebel had already mentioned, including what people were going to say about her when they found out she was associating with them.

"I don't care what people think, Sean. I like him."

"Don't be fooled, Gypsy. He may make an honest living, but Rebel's no angel. And that family ... they're a wild bunch. Tight-knit, too. Mess with one McCassey, you mess with them all."

She rolled her eyes and added a touch of sarcasm when she answered, "I'll keep that in mind," as their first customers trickled in.

Business was steady all the way through lunch, but that didn't stop Gypsy from thinking about her conversation with Sean. The things he said intrigued her, and she was dying to find out more about Reb, who apparently had two very different sides. The gentle one he'd shown her, and the don't-mess-with-me-or-I'll-kill-you one he saved for everyone else.

She wanted to know more about his family, too. With all the talking they'd done, he'd mentioned only Judd and Jimmy by name, nothing about his parents or more siblings. And where did he live? She decided to ask him a few questions tomorrow morning when he picked her up for work.

When Gypsy left the storeroom after her lunch break, she was surprised to find the diner empty. A note on the counter from Sean said he went to the hardware store to have an extra key made.

Alone with her thoughts, Gypsy let her mind wander to Rebel, and what exactly it was about him that sent her running into his arms, instead of in the opposite direction.

* * * *

At two o'clock in the afternoon, there'd been no sign of Sean and not one single customer for almost an hour. Bored, Gypsy sat in a booth and glanced across the street at McCassey's Garage. The three, big bay doors were open and all the lifts had cars on them. Rebel's black GMC tow truck was parked on the left side of the building, with a huge German Shepherd asleep in the sun next to the front tire. Outlaw.

There were cars fixed or waiting to be worked on parked along the opposite side, and a handful of mechanics walking around with tools in their hands. It had turned out to be a beautiful spring day, and Gypsy envied them for being able to work in the fresh air.

Lost in thought, she jumped when the door opened. Standing up, Gypsy walked passed the customer wearing a

blue jacket with McCASSEY'S GARAGE written in white script on the back and moved behind the counter. She recognized the man in faded grease-stained blue jeans as Rebel's older brother, Judd.

Gypsy wasn't sure whether or not he recognized her, but the way he was staring made her wish her waitress uniform wasn't so short. Pad and pencil in hand, she asked, "Can I take your order?"

* * * *

Judd McCassey was surprised to discover the girl working behind the counter was the same one he'd seen in the woods with his brother the day before. When he noticed how beautiful she looked in the light of day, Judd took a moment to study her. The red hair she'd pulled back into a ponytail really showed off the green eyes staring at him from behind long, wispy lashes. She wore just enough make-up to enhance her soft features, and her sweet smile was enough to make him forget, if only for a minute, who he was. This girl wasn't just beautiful, she was striking.

Still, after all that, he decided she wasn't his type—much too innocent looking. But he'd bet a whole month's pay that his baby brother was more than a little interested in her.

Judd stared intently another few seconds, knowing she was waiting for an answer to her question. While his reputation demanded it, he just didn't have the heart to harass her. "Sure, cutie pie," he said, "I need six ham and cheese sandwiches, three with a side of coleslaw, three with macaroni salad."

She scribbled down the order. "Anything to drink?"

"Yeah," he said, looking at his piece of paper. "Three Cokes, two iced teas, and a coffee. Black."

Gypsy rang up the order and Judd paid her. "It'll be just a few minutes," she told him and walked into the kitchen.

* * * *

Wondering dreamily which sandwich Reb would be eating, Gypsy got the food together as fast as she could, hoping to finish before Judd realized the two of them were in the diner alone. Just as she was putting tops on the drinks, the front door opened and Sean walked in.

"I thought I told you to stay out of here, Judd," her boss said as he walked behind the counter.

Gypsy packed the order in two large bags, but hung back in the kitchen and listened to their conversation.

"I'm here to get lunch."

"Don't come around here bothering my help," Sean said loudly, taking a step closer to Judd.

"I said ... I'm here for lunch."

Gypsy didn't like what little she knew about Rebel's brother. But he hadn't been bothering her, and it wasn't fair to allow Sean to believe he had.

Before Sean had a chance to reply, Gypsy exited the kitchen. Wedging herself between the two men, she handed the bags to Judd and looked into his eyes. "He wasn't bothering me, Sean," she said with her back to her boss. "The man just came in for sandwiches."

Gypsy had no idea what kind of look was on Sean's face at that moment, but guessed it probably mirrored the utterly shocked one on Judd's.

Sean squinted and leaned in closer to Judd. "See that it stays that way." Then he turned and walked into the storeroom.

* * * *

Judd turned and stared at Gypsy in surprise. He hadn't exactly endeared himself to her the day before by picking a fight with Rebel in front of her; and for that reason, couldn't figure out why she'd defended him. It probably hadn't taken more than her first five minutes in town to find out that taking the side of a McCassey wasn't something you did if you wanted to make friends with decent people. Yet, she'd spoken up for him anyway. Jobs were hard to come by in Hagerstown, and Gypsy could've lost hers by sticking her neck out for him the way she did.

When the door to the storeroom slammed shut, Judd tore his gaze from Gypsy and focused on the door as he spoke. "Just after he bought this place, Sean got robbed, and accused Rebel and me of being responsible for it. We were wild, out of control teenagers back then, destructive little bastards, too. But we drew the line at stealing. We told the sheriff a thousand times we had nothing to do with it, but he arrested us anyway. The charges were dropped two days later when the real thief came back for seconds while Reb and me were still in jail.

"I do my best to avoid this place. But Mondays are my day to buy lunch. There's five pissed off mechanics across the street because I'm two hours late with their food. You weren't busy, so I came in."

* * * *

Listening closely to Judd as he spoke, it was easy to hear the pure hatred in his voice. Why had he just told her that story? Was it because Judd, like Rebel the day before, wanted to set her straight about what happened before someone else filled her head with lies?

Gypsy was unsure of how he expected her to respond. "I really don't know Sean that well," she told him. "We just met yesterday."

With the intention of heading back into the kitchen, Gypsy turned away.

Before she took one step, Judd's arm shot out and grabbed her. The instant they made eye contact, he let go. Nodding, he said, "No worries," then turned and left the diner.

Strange, Gypsy thought. That was the same thing Rebel had said to her that morning. She wondered what it meant.

"Now you've done it," Sean commented when he heard Judd leave.

She rolled her eyes. "Done what?"

"McCassey's say 'no worries' to each other all the time. It's how they let one another know their backs are being watched. By defending Judd, you earned his respect. He'll be keeping an eye on you now, watching out for you like you're

one of his own. When people find out you're in with that family, they won't want anything to do with you."

"So you said." Gypsy had been through too much in her life to worry what anybody else thought of her now. All she knew was that Rebel said that same thing to her earlier. She hoped it meant he thought of her as more than a friend.

"Live your life the way you want, Gypsy. I'd just hate to see a nice girl like you get mixed up with the wrong people."

Gypsy sat down to roll silverware into napkins. "What's so bad about Rebel and Judd?"

"Most folks around here are afraid of Judd; he's a nasty son of a bitch. He causes a lot of trouble that Rebel usually has to bail him out of."

Gypsy wasn't sure she believed that.

"But he works at the garage, and they look pretty busy over there. People can't be that scared of him."

"Number one, Judd drives the tow truck during the day, so he's not even there half the time. And number two, none of those boys cause any trouble during the day. Like I said, they make an honest living. It's what they do when they get off work that's earned them their reputation.

"What about Reb?" she asked. "What's he done?"

Sean let out a long, low whistle. "Rebel McCassey doesn't start trouble, Gypsy, he finishes it. More often than not, it has something to do with Judd or one of their cousins."

"But he and his brother don't like each other."

Sean looked confused. "Says who? Those two are thick as thieves." Then he laughed. "No pun intended."

She ignored his joke. "Judd tried to pick a fight with Reb in the woods yesterday. I just assumed they didn't get along."

"I've only been in town since they were fifteen and sixteen, but from what I understand, those two boys have always beaten on each other. They're close," he assured her. "Trust me."

He walked to the front door and held it open. "Come on out here. I want to test the key I had made for you."

Just like that, their conversation was over.

Gypsy and Sean walked outside, and he made her lock and unlock the door ten times before he was convinced the key worked.

"I'm really sorry for being so late this morning. I would have felt terrible if you'd been sitting outside by yourself."

She touched his arm gently. "It's all right, Sean."

"Well, now you have a key. We don't usually get busy during the week until about seven, so you should be fine until I get here. If you ever have any trouble, just dial 911; or if it's not an emergency, your friend Rebel is always right across the street."

"Always?"

"He lives above the garage. Didn't he tell you?"

"It never came up."

"His Uncle Jimmy owns the building. Rebel's lived there, I don't know, the past eight or ten years, I guess."

Burning with curiosity, Gypsy wanted to ask a dozen more questions, but decided Reb was the person she should talk to. Recalling the deeply personal information she'd revealed to

him earlier, Gypsy wondered if Reb would be willing to do the same.

Did she even have the right to ask?

Just how much did their friendship entitle her to?

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Chapter 4

With twenty-eight dollars in tips buried at the bottom of her knapsack, Gypsy left the diner after her first day of work happier than she'd ever felt.

Dressed comfortably in her old overalls, white T-shirt, and worn tennis shoes, she walked through the parking lot smiling as she thought of her good fortune; finally having a place of her own, a good job, a nice, although quirky boss, and a new friend. And just as she started thinking about her new friend, there he was, standing outside the garage.

The sight of Rebel McCassey was staggering. Wearing one-piece, blue mechanics coveralls with the sleeves cut off, he was leaning against the brick wall of the garage staring straight ahead and smoking a cigarette. His right leg was bent; foot flat against the wall, and his right hand came to a rest on his thigh every time he lowered his arm after taking a drag of the cigarette.

Gypsy recognized the backward baseball hat. It was the same black one with the word MARLBORO embroidered on the front in red that he'd been wearing yesterday. She also saw that there was a large tattoo on his left bicep, but was too far away to make out what it was.

* * * *

Rebel had just crushed the cigarette under the heel of his steel-toe work boot when he noticed Gypsy watching him. He

waved her over, and she nervously made her way across the street.

"Hi," she said, staring at his softball-sized, black skull and crossbones tattoo.

"How was your first day?" he asked.

"Fine thanks. I met some nice people."

"Good. I heard there were a few living around here somewhere."

It wasn't until Gypsy smiled at Rebel's sarcastic comment that he noticed how incredibly beautiful she was. So far, he'd only seen her in the low light of dusk and the pre-dawn of early morning, neither doing justice to her beauty like the bright light.

Her hair was in a ponytail again; the color of the loose curls was twice as vivid under the glowing sun. Everything about Gypsy was mesmerizing, but most of all, he loved the way she was looking at him—adoringly, like she was happy to see him.

"Well," he said, "since you're here, you want to come in and meet the guys?"

Her face brightened. "Are you kidding? Big families fascinate me. I'd love to!"

Rebel took her bag and set it in the bed of his tow truck. As he started to escort her inside, the large German Shepherd rose from his spot in the sun and began barking ferociously.

Taken by surprise, Gypsy immediately grabbed onto Rebel's right arm and tried to move behind him.

"Its okay, Gypsy," he gently pried her hands from around his arm, placed his right arm around her back and pulled her forward. "This is Outlaw," he said calmly. "Come here, boy."

Shaking, Gypsy pressed herself against Rebel's body as the dog came closer.

"Put your hand out so he can smell you."

Her eyes opened wide with fear. "What?"

"Dogs recognize you by your scent. Put your hand out."

Gypsy held her breath and did as Reb instructed. Outlaw spent a few seconds sniffing her hand, licked it with his soft tongue, then turned and retreated behind the tow truck.

Gypsy stood frozen.

"I'm sorry, I should have warned you. German Shepherds are very protective dogs. He wouldn't have acted that way if you weren't standing so close to me. But he knows you now so he won't do it again. Are you okay?"

She nodded. "Fine."

"Good, let's go inside."

Reb led her through one of the open bay doors, and the first person he introduced her to was a tall, thin man with light brown hair, who didn't appear to be much older than Reb.

The man looking at her with a pair of beautiful, McCassey, royal blue eyes said, "James Younger McCassey, at your service. But you can call me Jimmy." He offered her his grease-stained hand, and Gypsy giggled as she shook it.

He grinned in return. "Heard about our family history, did you?"

"Mmm-hmm."

Rebel saw the smirk appear on his young uncle's face and jumped in before he had a chance to say anything. "Don't you go feeding her any bullshit, Jimmy," Rebel told him, "I don't want you scaring her away."

"Aw come on, Rebel, it's all in good fun."

"Excuse me, Gypsy," Reb said. Quicker than lightening, he took off his baseball hat and threw it at Jimmy, who was already halfway across the garage. An older man wearing the same coveralls as Reb, with the sleeves still attached, picked it up and handed it back to him.

Breathing heavily, Rebel introduced them. "Gypsy, this is my uncle, Frank. He's the peacekeeper around here, does his best to keep us all from beating on each other, and patches us up when he can't."

"It's nice to meet you," she said.

Frank nodded. "You, too, little lady."

"And over there," he said, gesturing toward two, blonde-haired men about the same age as Rebel and Jimmy but several inches shorter, "are my cousins Brady and Kane. They're two of the best body men in the business," he said, just before they started arguing over whose turn it was to use the new welder, "when they get their work done."

When Rebel yelled at his cousins to quit fooling around, one of them let loose with a string of curses that would've made any ordinary woman blush.

Pretending to ignore their rudeness, Rebel took Gypsy's hand in his and gave her a tour of the rest of the garage. After introducing her to Frank's wife, Rose, their bookkeeper

and receptionist, he walked her up a set of metal steps that led to the second floor.

Halfway up, they ran into another one of Rebel's cousins; a tall, dark-haired boy barely out of his teens.

"Gypsy, this is Flynn."

"Hi," she said shyly.

He nodded. "Hey."

"He doesn't say much," Reb told her when they started climbing the stairs again, "but he's smart. Slick, too. Has this way about him that just makes people want to talk. If there's ever any information we need, Flynn's our man."

Once at the top, a short walk down a dark hallway took them past the fire escape to the door of a small studio apartment.

When Reb opened the door and turned on the light, Gypsy saw they were standing in a tiny kitchen.

"What's this?" she asked.

The floor was nothing but wooden planks. Thick, room-darkening shades covered each of the three windows and all four walls were painted beige. The apartment was sparsely decorated; just two framed pictures hung on the wall. A king-sized bed in the far corner left just enough space for the pine chest of drawers where a twelve-inch TV sat.

"This is where I live."

"By yourself?"

He laughed. "Flynn crashes here every now and then; but other than that, I'm all alone. There isn't much room for anyone else. The only thing you can't see from where we're

standing is the bathroom ... and that's because it's down the hall."

"I'm impressed by how neat your place is. Are you always this clean or did you straighten up just for me?"

"I spend most of my time in the garage," Reb told her. "If I am here, I'm usually sleeping."

"Wow, you really work that much?"

"Yes and no. I fix cars six days a week. Judd drives my tow truck during the day, and Jimmy and I split the eleven to seven shifts during the week."

"The tow truck belongs to you? I thought you and your uncles are in business together."

"Jimmy, Frank, and I own equal parts of the garage, but the towing business is mine. I pay Jimmy and Judd by the hour."

"Oh," Gypsy said somberly. "It sounds like you don't have much time for anything else."

The disappointment in her voice took Rebel by surprise.

When he smirked and said, "I'm the boss, Gypsy. I have time for anything I want," her shy smile gave him hope that she was as interested in spending time with him as he was with her.

Rebel suddenly thought about how different Gypsy was from all the girls who'd been chasing after him since he was a teenager. In his wilder days, the girls he knew were only interested in what kind of good time he could show them. And truthfully, he'd never disappointed a single one of them. All night parties on the bank of Antietam Creek and bonfires with his brothers and cousins behind their grandfather's barn were

weekly occurrences. There were drag races in fast cars down dirt roads, free pizza at Pizza Hut, courtesy of one of his uncles, and always plenty of beer and moonshine.

But no matter how much fun he had with those girls, none of them were good for anything more than a quick fuck at the end of the night. Rebel had never met a girl as special as Gypsy. She was someone he really cared about and wanted to get to know. And if they ever did wind up in bed together, he already knew that being with her would mean a hell of a lot more to him than anything he'd shared with those other girls.

* * * *

Gypsy's heart began to race when Rebel said that he had time for anything he wanted. Did that mean he was going to make time for her? The way she felt inside excited her, making her want to find out even more about him. She decided to start with the framed photographs.

"Is it okay if I look at the pictures?"

Rebel stepped in front of her, turned on another light, and opened all three shades. "Help yourself."

She walked across the room to where two framed pictures hung on the wall. One was of Reb, Judd, and an older boy leaning against the trunk of a large tree. They were wearing camouflage jackets and holding rifles.

"That's our older brother, Blackie," Reb said when he saw her studying the picture. "We were hunting up at Ten Acres that day. I was fifteen, Judd sixteen, and Blackie was twenty."

Feeling as though she was looking through a window into the past, Gypsy gazed intently at the photograph. Rebel and Judd looked much as they did now; big and intimidating. Blackie's appearance was terrifying. Much bigger than his younger brothers, his eyes exuded recklessness and violence. They invited trouble. Trouble she had a feeling he enjoyed.

Their stance was one of unity, defiance, and power. The brothers stood shoulder to shoulder, ready to take on anything.

The next picture was of a man and woman sitting in the bed of an old blue pickup truck. But what Gypsy saw there was something completely different.

The woman's tightly pulled back hair accentuated the look on her gaunt face; worry and fatigue etched into every line. Her hazel eyes looked as if they'd forgotten how to laugh, making Gypsy wonder what could've gone so wrong for her to be that sad.

Though his build wasn't as large, the man beside her was the spitting image of Blackie, right down to the cold madness in his eyes. Generously stuffed with chewing tobacco, his left cheek bulged, while his right one bore the remnants of a fading bruise.

"Who are they?"

"Those are my parents, Dolan and Mary McCassey. My mother died when I was twelve. She was only thirty-two. My father went a few years later."

"Oh, Reb, I'm sorry."

Rebel sat down on his bed and lit a cigarette. "Don't be. We all knew his abuse was going to kill her. It just wound up

happening sooner than later." He pointed to his father. "He got himself shot trying to cheat his partner out of money they made selling moonshine."

Rebel paused and gave his head a slight shake. "My father was a brutal man. He beat me and my brothers senseless when we were kids for doing nothing more than looking at him the wrong way. I've done a lot of things I'm not proud of, but I never once hurt someone who didn't deserve it." He gestured toward the picture again. "I look at that every day and promise myself I'll never turn out like either one of them."

Gypsy suddenly understood why Reb had gotten so upset when she told him the story of her father threatening to kill her. His compassion made him that much more attractive, and before she could think about what she was doing, she stood in front of him, bent down, and kissed his lips.

* * * *

Giving him a kiss was the last thing Rebel expected her to do when she heard that story. He thought maybe she'd cry, or be so scared she didn't want anything to do with him and his family. But he definitely hadn't expected to be kissed.

He had a hard time controlling himself when he felt the touch of her soft, wet lips on his. Still holding a cigarette low between the index and middle fingers of his right hand, Rebel put his arm around the back of her neck and drew her closer. Opening his mouth, he deepened their kiss as Gypsy wrapped her arms around his waist and pressed her body against his. She returned the kiss with more passion than Rebel was

ready to handle, and he found himself needing to pull away before things went too far.

"Did I do something wrong?" she asked.

He cleared his throat and took a long drag on his Marlboro. "No, Gypsy, darlin', you did everything right. That's why I stopped."

When she turned her back to him, he was afraid he'd made her self conscious. Rebel stood up and turned her around, pulling her over to the bed. They both sat down. "There's nothing wrong with what you did, Gypsy. And I like you. I like you way too much for only knowing you a couple of days. You make me feel things I've never felt for a woman. Protective mostly. I feel like I want to lock you away up here so nothing bad ever happens to you. That's why I said 'no worries' to you this morning. My family members say that to each other when we want someone to know they're being watched out for."

She nodded. "I know. Sean explained that to me this afternoon."

"Sean?" he questioned suspiciously. "Why?"

"Because he heard Judd say the same thing to me a couple of hours ago."

Rebel's expression turned dark. "Judd didn't mention he'd seen you. What happened at the diner?" he demanded.

When she finished telling him the story about defending Judd, Rebel asked why she'd stuck up for his brother.

"Because he didn't do anything wrong."

"Sean hates Judd, Gypsy. And me too, for that matter. You could've lost your job for what you did."

She shrugged it off like it was no big deal. "I know."

"My brother's a lot like my father," he explained. "Most people would have jumped at the chance to blame him for something. He respects you for speaking up for him. That's why he said what he did to you."

"What about you?" she asked. "Are you angry?"

"Why would I be angry? Family looks out for each other. And like it or not, girl, you're in."

She smiled. "I like it. Besides my mother, I've never had family before."

"Well, you do now." Reb leaned over and gave her a quick peck on the lips. "I have to get back to work. You want me to take you home?"

"No thanks, I've been stuck inside all day. I'm looking forward to the walk."

Rebel took her hand and led her downstairs, half expecting the boys who'd known they were alone in his apartment to throw out a sarcastic comment or two. But with the exception of Brady and Kane, who were now cussing each other out over something else, everyone was too busy to even spare them a glance.

On their way out to retrieve Gypsy's bag from the bed of the tow truck, Jimmy stopped them. "You come over and see us any time, Gypsy."

"Thanks, I will."

"Judd told me what you did for him at the diner this afternoon. Not too many people are going to like you when they find out."

"I just did what was right, Jimmy. I don't care what people think of me."

He nodded his approval. "Well, in any case, you just holler if you ever need anything over at the diner. There's always four or five of us hanging around here."

"That means a lot," she said, "it really does. Thanks."

Watching the friendly exchange between Gypsy and Jimmy made Rebel happy. He was glad to see that his family had so readily accepted her, because if he had any say in it, they were going to be seeing a lot more of her.

"I should go," she told him. "The twenty-eight dollars I made in tips today is my grocery money for the week. I need to stop at Safeway on my way home."

Rebel frowned. Twenty-eight dollars wasn't going to buy much food. He wanted to offer her more money but didn't want to embarrass her. Instead, he offered to drive her to the store.

She turned him down. "But I'll see you in the morning, right?"

He nodded. "Five-fifteen."

As she turned to go, Rebel reached out and stopped her. "Be careful, Gypsy."

She smiled. "For a bad boy, Rebel McCassey, you're pretty soft inside."

He gave her a wink and grinned. "Don't tell anyone."

* * * *

Every time Rebel saw, talked to, or even thought about Gypsy, his feelings for her grew stronger. Yesterday, he was

wondering what the hell was wrong with him for feeling the way he did about her. Today he didn't give a damn. He'd spent the rest of the afternoon thinking about their kiss, the damn twenty-eight dollars worth of groceries she planned to buy, and worrying so much that he didn't get any work done.

She had no car, no warm coat, and no telephone; something he found out after calling information to get her number, and wondered if she'd spent everything she had on rent.

Not having any money would explain the reason everything she owned fit in two knapsacks, as well as why she didn't turn on any lights in her apartment the night before, despite being afraid of the dark.

He admired Gypsy for working hard and trying to make it on her own. What else could she do? She had no family, no friends, and no one to go to for help if she needed it. Knowing the reason she lived in a run down part of town was because that was all she could afford made him worry even more. It made him want to run over to her apartment and stand guard outside her door.

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Chapter 5

Twenty-eight dollars bought Gypsy just enough food to fit into one very heavy, double-paper grocery bag. She was sure her arms were going to give out by the time she got home, and if it wasn't such a beautiful day, she would've been sorry she'd turned down Rebel's offer to give her a ride.

Gypsy shifted the bag from hip to hip every few minutes as she made her way down Franklin Street, thinking about the time she'd spent with Reb at the garage. The members of his family she met had been nice. Although she wasn't sure she could tell one from the other. That made it hard for her to understand why nobody liked them. She hadn't actually talked to Brady and Kane, but the way they were playing around made them seem like good-natured people.

What really stuck in Gypsy's mind was the kiss she and Reb had shared. It had felt so right. She hadn't expected it to turn into something hot and heavy either, but was glad it did. He was interested in her, she could tell, and she was just as interested in him. Gypsy wasn't sure if she believed in fate, but if there was such a thing, then meeting Rebel McCassey in the woods was it.

It was seven o'clock by the time Gypsy put away her few groceries, showered, and sat down on the floor with her dinner; a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and glass of ice water. The meal wasn't her first choice, but she couldn't afford to be extravagant.

Without a TV or anything to read, the only thing to keep her company while she ate was the radio. By eight o'clock, she was bored stiff and decided to go to bed.

After setting her alarm for four-fifteen, Gypsy climbed into her sleeping bag. She was grateful for its warmth, because even though the heat had been turned up to sixty-three, her hair was still wet and the extra five degrees didn't make much of a difference.

Then she remembered Rebel's jacket.

She'd felt guilty when he practically forced her to keep it, but now was glad he did. Crawling out of the sleeping bag, she took the blue polyester jacket out of her knapsack and put it on. It was big enough to keep her plenty warm, but what she liked best was that it smelled like him.

"Reb," she whispered, pulling the cuffs over her hands and touching her face. She got back into bed, and her heart began to beat faster as she inhaled his scent. Feeling like he was right there with her, she relaxed and fell asleep.

* * * *

It took Gypsy a few minutes to realize that the faint pinging noise she heard was not part of a dream, but something hitting her bedroom window. Hoping it was just a tree branch blowing in the wind, she laid quietly for another minute waiting for the noise to go away. But then there was another ping, and another, and she realized it was pebbles hitting the glass.

Rising, she walked to the window and peeked out the shade. There, standing in the shadows cast by a streetlight

outside her window, was Rebel. Gypsy's heart fluttered at the sight of the man who'd been in her thoughts as she'd fallen asleep.

She unlocked and opened the window. "Rebel?" It was hard to tell, but it looked like he was still wearing the same sleeveless mechanics overalls he had on earlier that afternoon.

"Yeah," he said in a loud whisper. "Can I come up?"

She didn't know why he didn't just do that in the first place. "Of course."

She closed the window, walked to the living room, and unlocked the front door.

"Hi," she said and invited him in.

* * * *

The first thing Rebel noticed when he entered the apartment was how cold and empty it was. The second was that Gypsy was wearing his jacket, which, he admitted to himself, made him feel good. He remembered her saying she never slept in nightgowns anymore. Were those threadbare sweatpants her pajamas? As much as he wanted to say something, he just couldn't. She wasn't stupid and probably knew exactly what he was thinking. There was no point in humiliating her.

"Hey," he said, taking a close look at her disheveled hair. "It took you a long time to come to the window, were you sleeping?"

"Yeah. I'm sorry," she said, trying to fix her hair with her hand. "My hair gets really curly and wild when it air dries. What time is it?"

"Nine-thirty." He touched Gypsy's hand to stop her from messing with her hair. "Don't, it looks beautiful."

It really did look great. And so did she. He never thought he'd find anything attractive about a woman who'd just rolled out of bed. But at that moment, Gypsy was more beautiful than anyone he'd ever seen.

When she stopped fussing with her hair and turned her attention to his bare arms, she immediately blushed. "Oh, you must be freezing. Here," she started removing the jacket, but he stopped her.

"I'm fine, Gypsy," he took hold of both sides of the coat and wrapped her back up. "I told you to keep it."

"Then I'll turn up the heat." She made a move toward the thermostat, but he stopped her again.

"I said I'm fine."

Gypsy shrugged, giving Rebel the impression she was uncomfortable. And why wouldn't she be? She was standing in front of him in her pajamas with her unruly hair sticking out in every direction. It was so cold in her apartment that she'd obviously been sleeping in his jacket, and she hadn't asked him to have a seat because there was no place to sit but the floor.

"I'm sorry I woke you. I didn't think you'd be in bed so early."

"Normally, I wouldn't have been, but I didn't have anything else to do. I'm surprised, actually. I don't usually

sleep so well. I think it had something to do with your jacket," she said quietly. "It made me feel like you were here."

Rebel smiled. By the look on Gypsy's face, the words must've left her mouth before she had a chance to stop them. To save her from further embarrassment, he bent down and lightly kissed her lips, then turned toward the door. "I should probably let you get back to sleep."

"No!" she grabbed for his arm. "Don't go."

He looked at her and raised his eyebrows.

She let go of him and took a step back. "I mean, you could at least tell me why you came over."

"I don't go on duty until eleven and thought you might want to go out for a beer or something. I would've called, but..."

"I know," she said, "no phone. But we're friends, Reb. You don't need to call first. And you could have come to the front door."

"I didn't want to scare you."

It was Gypsy's turn to raise her eyebrows. "And you thought throwing rocks at my bedroom window wouldn't scare me?"

He did his best to look ashamed without laughing. "Sorry."

"Oh, I don't care about that," she said, touching his hand. "I'm just glad you're here."

He gave her an extra squeeze before releasing her. "Me too."

Nothing in all the experience Rebel had with women prepared him for the way the tenderness of Gypsy's admission pierced his heart. He hadn't been looking for

someone to love when she practically fell into his lap, but that's exactly what he'd found. After knowing Gypsy just two days, Rebel was falling in love with her.

He took hold of Gypsy's hand and pulled her into his arms. But there was no kissing this time. Just a firm, comforting hug, and she clung to him as tightly as she had in his truck that morning. He stroked her hair and planted tiny kisses on top of her head.

"There's no way to describe this," Gypsy said just above a whisper.

"Describe what?"

"The feeling of being held in your arms. I never want to lose it."

Rebel knew exactly what she meant, because he felt the same way. So much so that he could feel his body starting to respond to their closeness. He would've loved to stand there and hold her longer, but needed to let go before the situation became embarrassing for both of them. Reluctantly, he took a step back.

Gypsy cleared her throat. "Do you want me to get dressed?"

Oh, God, had his physical attraction been that obvious? "Dressed?"

"To go out for a beer."

"Oh." That was a relief. "Nah, you're ready for bed. We can hang out here instead. That is ... if you don't mind the company."

"Mind?" she put a hand over her heart. "No, I don't mind. But I'm afraid there isn't much to do."

"You don't have to entertain me, Gypsy. We can just hang out."

She smiled. "That sounds great. But I have to go lock my window first."

"Lead the way," he said and followed her into the bedroom.

Rebel couldn't believe what he saw when he entered the room. Her clothes, what little there was of them, were folded neatly in the corner against the wall. The only other things in the room were a sleeping bag, pillow, and small clock radio. She didn't even have a blanket.

Was Gypsy really so broke that this was all she owned? He should've been subtle, beat around the bush a little to find out the answers to his questions. But he just couldn't hold it in any longer.

"What's going on, Gypsy?" he asked as calmly as he could. "Why the hell are you living like this?"

Gypsy took a deep breath and extended her arm, inviting Rebel to sit down. "I'm sorry for not explaining things to you earlier. You've been so nice to me, and it's the least I should've done, so you wouldn't have been so surprised when you walked in here."

She took another deep breath. "Like I told you this morning, I left Baltimore City in kind of a hurry. With all of the other expenses I knew I was going to have, I only budgeted twenty dollars for a bus ticket. I ended up in Hagerstown because it was an additional twenty-three dollars to go to Pittsburgh. I would've loved to leave Maryland, but just couldn't afford it."

Then she explained where every penny of her money had gone and that all she had left was thirty dollars.

"My apartment's empty because I don't own anything, not even a coat. I used to have one, but it was stolen a few months ago."

"What about clothes?" He gestured toward the small pile. "It doesn't look like you have more than a few days worth over there."

She glanced at the corner of her bedroom. "I don't. No matter how hard I worked, I never seemed to have extra money for anything after paying rent, buying food, and putting something in the bank. It didn't matter though. The waitress jobs provided uniforms, and I didn't need to wear anything nice to clean houses."

Rebel had been in and out of trouble his whole life, and most everybody in town, except his family, hated him. But no matter what, he'd always had clothes to wear and there'd always been people in his family who cared about him. He had some good memories of being a kid, a bed to sleep in, and could afford to heat his apartment. Gypsy never had any of those things, and it pained him knowing that she'd worked her fingers to the bone for years and still had nothing.

Her voice broke into his thoughts. "You shouldn't worry about me, Reb."

He looked at her sitting with her arms wrapped around her knees, which were pulled to her chest. "Who said I was worried?"

"The look on your face."

Goddamn right he was worried. She'd be lucky to make rent every month only pulling in twenty-eight dollars a day. "Will you make me a promise?"

She rested her chin on top of her knee and looked at him suspiciously. "If I can."

"Promise you'll come to me if you ever need anything."

"I appreciate the offer, Reb. But asking you for help would be relying on someone else to solve my problems, and I can't do that. I know it'll be hard to survive earning such a small amount of money, but I can do it. I've survived on much less."

"Hard? Gypsy, it'll be nearly impossible!"

She shook her head. "I have to find a way to survive on my own."

Rebel didn't know whether to strangle Gypsy or hug her. He admired her strong work ethic, but why the hell was she being so goddamn stubborn? Didn't she know that friends helped each other out when they were in trouble?

And then it hit him.

Of course she didn't know. She'd never had any close friends. The only person she'd ever been able to count on was herself. He felt like an ass for not understanding sooner.

Well, he'd be damned if he was going to stand back and watch her live in poverty. She was going to accept his help whether she liked it or not ... she just didn't know it yet.

"Fine. But I'm going to say just one more thing before I let the subject drop." His features softened as he reached out to caress her cheek. "You're not alone anymore, Gypsy,

McCassey's take care of their own. Ask any one of the boys. They'll tell you the same thing."

Before Gypsy had a chance to respond, he stood and pulled a pack of Marlboro's from the side pocket of his coveralls. "I'm going outside for a smoke. I'll be right back."

On his way out, Rebel noticed something that had slipped by him before; the only lock on the front door was the one on the knob. Making a mental note to bring over and install one of the extra deadbolts he had at the garage, he quietly closed the door behind him.

* * * *

Gypsy was so surprised by Rebel's comment that she sat on the floor a full minute after he was gone trying to figure out what he meant. McCassey's take care of their own? Did that mean she was his girl? Or maybe he just considered them good friends. Whatever it meant, Gypsy had a feeling he was going to give her help whether she asked for it or not.

When Rebel returned, Gypsy was in the kitchen making hot chocolate. She met him in the living room and handed him a cup. "I forgot I had this. It's not beer, but it's the best I could do."

He smiled. "My brothers and cousins and I used to drink this in my grandparent's kitchen when we were little," he explained as he blew on the hot liquid. "It's perfect. Thanks."

They went into the bedroom where Gypsy had raised the shade and re-lit a candle. She put the radio on low and they sat on the floor again. This time, Rebel leaned back against

the wall, his legs stretched out long in front of him, left foot crossed over the right.

Gypsy sat next to him.

When he extended his left arm inviting her to come closer, she leaned back against him and rested her head on his chest.

"Tell me about your mother," she said.

Rebel sighed. "She got pregnant with Blackie when she was fifteen and married my father, who was seventeen, because her father forced her to. My father thought she trapped him into marriage and hated her for it."

"Did she?"

"Did she what?"

"Trap him into marriage."

"At fifteen?" Rebel snorted. "I doubt it. My mother's father, who I had the unfortunate pleasure of meeting for the first time at her funeral, was the meanest person around these parts back then. She was afraid of him, but not enough to go running into the arms of Bad Dolan McCassey. It was probably something more like my father met her, got her drunk on moonshine, and forced himself on her.

"Once her father found out she was pregnant, he probably threatened to beat the hell out of her until she told him who did it. The way the story goes, he hunted around for my father until he found him harvesting corn in my granddaddy's fields. He dragged my parents to the courthouse, and they had a shotgun wedding, literally, on a Thursday afternoon."

Gypsy couldn't say anything but, "Wow."

Rebel took a deep breath. "I always wondered if her father would've done things differently if he'd known he was signing his daughter's death warrant by forcing her to marry my father."

"I'm sorry she had such a rough life."

"Me too. Anyway," he continued, "she suffered two miscarriages after she had Blackie. Probably from being beaten every time she turned around. I was born ten months after Judd, and my father never touched her again after that ... at least sexually. She was a good woman, but the years of being browbeaten and abused by my father took their toll. All that was left of my mother by the time she died was a shell of the woman she once was."

Not quite sure what to say, Gypsy was suddenly sorry she'd brought up the subject. She covered by asking if he and his brothers were close growing up.

"Judd and I were at each other's throats more often than not. Blackie didn't have much use for his two, warring younger brothers until we were teenagers. The two of us had calmed down a bit by then." With a smirk, he added, "But not much."

"You're close now?"

"Yeah, we're close," he told her. "But we still beat the hell out of each other every once and a while ... just to keep in practice."

Gypsy could imagine being close to a brother or sister. It was something she'd longed for her entire life.

"I would have given anything to be close to someone growing up. You guys are lucky."

"Judd's the lucky one. He would've been dead a hundred times already if I wasn't around to save his ass. He's got a short fuse and tends to react to things before he has a chance to think about what he's doing. That's usually what gets him in so much trouble."

Gypsy was afraid she'd made him angry by prying into his personal life. But then he reached up with his right hand and started playing with her hair, winding the tight curls around his fingers.

Letting herself relax, she put down her cup, snuggled against him, and closed her eyes. For such a wild and supposedly dangerous man, Rebel McCassey had an amazingly soft touch.

In the silence, he continued to play with her long, curly locks. When she snuggled closer, he wrapped his left arm around her body, resting his hand on her stomach. She entwined her fingers with his and held on tight.

"What about Blackie?" she asked.

"What about him?"

"How come I didn't meet him? Does he work with you at the garage?"

"He used to. He's been in prison in Baltimore City the past few years for armed robbery."

She swallowed the lump in her throat. Gypsy didn't want to tell Reb again that she was sorry, so she remained quiet, hoping he would say something else.

"Blackie thrives on the rush he gets by causing trouble. The more severe the consequences, the more exciting it is for him. He didn't even need the money he got from robbing the

liquor store. He just did it for fun. The fact that he got caught a few hours later didn't even bother him.

"He and Judd are a lot alike, only Judd doesn't carry things as far. At least he hasn't yet."

"Wow," she said. "You're family sure is interesting."

Rebel gave his head a slight shake. "Don't make us out to be more than we are, Gypsy. We may have interesting stories, but all the fun we have and trouble we get into comes at a price. I just hope to hell I don't wind up dragging you down."

Gypsy was almost asleep, but she could hear the worry in his voice. "I don't care what happens to me, Rebel," she whispered sleepily. "As long as I'm with you, I'll never be afraid."

* * * *

Rebel wished she knew what it did to him to hear her talk like that. And he would love to know what he did to deserve so much trust and admiration from a sweet girl like Gypsy.

When he was sure she was asleep, he re-positioned himself so he was lying on his back, wrapped his arms around Gypsy, and rested her head on his right shoulder. After covering both of them with the sleeping bag, Rebel focused on the ceiling and let his mind wander.

If someone had told him a week ago that he was going to meet a girl like her, one who would like him for who he was, and trust him unconditionally, he would have told them they were crazy. But here she was, lying in his arms sound asleep.

He knew she was a girl he could love the minute she flashed him that first trusting smile.

Eleven o'clock came and went and Rebel decided to forget about going to work. After all, he owned the tow truck and had the right to take a night off.

He closed his eyes but didn't sleep. Instead, he thought about Gypsy, convincing her to accept his help, and how he was going to take care of her if she refused it. Telling her he loved her also crossed his mind, and how the hell he was going to do that without scaring her off. He knew that if a girl said she loved him after they'd only known each other a few days, he'd automatically think she was after something. The only thing Rebel wanted from Gypsy, other than the respect and trust he already had, was her love.

When the alarm clock rang at four-fifteen, Rebel reached over and turned it off. "Gypsy," he whispered, not wanting her to be scared when she woke up and realized he was still there.

"Hmmm," she moaned, slowly opening her eyes.

Rebel was pleasantly surprised when the only reaction she had to him lying next to her was to snuggle closer. "Your alarm went off, darlin', it's time to get up."

Still half asleep, she closed her eyes again. "Five more minutes."

It wasn't until he said, "If you don't get up you'll be late for work," that Gypsy seemed to become aware of the situation. After a brief glance at the clock, she gave Rebel a wide-eyed look. "Oh, no! You missed work. Why didn't you leave?"

She tried to get up, but Rebel pulled her close, and she rested her head on his chest. "I'm the boss, remember? I don't have to work if I don't want to."

Rebel went outside for a smoke while Gypsy took a quick shower and got dressed. Uniform on and hair in a ponytail, she handed him a toothbrush when he came back inside.

"It's extra," she told him shyly. "In case you want to use it."

Rebel gave her a suspicious glance. She barely had enough money to buy food, but had bought an extra toothbrush? It was too much to hope she'd gotten it with him in mind, so he thanked her and walked into the bathroom.

She was wrapped in his jacket and standing by the front door when he asked if she was ready to go.

"Ready." She picked up the knapsack that held her change of clothes. Before she could drape it over her left shoulder, Rebel took it and slung it over his.

He opened the door, and she walked out. When it was closed, he twisted the knob several times to make sure it was locked. "I'll be by tonight to install a deadbolt. A five-year-old could pick this worthless lock in seconds."

She started to protest, but he stopped her. "No arguments. I want you safe."

"Okay," she gave in, "thank you."

Rebel pulled Gypsy close for a minute, then loosened his hold and bent down to give her a kiss. Not just a peck on the lips, but a slow, deep, sensual kiss that she eagerly returned.

When they parted, Reb planted one extra kiss on her forehead and chuckled. "You're sweet as honey, darlin', but

that's a lot more than I can say for the way that jacket smells," he waved his hand back and forth. "It could use a good washing. Probably two."

She held her forearm up and sniffed. "I like it. The scent reminds me of you."

He laughed. "Do I really smell that bad?"

"No ... that good."

And that was the moment Rebel McCassey knew Gypsy Lance was his, heart and soul. No woman thought the combination of grease, cigarette smoke, and perspiration on a man smelled good unless she felt more for him than just friendship.

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Chapter 6

Rebel and Gypsy spent a lot of time over the next four weeks getting to know each other. Since she had more free time than he did, she spent a lot of her afternoons hanging around the garage after her shift at The Tea Cup.

"I feel a little awkward," she said at first. "I'm afraid your family will think they have to walk on eggshells around me because I'm a woman."

"You've got nothing to worry about, darlin'," Reb reassured her, "With the exception of Frank, not one of those guys would know how to act properly around a woman if they took lessons."

Gypsy was pleasantly surprised to find that Reb had been right; none of them went out of their way to be extra nice. Instead, they talked to and teased her the same way they did each other, making her feel more than welcome.

Rebel was happy Gypsy and the boys had taken to each other so well. But much to his chagrin, they occasionally treated Gypsy too much like one of the guys.

There was an incident where she, Brady, and Kane wasted two hours telling each other the most disgusting jokes they knew, and one with a loose oil plug on a car that had Gypsy scrubbing 10W40 out of her hair all afternoon; Rebel still wasn't quite sure what happened there. But when he caught a glimpse of Gypsy sticking her middle finger up at Kane, he kicked himself for not putting a stop to his cousin's lewd

behavior when Gypsy first started hanging around the garage. She'd picked up one too many of their bad habits.

"That's it!" he yelled one day, "from now on, I forbid anything other than work to take place in this garage between the hours of seven in the morning and four in the afternoon!"

Most of the time, Gypsy did everything she could to help around the garage. She answered the phone when Rose was busy, ran errands, and was learning a little about cars from Rebel, too. He even taught her how to hotwire his pickup truck by crossing the battery and ignition wires.

"You shouldn't be teaching that sweet, innocent girl to do a thing like that, Rebel," his uncle, Frank, lectured.

"Easy, old man," he teased. "I'm just teaching her some basic survival skills."

Frank shrugged and walked away, muttering something under his breath about what kind of thing Gypsy could possibly have to survive that would require her to hotwire a vehicle.

Rebel gave Jimmy all the early shifts with the tow truck so he could spend more time with Gypsy in the evenings. Even though her apartment was empty, it was slightly bigger than the one Reb had over the garage, so they spent most of their time there.

Sometimes they played cards or watched the old twelve-inch black and white TV Reb brought over. Other times they just sat and talked. But no matter what they wound up doing, one thing was always the same. Every night, Rebel stayed with her until she fell asleep.

By the middle of May it was much too warm for extra covers, but Gypsy always insisted that he drape his jacket over her each night before he left for work at eleven.

Rebel would never forget how he felt the first night he found her sleeping with it. She'd given him a key the day he installed her deadbolt and told him he could come over whenever he wanted, even if she was sleeping.

That particular night, Jimmy was out sick and Reb was supposed to work a double shift driving the tow truck. Instead, he quit at ten o'clock, stopped at the liquor store on North Locust Street for a six-pack of Budweiser, and went to Gypsy's.

Knowing she'd be asleep, he entered the apartment quietly and put the beer in the fridge. When he went in the bedroom to check on her, she was curled into a ball on top of her sleeping bag, his jacket tucked under her arm. Reb smiled at the sight, his love for her growing stronger as he realized she took comfort from something that belonged to him.

Squatting beside her, he started to take the jacket away. But she stirred, and stopped him. "Don't take it," she pleaded, half asleep. "It makes me feel like Rebel's here."

He brushed the hair away from her face and kissed her forehead. "I am here, Gypsy." Taking the jacket, he laid it in the corner with the rest of her clothes. His six-pack forgotten, Rebel stretched out on the floor and gathered her into his arms. Gypsy settled herself against him with ease and immediately fell back to sleep.

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Chapter 7

Thunder rumbled low in the distance at the same time on a slow, sultry, Friday afternoon at the end of July that Rebel and his cousins were in the garage playing Seven Card Stud. The noise was upsetting Outlaw, causing the German Shepherd to bark incessantly.

"I give up." Kane slammed his cards down on the table. "Not only is it hotter than hell in here, but that damn dog is making me crazy. What's with him today?"

"Lay off, Kane." Rebel whistled and Outlaw trotted over.

The dog nudged his master's arm, whined, then loped outside through the open bay door. Rebel knew exactly what was wrong with his faithful friend.

By the time Judd pulled the tow truck into the parking lot twenty minutes later, everything outside had become eerily still. There were no cars on the road and no breeze; not even a single bird chirping.

Judd walked into the garage and came to a stop behind Brady. After looking at his cousin's cards, he grinned, seeing the perfect opportunity to have a little fun at Brady's expense. "Wow!" he said, with exaggerated excitement. "Three aces."

Brady threw his cards on the table and jumped out of the chair. He tackled Judd, and the two men fell to the oil-stained cement floor laughing like kids. As the rest of the guys watched from the safety of the card table, Brady and Judd rolled around for a good minute or two, each trying to get the

better of each other. But when Brady accidentally pushed Judd too hard and he slammed against one of the tool cabinets, the fun ended with a stream of curses from Rebel.

"If you two shit heads want to kill each other, do it outside! Quit wrecking my damn garage!"

Judd stood and straightened the cabinet. "Can't," he said, offering Brady a hand up. Brady accepted, and the two men brushed themselves off and made their way back to the table. "Bad weather's coming this way. I was just at the campground in Clear Spring picking up a tow. The sky over there is black, man. Black. There's a tornado watch from Cumberland to Baltimore."

Judd's announcement ended any thoughts the cousins had of continuing the poker game.

Irritated by his brother, Rebel, who'd been balancing his chair on its two back legs, set all four on the ground and leaned across the table. "Quit being so dramatic."

"Who's being dramatic?" Judd extended his arm toward the door. "Go look for yourself."

Rebel didn't need to look outside to know what was coming. Approaching storms were the only thing that made his dog uneasy, and Outlaw hadn't sat still all day.

After the next boom of thunder and quick flash of lightening caused the garage lights flicker, Rebel backed his chair away from the table. "Let's call it a day."

Following their cousin's lead, Brady and Kane rose and began returning the chairs to Rose's office while Flynn lowered the big bay door and turned out the lights.

Reb pulled his brother aside. "Will you stay here and keep an eye on things for me? Gypsy's shift at The Tea Cup is due to end in an hour. She'll be heading over when she's through, and I don't want her here alone."

Judd scratched his head and shrugged. "Sure, bro. Where you going?"

"To get my guns from the hunting cabin on Ten Acres. I'm not sure that old building can survive a tornado."

"Your guns? You should stay here in case Gypsy needs you, man. I'll go."

Rebel shook his head. "You can't. I was cleaning them and the pieces are scattered all over the place," he told his brother, wishing for the millionth time that Judd had taken the time to learn to assemble a firearm. Everyone else in his family could put one together in the dark with two hands tied behind their backs. And although Judd could shoot any type of gun with amazing accuracy, he couldn't put one together in broad daylight with an instruction book.

"You better get moving, then," Judd shouted over a loud clap of thunder. "It doesn't look too good out there."

Rebel glanced out the window. "That's an understatement." Since Judd had come in, the sky had turned pitch black and the wind had picked up. It was blowing fiercely, scattering debris everywhere.

The diner appeared to be busy, which was good. If Gypsy had to work late, he wouldn't have to worry about her refusing Judd's company and trying to walk home in the storm.

Reaching into the pants pocket of his sleeveless coveralls, Rebel pulled out his keys. Adjusting his baseball hat backwards, he lit a cigarette and turned to his brother. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

When a strong gust of wind nearly ripped the door from its hinges as Reb opened it, he whistled for Outlaw, who came running.

"The guns can wait," Reb announced when he walked back into the garage. "I'm going to the diner."

It wasn't often that Rebel worried about anything, so when Brady and Kane apparently noticed how concerned he was about Gypsy, they offered to go with him.

"Hell," Judd said. "We'll all go. Sean will never confront all of us. Come on, Flynn."

As the five McCassey's made their way to the door, they were stopped short by the sound of a rain barrel crashing against the metal bay door. Rushing to the window, they watched as the wind bent the trees so far over they looked as if they'd snap in half. Large hailstones began pounding the roof, and the sky let loose its torrential rains. Then high winds gave way to a deafening roar sounding remarkably like an oncoming freight train.

They all saw the funnel cloud at the same time.

Rebel started to run out the door. To get him to stop, Judd, Brady, and Kane had to tackle him from behind. "You can't go out there!" Judd yelled.

Rebel shrugged them off. "I have to get to Gypsy!"

"Well, you won't do her any good by getting yourself killed, goddammit!" Judd hollered. "Let's go!"

As Rebel struggled against them, his brother and cousins dragged him toward the steps leading down into the pit at the back of the garage. It was ten feet under ground and fifteen yards long, mainly used for storing tires, old tools, and car parts. But there was plenty of room for all of them, including Outlaw, to ride out the storm.

One by one they descended into the dark pit to take seats on the concrete floor. Other than objects being blown into the heavy metal bay doors and a couple of loud crashes of glass, they couldn't hear anything over the roaring wind.

"I'll go with you to check on Gypsy when this blows over," Judd yelled to Reb. "We all will."

Rebel only grunted in response, soothing his anger by thinking of ways to make his brother pay if anything happened to Gypsy. Deep down he knew there was no way he would've made it across the street before the tornado struck, but sitting here doing nothing to make sure Gypsy was safe made him feel useless.

The chaos outside lasted no more than a minute. The instant it ended, Rebel flew up the metal stairs followed by the other four. Outlaw brought up the rear.

Other than some broken windows and scattered papers, there wasn't much damage to the inside of the garage. Rebel glanced out the window, sighing in relief when he saw the diner hadn't suffered much damage, either. He tried to lift one of the bay doors, but it wouldn't budge. Neither would the other two.

"Power's out," Flynn announced, after trying to turn on the lights.

"Forget about the damn lights and get your ass over here," Rebel snapped. "There must be a thousand pounds of debris piled against these doors."

It took the strength of all five men to finally get one of the doors open. Jumping over downed tree limbs and scattered debris, Rebel and his cousins ran toward the diner, slowing to a walk as they reached the parking lot.

Then suddenly, without warning, the roof of the diner caved in, causing two of the walls to collapse.

"Oh, shit!" someone yelled. But Rebel never heard it. He was already up to where the front door of the diner used to be.

"Gypsy! Gypsy!" he shouted. And without hesitation, began throwing broken pieces of wood and brick out of his way looking for a hole to crawl through. He had to get inside. He had to get to Gypsy.

Judd ran up behind his brother, followed by Brady and Kane. "The phones are out so Flynn ran down to the sheriff's office," he said, then put a hand on Rebel's shoulder. "Help will be here soon."

Rebel nodded then spoke as if he hadn't heard a word his brother had said. "We'll never be able to move all this by hand. Brady, Kane, run over to the garage. Get flashlights, ropes, chains, shovels, and whatever else we've got. Hook up the snowplow to my pickup truck, too. We'll push this stuff out of the way if we have to."

The boys took off running just as the first faint screams from terrified customers started coming from inside the diner.

Desperate to get in and find Gypsy, Rebel and Judd tore frantically at the debris.

The police and fire departments showed up at the same time Brady and Kane drove into the parking lot in Rebel's 1978 one-ton, black pickup truck, clearing away debris with the plow. After parking the truck, they quickly made their way to the front of the building with tools in hand.

The McCassey cousins worked side by side with the firemen, police, and volunteers from town for thirty minutes before they were able to clear a safe path. When the firemen began going into the building, the volunteers were asked to step aside and let the professionals do their job.

Rebel watched anxiously for an hour as they pulled victims, most unconscious but alive, one by one, from the collapsed building. "Twenty people have come out of there already. Where the hell is she?"

"They'll find her," Judd told him. "They'll find her."

When dusk faded into darkness, a local paving company showed up and donated the use of portable lights they had for working on the roads at night. Around nine o'clock, the two remaining walls of the building gave way, trapping the remaining victims inside.

"We can't get to them from the front of the building anymore!" the fire chief shouted. "We'll have to go through the top!"

Rebel stood alone and watched from the side of the building as the fire department positioned a hook and ladder over what was left of the diner's roof.

The chief shouted final instructions as the ladder was double checked. "Lower men in, have them search for victims, then lift them out with a stretcher attached to the ladder."

The first person they brought out was Sean. When Rebel spotted him, he ran to the stretcher. "Where's Gypsy?"

Dazed, Sean answered. "Basement. She was ... in the basement."

"In the basement?" Rebel questioned. He took off his baseball hat, ran a hand through his hair, and began to pace. "What the hell was she doing down there?"

Sean never got the chance to answer, and Rebel watched helplessly as he was loaded into an ambulance and taken away. Wasting no time, he ran to tell the fireman that someone was trapped in the basement.

"Sorry," the fire chief shook his head. "We've suspended the search for now."

"What?" Rebel yelled. "Why?"

"There's a gas leak in there. As much as I want to get the rest of those people out, I can't risk the lives of my men."

Anger and an overwhelming feeling of helplessness overcame Rebel. Deep down, he knew the chief was right. Those men had families and they were already in a dangerous situation. A single spark around a gas leak would mean certain death for everyone. But it also meant that Gypsy was now in even more danger. He had to get her out.

"Then I'll go in and get her myself," Rebel said and took off toward the pile of rubble.

"Wait!" the chief ran after Rebel and caught him by the arms. "I can't let you do that, McCassey. We have to wait for the gas company to get here."

"Screw the goddamn gas company! They could take all fucking night to get here! Now, either have me arrested or get the hell out of my way."

The two men stared at each other until the chief bent his head and held out his arm, giving Rebel permission to do what he wanted.

"Judd!" Reb called to his brother. "Get me one of those flashlights the boys brought over. I'm going after Gypsy."

Judd stared openmouthed at his brother.

"Go goddammit! This place could blow at any minute, and I'd like to have Gypsy out of there before it does!"

Judd ran off as Rebel climbed to the top of the building. Thirty seconds later, his brother and cousins were standing next to him with flashlights and rope.

"I'm going in with you," Judd told him. "Brady, Kane, and Flynn will stand by in case we need help."

Knowing that every second counted, Rebel nodded, tossed his hat to Flynn and headed down into the hole.

Armed with flashlights, the brothers sidestepped bricks and crept over broken furniture as they made their way through the diner. When they reached the area where the basement door was located, Rebel began calling Gypsy's name.

No answer.

Rebel's heart almost stopped beating when he noticed the door was blocked by pieces of the collapsed roof. Was there even the slightest chance anyone in the basement hadn't

been crushed to death? Thinking only of Gypsy's safety, Rebel ignored the pain as sharp objects sliced into his hands and arms as he and Judd quickly cleared away debris. When they finally reached what was left of the door, Rebel ripped it off the hinges and threw it aside. "Gypsy?"

"Reb?" she called weakly.

Thank God! She was still alive!

Rebel turned to Judd, who was standing ten feet behind him and gave a thumb's up. "It's me, darlin'. Is there anyone else down there with you?"

"No. I'm ... I'm the only one."

"It's all right, Gypsy. Hold tight, I'm coming down."

Rebel tied the rope around his waist and handed the slack to Judd. "I'm going down," he told his brother. "If it feels like this floor's going to go, get the hell out of here."

Judd shrugged and tied the other end of the rope around himself. "Just go get your lady, so we can all get out of here. I need a smoke."

Making jokes was Judd's way of dealing with things that made him nervous. It didn't happen often, though, because he wasn't usually on the receiving end of something intimidating.

Shining his light through the doorway, Rebel called out to Gypsy again as he headed down the rickety stairs.

* * * *

Relieved to hear Reb's voice, Gypsy started to cry. The tornado had struck so fast that it was a miracle everyone in the diner was able to get into the building's basement. When

the noise stopped, they started climbing the stairs to go back into the restaurant. Sean had gone up first to make sure his customers got out all right, and she'd stayed behind to help the people still downstairs.

Gypsy was walking around the basement one last time to make sure no one had been left behind when she heard a low rumble, followed by screaming, a loud crash, and finally, silence. Another small crash came a minute later, causing heavy pieces of the building to rain down on her. She dove for cover, but not before she was struck on the side of her head by a brick.

When the rumbling stopped, Gypsy was grateful to see that the steps leading upstairs were intact. When she climbed them and tried to open the door, it wouldn't budge. She worked for hours trying to alert the rescuers to her presence, but nothing had worked. She was buried under too much wreckage for anyone to hear her.

When the rest of the building collapsed a couple of hours later, Gypsy was taken by surprise as everything from bricks, metal chairs and tables, to roof shingles and shattered glass fell on top of her. Unable to take cover, she was buried under thousands of pounds of the building's remains.

When Gypsy came to, she found herself pinned painfully under the bulk of a large beam. The end of it was resting on what was left of the basement wall, taking some of the weight off of her body. Had it not been for the wall, she was sure she would've been crushed to death.

Unable to move the beam and barely able to breathe, Gypsy closed her eyes and convinced herself that she was

going to die. Her last thoughts had been of Reb as she drifted back into unconsciousness.

* * * *

Gypsy thought she was dreaming, but as she slowly regained consciousness, she realized it really was Reb calling her name. He told her to hang on; he said he was coming to get her.

"Gypsy?"

"It's dark down here, Reb," she cried.

"I know. It's all right. I'll be there in a minute. Just keep talking to me, so I can follow your voice."

She sniffed. "Okay."

"Can you move?"

"No. There's a ... a beam on top of me."

"Jesus," he muttered. "Does anything hurt?"

"My left side," she paused, "and my head."

Rebel reached the bottom and shined his flashlight across the floor, searching for Gypsy. "Talk to me, Gypsy, honey. Where are you?"

"Over here."

Rebel turned the light to his right, and there she was. Her face was filthy; the only clean spots were two white streaks down the sides where tears had washed away the dirt. She was lying on the floor in a small pool of blood from the cut on her head; the support beam was halfway across her body.

Gypsy burst into tears again the second she spotted Rebel. He was on the floor kneeling by her side before she had the

chance to utter a single word. "It's okay," he said, brushing the hair away from her face. "I'll get you out of here."

Still crying, she nodded.

Rebel crawled over to inspect the part of Gypsy's body the beam was lying on and grimaced when he noticed it was directly against her ribcage. He stood up to examine the beam then knelt beside her again. "Do you think you can move?"

Gypsy could tell by the slow monotone sound of Reb's voice that he was trying to hide his worry. The situation had to be much worse than she thought for him to be so worried. That scared her even more. "I ... I don't know," she said and began sobbing.

"Listen, Gypsy," he said harshly. "I know you're scared. Hell, when this whole thing's over I'll sit down and cry right along with you. But I know you. You're tough and you're brave. And right now, I need you to be both. Turn off the waterworks. You can cry later."

Suddenly, Sean's words, "Rebel McCassey doesn't start trouble, he finishes it," echoed in her mind. Reb had come here to save her. He'd risked his life to climb down into the basement of a collapsed building because he wanted her to be safe. At the very least, she should do as he asked. With one final sniff, she wiped at her tears and managed a slight smile. "Okay."

"Good girl." Rebel flashed a quick grin and tucked his flashlight into the side pocket of his coveralls. "Now ... I'm going to lift this beam. As soon as it's in the air, I want you to scoot out from under it. Can you do that?" He was talking to

her like she was a child, but she knew he was only trying to keep her calm.

"I can do it."

"All right, here we go." Rebel braced his shoulder against the beam to get leverage, grunting as he lifted it into the air.

With his left leg bent in front and his right one behind him to keep from sliding, he raised his arms all the way above his head to give Gypsy enough room to free herself. When the beam was as high as he could get it, Gypsy choked back her cries of pain and moved as far away as she could.

Gasping for air, she let Reb know she was free.

"Good," he said. "I'm going to count to three and let this thing go. It's probably going to stir up some dust and cause a few things to fall, so I want you to bend your head toward the floor as much as you can without hurting your ribs and cover it with your arms. Are you ready?"

"Wait!"

"Gypsy, I'm strong enough to lift this beam over my head with no trouble, but I ain't Superman," he said, his voice laced with strain. "This thing is getting pretty damn heavy, honey. What is it?"

Gypsy swallowed the lump in her throat. "Just in case the whole upstairs caves in and crushes us when you let go of the beam, I don't want to die without letting you know that I love you," she whispered. "And thank you for saving me."

"Damn," he cursed with an obvious hint of humor. "I wanted to be the first one to say it. I love you, too, darlin'," he said with a softness Gypsy had never heard. "But don't

thank me yet. The whole building could come crashing down when I let go of this thing. Are you ready?"

"I'm ready."

And with that, Rebel counted to three and let go. The building started to rumble and shake as he dove toward Gypsy. Shielding her body with his, she heard him whisper a prayer to a dozen saints she'd never even heard of to keep them from being crushed to death.

Judd raced to the basement door and started calling his brother's name when the floor began to move. "Rebel! Where the hell are you?"

"I'm here!" Rebel shouted when everything stopped moving. "I've got Gypsy. We're coming up."

Judd shined his light into the basement. "The steps are still standing," he called to his brother, "but you'd better hurry, they don't look too steady."

"Did you hear that, Gypsy? We have to go now."

It was getting hotter by the minute down there, and Gypsy watched Rebel run a hand through his sweat-soaked hair before helping her stand. The pain caused her to be unsteady on her feet, but she managed to follow slowly behind Reb as he picked up debris and tossed it aside, clearing a path for her to walk. They were no more than a few yards from the stairs, but it took them nearly ten minutes to get there.

"Judd! Start clearing some kind of a path to that hole we crawled through to get in here. Gypsy's hurt pretty bad. I'm going to have to carry her out."

Judd did the best he could clearing a walkway as Rebel and Gypsy made their way up the steps, but it didn't do much

good. There was just too much rubble and nowhere to put it. When he heard them at the top of the stairs, he moved toward the doorway as fast as the piles of wreckage would allow.

"Light the way!" Rebel shouted, tossing his flashlight to Judd. He untied the rope from around his waist and scooped Gypsy into his arms.

She wrapped her arms around Reb's neck and held on tight as he followed Judd, carefully stepping over whatever was in his way. When they finally made it out, waiting paramedics tore Gypsy from Rebel's arms and rushed her to an ambulance.

"Reb!" she called desperately.

"I'm here, Gypsy. I'm right behind you." Rebel stood just outside the ambulance doors as the EMT's worked on her, the look on his face daring anyone to tell him to move. Moments later, he was joined by Judd and their three cousins.

"You want to ride with her?" someone from inside the ambulance asked him.

Without hesitation, Rebel climbed in.

"We'll meet you at the hospital," Judd shouted just before the back doors of the vehicle closed.

Lying on the stretcher covered by a blanket, Gypsy opened her eyes long enough to see Reb smile. "You have a nasty gash on the back of your head, and the paramedics think you might have a couple of broken ribs," he told her. "But you're going to be fine."

"Thanks to you," she whispered. "You saved me."

He took hold of her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. "I'll always be here to save you, Gypsy. I love you."

Those were the last words Gypsy heard before she gave in to fatigue and passed out.

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Chapter 8

When Gypsy opened her eyes, she was lying in a hospital bed. The clock on the wall read two in the morning.

Reb was dozing in the chair next to her and Judd, Brady, Kane, and Flynn were sound asleep, slumped in chairs lining the wall on the opposite side of the room. The instant she stirred, Reb opened his eyes.

"Hey," he said.

She attempted a smile. "What's everyone doing in here?"

"Waiting for you to wake up."

Gypsy took a look around the room. "I don't want to stay here, Reb. I want to go home."

He sat up straight and ran a hand through his hair.

"Gypsy, you have two broken ribs and a mild concussion. You also have thirty-two stitches holding the gash on the side of your head closed—"

Panicked, Gypsy's hand suddenly flew to the side of her head. She'd seen how doctors shaved patient's heads when they needed stitches. Afraid she'd lost half of her curls, she tried feeling around the wound, but Reb reached out and stopped her.

"Don't mess with it," he warned, "you don't want to reopen that cut."

"But—"

"Don't worry, darlin', they only shaved a small area. With all that hair you have, no one will be able to see a thing."

Relieved she wasn't bald, Gypsy sighed deeply, but still couldn't relax. "I want to go home," she repeated.

"No way. You belong in the hospital ... at least for tonight."

"Please, Reb." Her voice rose as she started to panic again, waking the four sleeping men on the other side of the room. "Get me out of here."

"All right, all right," he gave in, after a few moments of silence. "Judd, go see if you can find a doctor, Gypsy wants to go home."

Judd jumped out of his chair and raced from the room. He was only gone a minute, during which time Rebel threatened to make her stay in the hospital if she didn't calm down.

"The doctor said he'd be by in a minute," he said, reclaiming his chair. "You're one famous woman, Gypsy. There must be fifty reporters in the hall waiting to talk to you."

All five men watched in apparent dismay as the color drained from Gypsy's face.

"No." She shook her head. "No reporters." She turned to Rebel and made a desperate plea. "Please," she begged, "make them go away."

Why, Gypsy wondered, hadn't it occurred to him that the reason she didn't want to talk to reporters was because they might use her name in a story, or worse, her picture? If any information about her wound up in the paper, there was a chance her father would see it. Then he would know where to come looking for her.

"No worries, Gypsy," Rebel said as if suddenly understanding. "I'll take care of it."

When he left the room, Gypsy turned to the four curious faces staring at her. It was Judd that finally spoke. "Um, Gypsy..."

"I don't want to talk about it!" She cut him off.

It probably hadn't taken much for Judd and the others to figure out that Gypsy was hiding something. But from everything she'd heard about them, she knew there was a pretty good chance each one of them had a thing or two they didn't want anyone else to know. Praying they wouldn't start playing Twenty Questions, Gypsy continued to stare at Judd without blinking.

"We just wanted you to know that we're glad you're okay."

She had a feeling that wasn't exactly what he'd been planning to say and was grateful to him for respecting her privacy.

When Rebel returned, he looked curiously from his family to Gypsy. "What's going on?"

"Nothing, bro. We just told Gypsy that we're glad she's okay."

Rebel glanced at Gypsy. She knew he was looking for conformation that nothing had happened, so she nodded. He seemed satisfied, at least for the moment, and she was grateful when he let it go.

"I ran into your doctor in the hall," Reb told her. "He said he'd discharge you if I promised to watch over you for the next few days. The reporters are gone, but I don't know for how long. So let's get you dressed and out of here before they come back."

The look of gratitude on Gypsy's face said it all, but she thanked him anyway. "I don't know what I would've done if I'd had to stay here."

"Just seeing you relax is thanks enough for me, darlin'. It even makes up for having to deal with that arrogant doctor of yours. I had to threaten the man with physical harm before he agreed to let you go home."

Gypsy's eyes widened, but she didn't say anything. She knew Rebel's days of getting what he wanted by threatening people were long gone, and that he normally wouldn't have done such a thing. But he knew how desperate she was to leave. And she was grateful he'd fixed it so she wouldn't have to spend one more minute in the hospital.

Rebel tossed her a large pair of white nurse's scrubs and flashed the boys a dirty look. "A little privacy, please."

Judd, Brady, Kane, and Flynn practically tripped over each other trying to get out the door.

When just the two of them were left, Rebel sat down on the edge of Gypsy's bed as she tried to figure out how to put on the scrubs. "Sorry about the size. It was all they had. You need some help?"

She nodded. "Please."

Reaching behind her, Rebel untied the hospital gown then turned his back so she could put the top on.

As she gingerly worked her way into the shirt, Gypsy wondered—if the situation hadn't been serious and she wasn't so desperate to leave the hospital—whether or not Rebel would've turned away. She hadn't forgotten that they'd declared their love for each other in the basement of the

diner. And even being as scared as she was right now, Gypsy couldn't shake her nervous excitement; Reb standing beside her while she was only half-dressed was making her insides tingle.

After helping her step into the pants, Reb opened the door and brought in a wheelchair.

Gypsy took one look at the chair, placed her hands on her hips, and shook her head. "No way, Rebel. I am not riding in that thing."

He smiled at her defiance. "Sorry, darlin', hospital rules. If you don't ride, you don't leave."

Gypsy reluctantly gave in and walked slowly across the floor, carefully planting herself in the chair. When she was seated comfortably, Rebel walked around and knelt beside her. "You didn't want to talk to the reporters because you're afraid that if your name gets in the paper, your father might see it. Am I right?"

She bent her head and looked down at the floor. "He's going to know where to find me now."

He put a finger under her chin and tilted it back up until she was looking into his eyes. "Gypsy, I love you. And I'll always do everything in my power to make sure no one hurts you. Do you understand?"

She nodded. "I understand. I love you, too."

He took her hand in his. "No matter how hard you try, it's going to be almost impossible to keep your name out of the papers. You know that, don't you?"

"I know."

"Whatever happens, Gypsy, we'll deal with it together. Okay?"

Gypsy wished she had a little more fight left in her, but right now she just wanted to get out of the hospital, go home, and lose herself in the safety and comfort of Rebel's strong arms. "Okay."

"Good. Now, first thing's first. The power's out at the garage, but I'm going to take you there to stay with me anyway."

"How come?"

"Because it may not be safe for you to stay in your apartment alone. I have to work and help the guys put the garage back together, but I want you close enough where I can keep an eye on you."

"Do you really think my father will come after me?"

"You can answer that question better than I can. But if what you've told me about him is true, I'd say it's a very real possibility."

Gypsy closed her eyes and bent forward. Rebel moved closer so she could lean on him. "Why, Reb? Why is this happening? My worst nightmare is coming true and there's nothing I can do about it. I'd hoped that by leaving Baltimore I might be free of my father. Now he's going to be led right to me."

"It'll be okay, Gypsy," he promised, "in the end, everything will be okay."

She nodded. "I hope you're right."

"I don't like to make promises without knowing exactly what I'm up against, but you've got my word, Gypsy. I'll do whatever it takes to keep you safe."

"I know you will, and I love you for it. But what about my stuff?" she asked. "There are a few things I'm going to need."

"You can make a list when we get to the garage. After I get you settled, I'll send Judd and one of the boys over to pick up your things."

Warning bells went off in her head. "But what will your brother and cousins think when they see my empty apartment? I know they've already figured out that I'm hiding something. Am I going to have to tell them everything now?" she asked, her voice just as panic stricken as when she first awoke. "This is all happening so fast that I can't even think straight."

Rebel tilted his head to the side and placed a light kiss on her cheek. "I know you didn't want anyone to know your secrets, darlin', but we need to let everyone know what's going on."

"Everyone?"

"Not everyone, just the guys who work at the garage, including Jimmy and Frank. They need to know ... just in case."

Gypsy's head snapped up. "Just in case what?"

"In case of trouble, Gypsy. They can't help you if they don't know something's wrong."

"Why?" She didn't understand. "Why would they want to help me?"

"I told you months ago, you're family now. And family takes care of each other. Why the hell do you think the boys were asleep in those chairs over there instead of outside getting drunk in the bed of my pickup truck?"

He gave his head a slight shake when she shrugged. "It breaks my heart that you've never experienced what it's like to be part of a family, to have people care and worry about you. And they do care about you, Gypsy. Each one of them refused to leave when the doctor tried to throw us out of here. I know you've got issues with trust. But my family and I won't betray you. Accepting help from people isn't a sign of weakness."

Gypsy actually smiled. "I can only imagine what a hard time you all must have given the doctor when he tried to get you to leave. You're all such good men. And that's exactly why I don't want anyone putting themselves in danger for me. I'll handle this problem alone, just like I've always done."

Looking puzzled, he stared at her.

"They don't even really know me," she explained. "And it isn't fair to make them feel obligated to help me."

"They've known you for months, Gypsy." Seemingly angered by her resistance, he yelled. "They like you; and they're going to watch out for you whether you want them to or not! So it would be a good idea to let them know what kind of trouble might be coming. Don't you think?"

Gypsy was silent for a long moment. "I guess I can't argue with that," she gave in. "But you have to understand something, Reb." She looked up into those McCassey royal blue eyes. "This is all new to me. You've always had people to

watch your back, but in the past twenty-four hours, I've gone from not wanting to rely on anyone else to being completely dependant on an entire family. I hate knowing I might not be able to take care of myself if something happens. But you're right. I know the boys won't betray me, so let's tell them."

Rebel nodded his approval and turned the wheelchair toward the door. "We'll do it once we get back to the garage. I don't want you anywhere near here when those reporters start sniffing around again."

* * * *

Judd and the rest of the boys rode in the bed of the pickup truck on the way to the garage, so Gypsy and Rebel could have some time to themselves.

In order to be able to drive through the part of town that hadn't been cleaned up yet, Rebel was forced to slow the truck to a crawl and lower the snowplow. He pushed debris to the side of the road, clearing a narrow path for the truck. He saw Gypsy close her eyes as they approached the diner, and was thankful when they finally pulled into the dark parking lot of the garage.

Outlaw ran out to meet them, and Judd showered the dog with attention as Rebel helped Gypsy out of the truck. One by one, Brady, Kane, and Flynn jumped from the back. They were met by Frank and Jimmy, each holding a flashlight.

"It's three o'clock in the morning," Frank said, shining his light on the truck. "We didn't expect to see you boys until sometime tomorrow."

"We came to clean up," Brady told him.

"In the middle of the night? There's no power, and it's too damn dark in there to see anything. You all might as well go on home."

"Aw, shit," Kane complained. "I don't feel like walking all the way home, I was counting on crashing here tonight."

Gypsy turned to Reb. "We could all stay at my place."

He looked at her in surprise.

"I know it's small, but if the guys don't mind sleeping on the floor..."

"Hell, I'm all for that," Kane yelled and jumped back into the truck's bed. "Let's go to Gypsy's."

"Shut the hell up," Reb scolded, and Kane immediately stopped talking. Reb turned to Gypsy. "Are you sure this is what you want?" he asked, knowing that once the others saw her empty apartment, there'd be no turning back; she would be forced to explain everything.

"I'm sure. I want to tell them what they need to know before I lose my nerve."

"All right, all of you back in the truck. We'll spend the rest of the night at Gypsy's apartment and come back here at first light."

"No hurry," Frank told them. "We're heading out, too. Let's meet back here around noon. Outlaw can take care of things until then."

At the sound of his name, the dog let loose with a loud bark as if to assure them that the garage and its contents would be fine.

Since Gypsy was almost asleep by the time they arrived at her apartment, Rebel eased her out of the truck and carried

her upstairs. He tucked her into the sleeping bag and whispered, "We're all going out for a smoke," even though he knew she didn't hear him. He brushed the hair away from her face and softly kissed her lips. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

The electricity was out at the apartment, too, so before he left, Rebel lit one of Gypsy's candles and placed it on the bedroom windowsill. He didn't want her to be scared if she woke up before he came back inside.

On his way out to the living room, Rebel decided he was going to have to be the one to tell his family what was going on with Gypsy. The guys had been nice enough not to say anything about the empty apartment when they first walked in, but he knew they were curious.

Shining his flashlight on the four men sitting in the dark on the living room floor, he motioned toward the door. "Let's go outside for a smoke."

They walked single file out of the building and stopped outside at the bottom of the concrete steps. Four of them stood in a line leaning on the brick half-wall. Rebel stood in front.

Brady dug a pack of Marlboro's out from the front pocket of his jeans and passed it down the line, each cousin taking a cigarette, striking a match, and inhaling deeply as he lit up.

When the pack got to Judd, he lit an extra one, handed it to Rebel, and asked the question that was on everyone's mind. "Why's her place so empty?"

"It's a long story."

"In your whole life, bro, you've never worried about anything until it's been absolutely necessary. What's eatin' you?"

Rebel raised his head and looked over at his family. They were a motley crew; that was for sure. There was Flynn, the quiet, skinny nineteen-year-old who puzzled them all, and Brady and Kane, who spent as much time bickering and goofing off as they did working.

Then there was Judd.

Rebel and Judd had always had a unique relationship. As kids, they'd nearly killed each other a dozen times; the ten months that separated them being the fuel that fed their raging sibling rivalry. They found common ground as teenagers, partying and stirring up trouble with the rest of their cousins, but then they'd gone down different roads.

By age twenty, Rebel had grown tired of loose women throwing themselves at him, messing around with the law, and the alcohol induced hazes he was always trapped in the mornings after hard nights of partying.

Now, even at thirty-one, Judd still hadn't outgrown the wild life. He worked as hard as anyone else at the garage during the day, but as soon as it was quitting time, he took off and caused trouble with the rest of the McCassey's who'd yet to calm down. They'd all gotten into a lot of trouble over the years, and the task of rescuing them usually fell to Rebel.

Somehow, he'd become their unofficial leader. His cousins all looked up to him, even the older ones. He hadn't asked for the job, even occasionally resented it. But when push came to

shove, he was always there when they needed him. That's how he knew they'd be there for Gypsy now.

Cigarette in hand, Rebel sat down on the steps and brought his knees to his chest. In a weary voice, he launched into Gypsy's story. He included everything; her mother's murder, her father's threat to kill her, and all the different foster homes. He even threw in the fact that she'd never had any friends and why. To save her from further embarrassment—if that was possible—Rebel left out the part about her almost being raped.

"I'm sorry, bro," Judd said sincerely. "Gypsy always seems so happy. It's hard to believe she's been through all that. She doesn't deserve to have it so rough."

"No, she doesn't." Rebel took a long drag on his cigarette. "And I have a feeling the worst isn't over. Gypsy's father's probably pretty close to being released from prison, if he hasn't been already." Rebel took another long drag. "And my gut tells me that if Gypsy's name winds up in tomorrow morning's paper, which it probably will, he'll come here looking for her. But as sure as I'm sitting here, I'll kill that bastard before I let him lay a hand on her."

"He'd have to get through all of us to hurt her," Judd said. "And that'll never happen."

"That's right, Rebel," Kane added, his voice void of its usual humor. "No one gets past the McCassey boys. We'll keep Gypsy safe."

Brady and Flynn ended the conversation by echoing their cousin's statement.

Judd sat down on the step next to his brother, made a fist, and held it out in front of him. The gesture was something Rebel and his two brothers had done since they were kids. It was their silent way of saying all for one, and one for all. "No worries."

Rebel didn't want to thank Judd for offering his help because he hoped to hell he wouldn't need it. Instead, he touched his brother's fist with his own, saying nothing.

* * * *

Saturday morning dawned as dreary as Friday night had ended. It was hot and humid again, the skies dark with another approaching storm. Although it wasn't raining yet, thunder rumbled loudly.

Gypsy stirred awake early, the pain from her broken ribs making it almost impossible to get comfortable. To her right, Rebel was sound asleep in his filthy coveralls.

Still wearing the nurse's scrubs, she was desperate to get washed, dressed, and into some of her own clothes. Having lost one of her knapsacks and a complete change of clothing when the diner collapsed, the only clothes she had left were two pair of cut-off jean shorts, one pair of long pants, her overalls, and a few T-shirts.

"Where are you going?" Rebel asked when she stood up.

"Sorry," she whispered. "I didn't mean to wake you."

He sat up and reached for his boots. "Don't worry about it. I'm surprised I was asleep with all the rumbling going on outside."

Her face blanched. "Are you worried about the weather? Do you think we'll have another tornado?"

Rebel pulled on one boot, then the other. He tied the long laces in double knots, stood, and held out his arms. Gypsy walked into them and received a gentle hug.

"The weather's the least of our problems," he told her. "Right now, I'm more interested in what's in the morning paper."

Gypsy's knees weakened, and she had to hold onto Reb for support. She'd almost forgotten about the reporters. What was she going to do if her name was plastered all over the front page? And what if her father saw it?

"Mrs. Gibson across the hall gets The Record Herald on the weekends, and she's never up before noon," Gypsy explained. "I'm sure she wouldn't mind if we read her paper as long as we put it back before she gets up."

Rebel nodded. "I'll go get it. You need a hand getting dressed?"

She managed a half-smile. This wasn't exactly how she'd planned on having Reb see her bare body for the first time, but she didn't have a choice. Her sore ribs made it hard to move.

"Just with my shirt, if you don't mind. And maybe you could check the bandage on my ribs, it feels loose."

As if undressing injured women was something he did everyday, Rebel carefully removed Gypsy's shirt and gently ran his hands along the bandage to make sure it was securely fastened. She was grateful he pretended not to notice the uncomfortable look on her face and the tear that slipped

down her cheek as she stared at the wall on the opposite side of the room. The pain in her side, mixed with the embarrassment of having to turn to someone else for help was almost too much for Gypsy to handle. She was relieved when Reb finally pulled the T-shirt over her head. After helping to guide her arms into the sleeves, he excused himself and left the room so she could change her shorts.

After waking the guys asleep in the living room, Rebel retrieved the newspaper from across the hall. Just as he'd feared, the tornado was front page news. Even worse, the reporter had written all about how he and Judd had risked their lives to pull Gypsy from the wreckage of the diner.

"Damn!"

"They mentioned my name, didn't they?" Gypsy asked as she walked into the room.

"I didn't mean for you to find out this way, but yeah, your name's in here. Mine, too. And Judd's. There's a story about the three of us on page two."

He held the paper in the air for Gypsy to see, just as she lowered her head and buried her face in her hands. "Why? Why couldn't the reporters just leave us alone?"

Rebel tossed the paper to his brother and walked to Gypsy. He put his right arm around her shoulders and carefully drew her close. "Freedom of the press, darlin'. They have the right to print anything they want."

"It's not fair," she cried.

"No, it isn't. But there's not a damn thing we can do about it."

Scared of what could possibly happen to her, Gypsy looked to Rebel for reassurance. His hands cupped her face, and he looked into her eyes. "Nothing's going to happen to you. I promise."

Judd cleared his throat, interrupting their tender exchange. "We're all going to back to town so you two can settle everything here."

Without taking his gaze off Gypsy, Rebel waved to his brother and cousins as they quietly slipped out the door.

After regaining her composure, Gypsy spent the next half hour gathering her meager belongings so Reb could load them into the bed of his pickup truck. When everything was secure, he went back inside to help close the blinds and tend to a few last minute details ... including returning Mrs. Gibson's newspaper.

Despite the circumstances, Gypsy decided she was excited about moving in with Rebel, even if she was a little sad at the way it had come about. They loved each other and probably would've moved in together eventually. Still, part of her couldn't help but wonder if he was going to resent having to look over his shoulder all the time. He was a busy man, yet bound and determined to protect her from anyone and anything that could possibly harm her.

She'd never had such unconditional love, and cherished the feelings Reb had for her. That's exactly why, at the first sign of trouble, she'd be gone.

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Chapter 9

McCassey's Garage was up and running two days after the tornado had devastated parts of downtown Hagerstown. Refusing to live with Reb without doing something to earn her keep, Gypsy insisted that he accept her help at the garage. Although Reb thought that was ridiculous, he told Gypsy he understood her need to feel useful and gave her a job helping Frank's wife, Rose, answer phones and book appointments. As it turned out, Rose couldn't have gotten by without the younger woman's help. In addition to their regular customers, the garage was swamped with calls from people whose cars had been damaged by the tornado's flying debris.

Gypsy and Rebel both enjoyed the living arrangements, and found that no matter how much time they spent together, it never seemed to be enough. They shared his king-sized bed at night, platonically for the moment, because of her broken ribs. But with each passing night, Rebel found it harder and harder to keep his hands off her.

Gypsy knew he wanted to make love to her. And although she wanted the same thing, she was nervous because she'd never been with a man before. Reb was definitely the right man for her, and she promised herself that by the time the doctor gave her the okay to participate in physical activity, she'd be ready.

During the three weeks it took Gypsy's ribs to heal, she was content sitting behind a desk and answering phones. The days passed quickly, and she felt like she was contributing

something to Reb and his family in exchange for all they were doing for her. However, even after the doctor had given Gypsy a clean bill of health, Rebel was still refusing to let her do anything or go anywhere by herself.

"Rebel, please," she pleaded as he bent over the engine of a car. "I just want to go pick up lunch."

"Today's Monday," he shouted from underneath the hood. "It's Judd's turn."

"Then can I at least go with him? It's been weeks since I've been out of the garage for more than five minutes. I'm going stir crazy in here!"

Covered in grease, Rebel put the torque wrench he was holding into the back pocket of his coveralls and wiped his hands on a rag.

Gypsy could tell by the look on his face that his answer was going to be no. Frustrated because she felt he didn't understand her needs, she sighed, put her hands on her hips and glared at him.

Then she noticed he was still holding the oily rag.

Seething with anger, Gypsy reached out, grabbed it from his hand, and shook it at him. "I do not need a babysitter, Rebel McCassey!" Turning on her heel, she stormed toward the open bay door, almost colliding with Frank, who was walking inside.

"What's up, Gypsy? Where are you going?" Frank asked, innocently.

"Out!" she called without looking back. But the hysterical laughter coming from Brady and Kane stopped her. She'd picked up some highly colorful language hanging around the

garage, and would've used it on them if she hadn't still been holding the oily rag. Crumpling it into a ball, she turned toward the two cousins and hurled it at them. Kane stepped to the side as the rag sailed by and landed on the floor between him and Brady. "Oh, get back to work!" Gypsy yelled, then to Reb's older brother, said. "Let's go, Judd."

* * * *

Rebel had known the moment he saw Gypsy's expression that he should let her go. He had no real claim to her and no right to tell her what to do. Yet, ever since she'd gotten hurt, she'd listened and followed his orders about not going anywhere alone. He admitted that she did need to get out, but she wasn't safe out in the open, especially with Judd. He was too impulsive in dangerous situations to be able to protect her.

Rebel didn't want Gypsy leaving, but he knew by the intensity of her outburst that there was no stopping her. So he decided to let her go, hoping the time away would help her cool off.

Had the situation not been so serious, he would have admired her spirit and the fearless way she'd stood up to him. But every minute she was in public, Gypsy was in danger of being spotted by her father, or anyone he'd sent looking for her. When she returned from picking up lunch, Rebel was going to remind her just exactly how much danger she was in.

Looking from Judd to Gypsy's retreating figure and back again, Rebel stared at Judd, who had yet to follow Gypsy, silently instructing his brother to keep a close eye on her.

Judd nodded and walked outside.

Although Brady was still laughing after Judd and Gypsy were gone, he was half-heartedly trying to work. Kane, however, was more interested in ragging on his cousin. "Man, I heard them red heads have fiery tempers," he teased. "She sure told you, Rebel!"

She sure had. But Rebel wasn't about to admit it to those two fools. Instead, he reached into his back pocket, pulled out the wrench he'd placed there earlier, and threw it across the garage where it landed with a loud clank against Kane's tool cabinet. "Shut the fuck up, or you're both fired!" he yelled, which successfully put an end to Kane's smartass comments.

* * * *

Gypsy climbed up into the tow truck next to Rebel's brother, and he pulled out of the parking lot headed for Pizza Hut.

"That sure was something, Gypsy," Judd said, grinning. "Remind me never to make you mad."

At the sound of Judd's voice, Gypsy turned to look at him, suddenly realizing that with the exception of that day in the diner, this was the first time the two of them had ever been alone. Unsure of what to say, she guessed offering an apology for her outburst was a good start. "I'm sorry, Judd. I shouldn't have yelled like that."

Still grinning, Judd shook his head. "You don't need to apologize to me, girl. Other than Blackie, you're the only person I know who's ever yelled at Rebel and lived to tell about it. Watching that was more fun than I've had in a long time."

Gypsy smiled at him. After observing Judd for the past few months, she'd learned two things about him. The first was that Judd knew people were afraid of him and seemed to enjoy doing his best to live up to his bad reputation.

But that was only around people other than his family.

Because the second thing was that Judd, along with every other McCassey she'd met, was extremely loyal to his family. They put each other first before anything else, including business. When he was at the garage, Judd was one of the guys. He laughed and joked around with everyone, including her, yet she still got the feeling he was more sensitive than he let on.

"Rebel loves you, Gypsy," Judd said, breaking into her thoughts. "He just wants to make sure you stay safe."

"I love him, too. But it's been almost a month since the tornado and no one's come looking for me."

"Yet."

Her heart fell into the pit of her stomach. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Aw shit, Gypsy, I shouldn't have said anything. It's not my place to get into this with you."

"Well, it's too late now," she huffed, "spit it out."

He gave her a sideways glance. "Fine. Rebel's gonna kick my ass for upsetting you, but here it is. You shouldn't be

under the impression you're safe. Just because there hasn't been any trouble from your father so far doesn't mean there won't be. He might just be biding his time, waiting to come after you when you least expect it."

"Oh God, I hadn't thought of that! No wonder Reb doesn't want me going anywhere alone. And I yelled at him for it! How could I have been so stupid? For all we know, someone was watching the garage, just waiting to catch me by myself."

Judd reached across the bench seat and gently squeezed her hand, causing her to flinch. "I didn't mean to scare you, Gypsy. But you need to understand that Rebel's a smart man. He never does anything unless it's for a good reason. If he wants you to stick close by, you should listen to him. It's for your own good."

Gypsy was quiet the rest of the way to Pizza Hut as she mulled over Judd's words. Were he and Reb right? Was her father hanging back, waiting for just the right moment to sneak into town and kill her?

No longer concerned for her own safety, Gypsy's thoughts turned to Reb. She knew he'd stop at nothing to protect her, and she suddenly felt sick to her stomach as she realized what needed to be done.

If she wasn't in town when her father came looking for her, Reb wouldn't have to protect her. He wouldn't be in danger. He was the only person to ever show genuine love and concern for her, and she loved him too much to let him get hurt.

"...to get the pizza. Gypsy?"

Gypsy whipped her head around when she realized Judd had been talking to her. "What?"

"I said ... I'm gonna run inside and pick up the pizza." He gave her a questioning look. "Are you okay?"

She nodded slightly and forced a smile. "Fine."

Judd squinted and looked at her with an accusing stare. "I don't believe you." When she didn't respond, he added, "I'll be right back," then opened the door and climbed out of the tow truck. Gypsy watched as he lit a cigarette and tossed the pack onto the seat. "Don't move," he ordered, then slammed the door and walked inside the restaurant.

As soon as he was out of sight, Gypsy pulled the handle of the passenger-side door and opened it just enough to slip out. She took a deep breath and told herself, "It's now or never," knowing this would probably be her only opportunity to slip away unnoticed. Back at the garage, there would be a dozen pair of eyes watching her and escape would be impossible.

She had no idea where she was going or what she would do when she got there, but that could all be worked out later. Right now, the most important thing was keeping Rebel and his family safe, which meant she had to get out of town. Sneaking around to the side of the building, she walked up the small incline to the main road and stuck out her thumb.

As the minutes passed, she couldn't figure out why so many cars were passing her by. Then she heard a familiar voice behind her. "Just what the hell do you think you're doing?"

Gypsy whirled around and saw Rebel standing five feet away, arms crossed, looking madder than she'd ever seen him. "How long have you been standing there?"

"Long enough to know you're trying to hitch a ride," he said angrily. "Where's Judd?"

It was then that Gypsy spotted Judd walking toward them wearing the same angry look as his brother. Knowing all hell was probably about to break loose, she pointed in his direction. "Right behind you."

The two waited quietly as Judd approached. When he reached them, Judd surprised his brother by lighting into him. "You could have at least come inside and let me know you were taking her!"

Rebel looked puzzled. "What?"

"It scared the shit out of me when I walked outside and she was gone. Why didn't you tell me you were leaving?"

Rebel turned his head slowly and glared at Gypsy. "Well, the man asked you a question. Why didn't you tell him you were leaving?"

"You mean she didn't leave with you?"

"No!" Rebel hissed. "I found her out here hitchhiking."

"Hitchhiking?" Scowling, Judd turned to Gypsy. "I told you to stay in the truck! For Christ's sake, Gypsy, I thought somebody grabbed you!"

"That's exactly why I left!" she yelled, startling both men. "It isn't your job to watch out for me, Judd. Or yours." She pointed to Reb. "Don't you understand? If my father comes looking for me and I'm not here, he'll just leave. But if I'm staying at the garage, he'll come after all of you, too. I

couldn't stand it if anything happened to any one in your family because of me." Directing her attention to Reb, she said, "Especially you."

When Rebel reached out and pulled her close, Gypsy knew his anger had faded. She wrapped her arms around his waist, not caring that traffic on the main road had slowed to watch them.

"Come on." Judd pushed them toward the parking lot. "We've given these people enough of a show."

When they reached the tow truck, Gypsy explained more about why she thought leaving town would keep everyone safe.

"But it won't keep you safe," Rebel reminded her. "I don't want you to be alone."

"I've been alone all my life, Reb. No one has ever really cared about me, except those who were paid to by Social Services. But then you came into my life and loved me for real. I can't fool myself into believing I'll be able to hide from my father forever. He'll find me eventually, and probably kill me like he promised to all those years ago."

Rebel took a step toward her, placed one finger under her chin and tilted her head until her gaze met his. "Don't give up that easily. I know you must be tired of running, Gypsy, so stay. Stay here with me and fight. I'll protect you."

Gypsy wanted to stay with all her heart. She hadn't known it was possible to be as happy as she was with Reb. He loved her, and she suddenly realized that not only did he want her to stay so she would be safe, but for his own happiness as well. Gypsy knew she had no right to deny him that

happiness, so she decided to stay. There was only one thing still bothering her.

As if he was reading her mind, Rebel shook his head. "I'll be fine, too. I promise."

She nodded. "Then I'll stay."

Rebel sighed and pulled her to him again. She buried her face in his chest and closed her eyes.

"But you have to trust me, okay? No going anywhere alone and no more running away. Got it?"

"I got it," she said, then remembered she owed him an apology. "Reb?"

"Hmm?"

"About before ... at the garage..."

Rebel chuckled. "Forget it, darlin'. I'm just sorry it took you standing in the middle of the garage shaking an oily rag in my face for me to realize you were right. You needed to get out. And from now on, when you want to go somewhere, I'll take you."

Rebel kissed the top of her head as he scanned the parking lot for Judd, who had silently retreated and was sitting on a bench by the Pizza Hut smoking a cigarette. Rebel gave Gypsy a final squeeze before releasing her and motioned for his brother to join them.

Judd walked over and leaned against the back of the tow truck. Gypsy cautiously approached him, praying he wasn't going to start yelling at her again. "I shouldn't have run away," she admitted. "I'm sorry for scaring you."

"You should be sorry, girl. My damn life flashed before my eyes when I thought I was going to have to tell Rebel I lost you."

Gypsy didn't know what to say until she saw the corners of Judd's mouth curve up into a smile. "So I'm forgiven?" she asked shyly.

"Yeah, but my chaperoning days are over. Next time you want to go out, tag along with someone else." Then he surprised her by leaning down and kissing her cheek. "No, worries," he whispered and looked at Reb. "I'll see you two later. I've got pizzas to deliver."

Rebel took Gypsy to Margie's Deli for lunch and they wandered back into the garage an hour after Judd had returned with the pizzas. No one bothered to give them a second glance when they came in, which Gypsy assumed meant that Rebel had probably threatened Brady and Kane with something after she left earlier. It also meant that, to his credit, Judd hadn't told anyone what happened at Pizza Hut. If he had, Gypsy had no doubt she would've had a thousand questions thrown at her, no matter what Reb had threatened to do to his cousins if they didn't get any work done.

* * * *

After Rose had gone home for the day, Gypsy sat behind her desk moping, questioning the decision she'd made to stay in town. Kane wasn't the only one to notice how unhappy she looked, but he was the only one with enough nerve to approach Rebel, who was under the hood of a car again with his head buried in the engine.

"Something happen at lunch today?" Kane asked his cousin.

"Whatever's on your mind, Kane, just spit it out. I'm in no mood to play games with you."

When Judd, Brady, and Flynn heard the exchange between the two cousins, they slowly made their way over until all four of them were standing just a few feet behind the car.

Kane winked at them and grinned. "Well, if you insist."

Annoyed, Rebel backed away from the car and stood upright. When he saw everyone staring at him, he knew he was about to be ambushed. He threw out a sarcastic, "What?" and waited to hear what they had to say.

Kane suggested a campout up on the hill behind their grandfather's barn. "Come on, man," he said, excitedly. "We'll take the girls up, a few cases of beer, a little Zeppelin..."

"A few joints," Rebel broke in. "Maybe a little drunken target practice ... no thanks, Kane. I'm done messing around with that shit."

"Aw, ain't none of us mess around with it anymore either, Rebel. It'll be good clean fun. I promise."

Rebel's gaze flew to Kane, who was grinning like a fox. Kane was only right about one thing. Everything the McCassey cousins did together was good fun, but nothing about any of it was clean. Rebel had gotten into more trouble than he cared to remember during their campouts, and had stopped taking chances with the law years ago.

"If you want to go camping, Kane, go ahead. You don't need my permission."

But Rebel knew he wanted it.

Still trying to convince his cousin, Kane added, "I'll even make sure Sheriff Johnson doesn't bother us."

Bile rose in the back of Rebel's throat at the mention of Sheriff Ben Johnson. He had grown up with Dolan McCassey, Rebel and Judd's father. Johnson hated every last one of the McCassey's for something that had gone on between him and Dolan decades earlier, and had spent the better part of his career trying to catch them in the act of doing something illegal. The big bust had always eluded him, but he'd gotten Rebel and a handful his cousins on a number of misdemeanors over the years.

Rebel reached into the back pocket of his sleeveless coveralls and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. Staring back at the anxious faces of his brother and cousins, he lit one and sat down to think.

Camping out with his family had been one of his favorite things to do as a kid. They'd all spread sleeping bags in the woods behind his grandfather's barn, light a campfire, and spend hours trying to scare each other in the dark. When they got older, their innocent fun gave way to dangerous games when they discovered alcohol and firearms. Still, those were some of the best times Rebel ever had.

He missed the fun that had come to an abrupt end when the boys were in their late teens and their grandfather's nearest neighbors started calling the police every time they heard gunfire.

Thinking about how much fun a campout would be, Rebel smiled to himself. It had been a long while since he and all his cousins were together. Gypsy would probably enjoy it too,

since she'd never been part of a real family. But even though it probably would be just good, clean, fun, he wasn't taking any chances.

Rebel put out his cigarette. "I'll take care of Sheriff Johnson," he told them. "Brady, Kane, spread the word. Flynn ... get beer." Suddenly remembering the gruesome experiences they'd had with moonshine as teenagers, he pointed at his cousin, saying adamantly, "And only beer. We'll meet behind Granddaddy's barn at ten. Not a minute before."

* * * *

By eight o'clock, Gypsy had showered, dressed in her only pair of jeans and old white T-shirt, and was hanging her head of thick curls upside down over the side of the bed waiting for it to dry.

Rebel entered the room wrapped in a towel from the waist down, his shoulder length hair still dripping. He took one look at Gypsy lying on her back and laughed. "What are you doing?"

She rolled over and sat up slowly. "My hair takes forever to dry. Sometimes hanging upside down speeds up the process."

"I see," Rebel said, still smiling as he walked to the dresser and opened the bottom drawer. He pulled out a hair dryer and threw it to her. "Try this next time."

"Thanks." She raised her arms and caught it in mid-air. "Don't tell me this is yours."

Rebel shook his head. "You won't find any beauty secrets here, darlin'. That contraption belongs to Flynn." He winked at her. "But you didn't hear it from me."

She thanked him again and walked down the hall to the bathroom. When her hair was dry, she returned to the apartment. Rebel was standing in front of the bed waiting for her, dressed and ready.

"I'm not used to seeing you wear anything other than mechanics coveralls," Gypsy commented, "you look really good."

Reb chuckled. "Thanks for the compliment. You don't look so bad yourself, darlin'."

"Maybe, but I'm sure those faded blue jeans clinging to your muscular legs wouldn't look nearly as good on me."

"Oh," he said with a sly grin as he touched his black sleeveless shirt—which revealed to Gypsy what she was used to seeing everyday; his tattoo, and large biceps and forearms. "But this would."

Rebel wrapped his arms around Gypsy and pulled her close, but she stopped him suddenly. "Hey, I didn't know you wore jewelry," she said when she noticed a thin silver chain around his neck.

His hand moved to the necklace. "My mom gave me this when I was ten. It used to be a lot bigger ... I've grown since then."

"It's nice. Do you wear it a lot?"

"All the time. The damn thing's soldered on."

"Why?" she asked.

"Because when Blackie was fifteen, he discovered our grandfather's soldering gun and decided to have a little fun. He stole a spool of solder from the hardware store and told me he could fix my necklace so it'd never fall off. Like an idiot, I let him do it."

"Well..." she said, defending him. "You were only ten."

"True. But you know what I got for my trouble?"

"I'm afraid to ask."

"You should be. Blackie dropped the gun on the back of my neck and I wound up with a second degree burn." Rebel sat on the edge of the bed and swept his hair, which was almost dry, away from his neck. "See?"

Gypsy climbed onto the bed behind Reb and propped herself up on her knees. She lightly ran her finger over the two-inch scar. "That must've hurt."

"Not more than your broken ribs, but enough to scare me away from playing with anything hot, or trusting my brother, for a long, long time."

He tried to turn around, but Gypsy leaned into him, forcing him to stay put. Her hair spilled over his shoulders as she lowered her head, softly kissing the back of his neck. A low groan escaped his lips as her hands roamed down his arms and across his chest.

With an overwhelming need to touch her, Rebel suddenly stood and turned around. "Do you have any idea what you do to me?" His question went unanswered as he kneeled on the bed and put his hands behind her head, drawing her to him.

His mouth claimed hers in a kiss that was slow and easy at first, deepening with every thrust of his tongue. When Rebel felt her body press against his, he nearly lost control.

Easing her onto the bed, time stood still as they touched and fondled each other. It wasn't until Outlaw started barking that Rebel remembered his brother was supposed to meet them at the garage.

He pulled away reluctantly, ending the kiss. "We have to stop, Gypsy. Judd's downstairs."

"He can wait," she whispered, trying to pull him close again.

"Of course he can ... for about two minutes. If we don't get down there, he'll find his way up here."

Frowning, she followed him when he climbed off the bed. They stopped in the doorway and shared one last kiss. "You ready to go?"

"I was," she said, "but I think I'd better look in the mirror first. I don't want to meet the rest of your family looking like I've been rolling around in bed."

"Take your time," he told her. "I need to talk to Judd anyway."

When Gypsy headed into the bathroom, Rebel went downstairs to meet his brother.

"Hey, bro. Where's Gypsy?"

"Getting dressed."

"We got time for a smoke?"

Rebel yelled to Gypsy that they needed a cigarette, and the brothers walked outside.

"How are you going to make sure Sheriff Johnson doesn't bother us?"

Reb laughed. "I'm going to make a little house call in about twenty minutes, insure that there's no possible way his squad car will be leaving the station tonight."

Judd smiled. "Need some help?"

"Nope, I got it covered. Just stay here and keep an eye on Gypsy for me, will you? I'll be back when I'm done, then we'll head up to the barn together."

"Sure thing, bro."

Judd and Gypsy only had to wait ten minutes for Rebel to return. He walked inside holding the spark plugs from Sheriff Johnson's car, causing Judd to break into a fit of laughter.

"The car won't start without these," Rebel explained to Gypsy, "and since Johnson doesn't know anything about cars, he won't know how to fix the problem."

"How do you know he doesn't know anything about cars?"

"Because he brings in his personal car—the one he drives when he's off duty—to be fixed every time it makes a strange noise. The problem last time was that one of the fan belts needed to be tightened. If he had half a brain, he could've fixed it himself; all he had to do was open the hood and pick up a wrench. Instead, he dropped off the car—swearing the entire time he was here that the engine sounded as if it was going to seize any minute—and thought nothing of paying the two hundred dollars I charged him when he came to pick it up."

Gypsy's eyes widened. "You charged him two hundred dollars to tighten a fan belt?"

"I would've charged him four if my conscious would've let me get away with it. He's done nothing since I was a kid but harass my family and cause us trouble. He's damn lucky I even agree to fix his car. And if he's too stupid and lazy to learn the basic mechanics of a car, then he deserves to be ripped off."

After clearing her throat, Gypsy took a deep breath. "I guess we're safe, then."

"Yup. Johnson won't be bothering us—or anyone else—tonight."

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Chapter 10

Gypsy stared straight ahead as Rebel drove his tow truck slowly along the one lane dirt road leading up the mountain. It was surrounded by trees, their full branches hanging low over the road, making the area so dark it was hard to see, even with headlights.

Near the top, he turned right and followed a long gravel driveway. When it ended directly in front of a large, white farmhouse, he made a quick left, which led to the backside of the barn where several pickup trucks were parked. Rebel pulled up next to the edge of the woods and shut down the engine. Judd jumped out of the passenger door and Gypsy climbed out behind him.

"Doesn't your grandfather mind you all having parties out here?" Gypsy asked.

Rebel unloaded two oversized sleeping bags from the bed of his tow truck and set them on the ground. "Not now that we're responsible enough not to set the whole mountain on fire," he told her. "But he used to run us off with a shotgun when we were younger ... if he knew we were here."

"Either that or a fire extinguisher," Judd explained. "Sometimes he'd come outside with one of those big ones you see in buildings, squirt us down, and chase us away."

Judd paused the story when he and Rebel were laughing too hard to talk, making Gypsy think how nice it would be to have just one memory she could laugh about.

"He was still farming back then," Rebel explained, after catching his breath, "and was scared to death we were going to burn down his whole crop. He doesn't care what we do now, but someone should go up to the house and let him know we're here. It's been a while since our last get together and I don't want him calling 911 thinking this is a brush fire."

Judd lit a cigarette. "I'll go. You take Gypsy out back and introduce her. Leave the bags. I'll get them."

When Judd took off running, Rebel grabbed onto Gypsy's hand and led her into the night. The walk was short, and when they reached the woods, someone shined a flashlight at them. It was Flynn.

"It's about time you two showed up," he teased. "Where's Judd?"

"He went up to tell Granddaddy we're here. I don't want any uninvited guests showing up. Where's the beer?"

"There's seven cases of Bud in the back of my truck," Flynn said and threw Rebel his keys.

"Christ, Flynn, why didn't you just get a keg?"

"It was too late. Cut Rate Liquors didn't have any left."

Rebel threw the keys back. "Then you should've tried another store."

He shrugged and tried unsuccessfully not to laugh. "Yeah, I guess I should've."

"Shut up and give me the damn lighter fluid," Rebel told him. "Let's get this party started."

Cheers went up from the large group of people sitting on the ground, and Gypsy backed away as Rebel caught the can Flynn tossed him. He opened it and drenched the small pile of

wood. Using a lighter to ignite the matchbook he'd taken from his back pocket, he tossed the flaming pack into the pile. The logs caught immediately, and just like that, they had their bonfire.

On his way back to Gypsy, Rebel was swarmed by a crowd of people. She watched as someone handed him a beer, and envied the way that they were all happy to see him. Watching the scene intently, she gasped when someone touched her arm.

"Easy, Gypsy," Judd said, raising his hands in the air. "It's just me." He offered her a can of beer. "Here, this'll settle you down."

Her eyes never leaving Rebel, she accepted it. "Thanks."

As she sipped the beer, Judd began pointing to each of his cousins, helping Gypsy put names with faces. "That's our cousin, Billy. Everyone calls him Tank because he's so big. And over there," he pointed to a slightly overweight woman with feathered blonde hair, "is his wife, Ann. She's big too, but nobody calls her anything because she'd kick our asses."

Gypsy laughed. The more time she spent with Judd, the more she liked him. She'd heard every horror story there was about the things he'd done, but they no longer bothered her. Deep down, Judd was a good man, and he'd treated her with nothing but respect since the day she defended him in the diner. He was a good brother to Rebel, too; they hadn't even had an argument since the day the three of them ran into each other in the woods. In fact, Gypsy realized, a brother was exactly how she'd come to think of him. Without even realizing it, she'd become part of a family.

Rebel joined them just as someone put Led Zeppelin in a portable cassette player. After giving Gypsy a quick kiss on the lips, he put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close. "Sorry I was gone so long," he apologized.

Gypsy didn't mind standing to the side waiting for him. She enjoyed watching him joke with and embrace the cousins he didn't see regularly. He made sure to stop and talk to each one of them, making it obvious how important family was to him. "It's okay. Judd kept me company."

"Thanks," Rebel told his brother. "That reminds me, what'd Granddaddy have to say?"

Judd grinned and took a long drink from his beer can before answering. "He said don't burn down the mountain, and bring Gypsy up to the house before you leave. He's curious about the woman whose tender love was able to tame his wild grandson."

Rebel gave his brother a playful punch in the arm. "Bullshit."

"Hey! Don't shoot the messenger, bro. You wanted to know what he said, and that's what he said."

"Fine. Since you opened your big mouth about her being here, you can join the two of us in the morning when we go up to say hello."

"No problem," he said, grinning again. "I didn't see any food in the back of your precious tow truck, and I'm getting too old to have beer for breakfast. We should go up around nine. Granddaddy's griddle ought to be hot and full of flapjacks by then." Judd winked at Gypsy and walked away.

"That boy should've been a lawyer," Rebel remarked. "He's got an answer for everything."

During the next few hours, Gypsy was introduced to so many people she didn't know how she'd remember all their names. Most of the men were McCassey cousins who'd brought along their wives or girlfriends.

"Don't you have any female relatives?" Gypsy asked when she and Rebel walked to Flynn's truck for another case of beer.

"A few," he told her. "But campouts were always a guy thing. None of the girls wanted to sleep outside with the bugs and wild animals."

"I'm guessing the wild animals we're talking about here were two legged and not four."

"You got it," he said, laughing as he dropped the tailgate of Flynn's pickup truck. "We were all hellions back then; each one of us wilder and more destructive than the next. The girls weren't really into that." Rebel hopped up into the bed and lifted two cases of beer from the large ice chest. Gypsy picked them up and set them on the ground. Rebel jumped down, closed the tailgate, and gave her a quick kiss. "Let's get this beer back before the natives get restless."

A case of beer in each hand, Rebel led the way back to the fire as Gypsy followed. By the time they returned, the large crowd had separated; couples were huddled together sitting close to the fire, and the handful of men who'd come alone—Judd, Flynn, and Brady included—were standing off to the side talking. Rebel sat down, ripped into the case and took

cans for himself and Gypsy. Then he passed it to Kane, who was sitting to his left.

After the beer was passed around, most of the couples got up and walked off into the darkness with their sleeping bags. "Are they going to sleep?" Gypsy asked.

"They're just going to find some privacy," Reb explained. "How about it?" He stood up and offered her his hand. "I got a spot all picked out for us."

Gypsy smiled and took his hand. He picked up their sleeping bags and led her away. Slowly, they walked hand in hand through the knee-high grass of the uncut field.

Having spent her life smothered by the overpowering lights of Baltimore City, Gypsy marveled at the bright stars sprinkling the dark sky. Fascinated by the flickering yellow light from a thousand lightening bugs, she suddenly realized she wasn't the least bit afraid of the darkness. Rebel's strong, reassuring presence made her feel safe and very much at home with the night and its numerous sounds.

Chirping crickets and croaking bullfrogs from the nearby pond were a far cry from screaming sirens and noisy traffic, but Gypsy didn't miss the city. Her place was here now, in the country, standing by Reb; the oversized, overprotective man who loved her and vowed to protect her with his life.

As they neared the edge of the woods, Rebel veered to the right and guided Gypsy toward a large rock. Hidden behind it was a small clearing where he set down their two sleeping bags, untied and zipped them together, then laid them on the ground.

"What do you think of this spot?" he asked as he unlaced and removed his boots.

"It's nice," she said mockingly, "but I bet you bring all your girlfriends here."

Rebel grinned, crossed his arms, and removed his shirt. Bare-chested, he stepped in front of Gypsy and cupped her face in his hands. The look he gave her was so intense, she barely heard him whisper, "Only the beautiful ones with sparkling, bright green eyes."

Gypsy's lips parted automatically under Reb's sensual stare, and when his head tilted and began to lower, she closed her eyes and leaned into him. The first time their lips met was quick; each of them pulled back as though they'd been shocked by a bolt of electricity. When they touched again, Rebel's tongue gently began teasing; first her lips, then the inside of her mouth.

As the kiss deepened, Gypsy was unsure of what to do with her hands. Following her instincts, she allowed them to roam. Starting on his washboard stomach, Gypsy let her hands move slowly up Reb's chest, brushing against his shoulder-length hair as they traveled over his broad shoulders. On the way down, they stroked his biceps, finally coming to rest on the small of his back.

Rebel's hands began roaming, too. Only not in the same curious, exploratory way Gypsy's were. His touch was slow and sensual, more tender than one would expect from such large, powerful hands. The feeling of his hands on her body, combined with the slight chill in the air, sent a tingling sensation through Gypsy causing her to shiver.

He broke their kiss, licking her moisture from his lips, and backed away. "Are you cold?"

"Just a little," she told him. "But I'm okay. Maybe you should just kiss me again."

"I've got a better idea." He unzipped the sleeping bag. "Why don't you take off your shoes and join me in here?"

Feeling wicked and excited, she slipped off her shoes and socks and stepped onto the makeshift bed. She and Reb had been sleeping in the same bed for weeks, but because of the injury to her ribs, the only time he touched her at night was when he wrapped her in his arms, holding her until she fell asleep. But tonight was different. She was healed and they were alone, both wanting what they knew was about to happen.

"This is pretty soft," she commented, inching her way into the sleeping bag next to him.

"So are you," he said, his voice rough.

Rebel rolled over on his side and lowered his head to kiss her. She raised her arms and wrapped them around his neck, kissing him back hungrily, as if she couldn't get enough. The sensual movement of his tongue, combined with his breath, warm and sweet from the alcohol, was threatening to drive Gypsy over the edge.

Again, Rebel was the one who broke their kiss. But this time he didn't back away. He simply gazed at her. "I love you, Gypsy. I think I fell in love with you the first day we met. Never in a million years did I think someone as amazing as you would love me in return."

She suddenly moved away and sat up next to him, then removed her shirt and unhooked her bra, baring round breasts, perfectly proportioned to her petite body. Gypsy could see the passion swimming in Rebel's eyes as he watched the slow, graceful movements she made slipping out of her jeans and panties. She set them in the grass next to her other clothes and looked down at him.

Gypsy didn't feel the least bit vulnerable standing in front of him with nothing on. She knew he loved her and felt that him seeing her this way somehow made her his forever, heart and soul. "Make love to me, Rebel."

* * * *

Light from the Hunter's Moon spilled over Gypsy's bare body creating shadows that only enhanced her beauty.

The sight was more than Rebel could handle.

He stood and removed his jeans, never taking his eyes off her. "Are you sure?" he asked.

Before answering, she tugged on his neck, forcing him to come closer and lower his head. Then she kissed him gently on the mouth, her sweetness filling his senses. "I'm sure. I love you more than anything. I want to be with you."

Rebel reached out and removed the band holding Gypsy's ponytail in place, causing tight, fiery red ringlets to spill over her shoulders. Carefully taking two handfuls of her hair, he caressed the back of her head as he leaned and began to tenderly kiss her neck. Then he moved his head up until his lips were nearly touching hers. "Please make sure this is what

you want, darlin'. Because once we start, I might not be able to stop."

Breathless, she whispered, "I want to know what it's like to feel the man I love inside me."

Rebel's last ounce of restraint gave way. With her hands in his, he sat down on the sleeping bag and pulled her down beside him. After dragging the covers over them, Rebel rolled onto his left side and moved Gypsy onto her back.

Distracted by his kiss, she gasped when she felt his hand slide between her thighs.

He removed it immediately. "What's wrong?"

Gypsy looked up into the royal blue eyes she loved so much. "I've never ... I mean, I haven't..." She sighed. "I'm just a little nervous."

"I won't hurt you," he whispered. "I'll never let anything hurt you."

"I know. Touch me, Reb, touch me."

Slowly, he replaced his hand. The wetness he felt told him she was ready, but he didn't want to rush her. Continuing their kiss, he ran his hands along her slender body, caressing her silken breasts, wanting desperately to explore every inch of her, taste her sweetness. But she'd never been with a man before, and he didn't want to frighten her by doing too much. So he took it easy, kissing her, teasing her hard nipples with the tip of his tongue trying desperately to control himself. Not until he heard her whisper, "Now," which told him she was ready to take the next step, did Rebel move on top of her.

When his erection brushed against Gypsy's thigh, Rebel watched as she threw her head back and let out a quiet

moan. With the need to be inside her growing, he waited until Gypsy opened her legs wide, inviting him to make her his.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, "but there's no way to keep this from being uncomfortable." Rebel lowered his head and kissed her, catching her sharp intake of breath with his mouth when he entered her, taking her virginity. He remained completely still until the tension in her body gave way to him. Then, thrusting forward, he buried himself within her. He moved slowly, trying not to hurt her.

After just a few moments, Gypsy began to move. She wiggled and bucked her hips, wrapping her arms around Rebel's back trying to get closer, trying to push him deeper inside her.

Sensing she was close, he reached down and touched her clitoris, rubbing it ever-so-gently with his index and middle fingers. Gypsy's response was instant, and she was suddenly meeting his every thrust, writhing beneath his body as if she couldn't get enough. Moments later, panting and breathless, she murmured, "Reb," and climaxed.

Hearing his name accompanied by Gypsy's soft moans pushed Rebel over the edge. Placing his hands on the ground for support, he raised himself over her and his slow, steady rhythm became more rapid. Knowing Gypsy was watching his every move as he claimed her body was what finally drove him over the edge. With one final thrust, he spilled his life deep inside her quivering body.

His energy spent, he bent down and rested his forehead on hers. "That was amazing, Gypsy," he said, trying to catch his breath. "Are you okay? I didn't hurt you, did I?"

"Hurt me? We just experienced the most intimate thing two people can share. I can't even describe how good you made me feel. I'm more than okay, Reb. I'm wonderful."

Relieved she was all right, Rebel whispered, "I love you," then turned and collapsed onto his back, pulling her with him.

Once again covered, she rested her head on his chest and draped her arm across his stomach. "I love you, too. I hope I was ... okay. Did I do everything right?"

He turned to the left and softly kissed her forehead. "You did fine, darlin'. Just fine."

As they lay together in silence, Rebel's mind was racing, reliving what had just happened. Being with Gypsy had been an incredible experience. Their lovemaking hadn't been anything wild or out of the ordinary, but it was the first time he'd had sex with a woman he loved, and it'd had an unexplainable effect on him. The overwhelming feelings he had before of wanting to protect Gypsy were suddenly twice as strong. She was his now, completely. And he'd do everything in his power to make her happy and keep her safe.

* * * *

Gypsy had no idea how good it would feel to be intimate with a man; never thought she'd trust or love someone enough to want to share something intimate with him. But nothing had ever felt better than having the man she loved moving within her. What she'd told Reb was true. She loved him completely, and that would never change.

Her contented state, combined with the slow rise and fall of Reb's chest, eventually lulled Gypsy to sleep. When she

awoke, she was enveloped in darkness. Clouds had rolled in, hiding the light from the moon, and she found herself alone in the sleeping bag.

"Reb!" she sat up and yelled, panicking.

He was at her side in an instant. "I'm here, Gypsy."

She grabbed for him in the dark, finding his leg first, and realized he was wearing his jeans.

"Where were you?"

"I needed a smoke and didn't want to wake you. I was sitting on the rock."

She sighed in relief.

"I know what you were thinking, Gypsy. But I wouldn't have left you here alone." He pulled her into his arms. "I wouldn't have walked five feet away if I thought you'd wake up while I was gone."

"It's so dark," she said, her voice noticeably shaky. "I thought something happened to you."

"It's okay." He slowly rocked her in his arms. "You never have anything to worry about when you're with me. As long as I'm around, everything will always be okay."

"I love you," she said quietly.

"And I love you." He rocked her until her erratic breathing returned to normal, then asked her if she wanted to wash up. "There's a stream about fifty yards south of here. The water should be fairly warm this time of year."

She smiled into the darkness, touched by his sensitivity. "I'd love to."

He gathered her clothes and handed her his T-shirt. She slipped it over her head and was relieved it was long enough to cover her all the way to her knees.

When they reached the stream, Rebel removed his jeans while Gypsy took off the shirt he'd given her and added it to their pile of clothes on the bank. He took her hand and led her into the rippling, chest high water. With an ironclad grip on his hand, she followed. "Remember, I can't swim."

"I'm here," he reminded her. "Everything's fine."

She nodded, even though she knew he couldn't see it.

"Let's go under, okay? On the count of three. Don't worry, darlin', I won't let go." When she stiffened, he added, "I promise."

She didn't want to do it, but the stream was as warm as bath water, and she knew it would feel good. "Okay."

"One, two, three," he counted, then grabbed both her hands and pulled her under the water before she had a chance to change her mind.

"Are you okay?" he asked when they surfaced.

"I'm fine." She squeezed excess water from her hair. "This actually feels pretty good."

"Come on over here," Rebel said. He shifted onto his knees, bringing the water up to his chin.

Gypsy turned her body and backed into him. He wrapped his arms around her, tightly securing her back against his chest. "We used to play out here all the time as kids," he told her. "I reluctantly learned to swim the day Blackie threw me in the pond behind my granddaddy's house."

She stiffened. "Is that your way of telling me you're going to throw me in the water, because I don't know how to swim?"

He chuckled. "No. If you want to learn how to swim, I'll teach you. In fact, I think that's a pretty good idea. But not in the middle of the night, and definitely not when you aren't wearing any clothes; I have a feeling not much teaching or learning would get done."

"Thanks for the warning. I guess I should learn to swim. How old were you when Blackie threw you in?"

"Five."

"Five?"

"Uh-huh. He did the same thing to Judd."

"Wow, he must have really not liked you guys."

"He didn't do it to be mean, Gypsy. He did it because all Judd and I did when we were that age was play out here. There are streams and little water holes all over these woods, and if one of us had fallen in and not been able to swim, we would've drowned."

"But I thought you said you two fought so much that he didn't want anything to do with you until you were older."

"He didn't. But hanging out with your younger brothers and teaching them survival skills are two different things. He was just looking out for us."

"I can't imagine what it would be like to have someone care about me that much. You're so lucky."

Rebel turned her around, brought his hands up out of the water and caressed her face. "I care about you a hundred times more than that, Gypsy. I want to marry you."

"Marry me? Why?"

"What do you mean, why? I love you. That's why."

"But what if my father comes after me?"

"I can handle your father."

"But there's no telling what kind of trouble he'll bring if he shows up here."

"Trouble is my family's middle name. We can handle it."

"But—"

"Gypsy!" he interrupted loudly, his sudden, angry tone causing her to jump. "My family loves you, goddammit! So your last name doesn't have to be McCassey for them to help you if you get in trouble."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying they're going to give you help whether you want them to or not, so get over it."

Gypsy was a little surprised by his outburst. "Why are you angry with me?"

Rebel sighed and leaned his forehead against hers. "I'm worried, not angry. You mean a lot to me."

"You mean a lot to me, too. So does your family. That's why I'm so afraid."

"What, Gypsy? What are you afraid of?"

"Losing you; being responsible for something happening to your brother or one of your uncles or cousins."

"Nothing's going to happen to me. Or any of the boys, either. You're part of a family now, and at the risk of sounding sexist, let us take care of you. Let me take care of you."

"You don't have to—"

"I want to, Gypsy. And as far as marriage goes, I don't need a piece of paper to tell me you're my girl." With a hint of humor in his voice, he added, "But it might be easier on our kids if their parents have the same last name."

At the mention of kids, Gypsy's hand went to her abdomen. They hadn't used any protection when they made love earlier, and she wondered if Rebel's seed had taken root; his child already growing inside her.

Gypsy sighed and gave in. "I don't have anymore arguments, Reb. You love me and want to take care of me, and to be honest; my heart skips a beat every time I think about it. I admit that it feels good to be part of a family, too. The only thing still bothering me is that my father is a violent criminal. I just don't feel right about putting my new family in danger."

Rebel only laughed. "It takes one to know one, Gypsy. Chances are ... me and the boys will smell him long before he gets to town."

"This isn't funny."

"Who's laughing?"

"You are."

"I'm sorry, darlin'. Please don't put your life, our life, on hold just because something might or might not happen. For all we know, your father may not want to go to the trouble of tracking you down. But if he does show up, we'll deal with it when the time comes."

She sighed. "Okay, but I'm still worried about you."

"Why?" he questioned.

"Because I know what you'd do if someone tried to hurt me, and you can't be a good husband from behind bars."

He put his hands on both her shoulders and squeezed them gently. "Does that mean you'll marry me?"

"Only if you promise to be careful."

"I'll make you a deal. You put your trust in me to take care of and protect you, and I promise only to do what's necessary to keep you safe. No extra acts of revenge. Deal?"

"Deal."

"Good. Now come on." He guided her to the edge of the water. "The sun will be up in a few hours, and I think we should get some sleep."

They dressed quickly in the chilly, night air and walked hand-in-hand back to their sleeping bag.

"When do you want to get married?" she asked, as they climbed back into their makeshift bed.

"You pick the date, darlin'. We can do it at the courthouse first thing Monday morning if you want."

"So soon?" she asked. "Don't you want your family there?"

"We can invite them," he told her, "but for obvious reasons, none of them are too fond of being in the courthouse."

"Should we have it somewhere else then?"

"Well, to tell you the truth, they don't get too excited about weddings, either."

Gypsy could understand that. She wasn't crazy about formal occasions herself. A quick ceremony at the courthouse sounded perfect.

"How about next Friday?"

"Okay," he agreed, "but why Friday?"

"I don't know. I think I'd feel weird getting married during the week."

"Friday it is. Now close your eyes and get some sleep."

Gypsy nodded off almost immediately, but even in the safe confines of Rebel's arms, it was an unsettled, fitful sleep.

* * * *

The only time Rebel remembered Gypsy having a hard time sleeping was when they first met. And even though she was asleep now, she was restless, tossing and turning, clutching his hand with a death grip she refused to loosen. There was no mistaking the fact that something was on her mind; probably the conversation they had about her father. She was obviously scared that someone was going to get hurt, and it pained him to know that his numerous attempts to reassure her hadn't done any good.

Rebel also knew that no matter how hard he tried, he'd never be able to look at the situation through her eyes. His whole life, no matter what kind of problems he had, there was always an army of McCassey's there to back him. For the past eleven years, Gypsy had no one.

But that was over.

She had him now. And he'd kill anyone who tried to hurt her.

Anyone.

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Chapter 11

Word of Rebel and Gypsy's upcoming marriage spread fast through the McCassey clan. During the entire week leading up to the wedding, relatives from all over Washington County filtered into the garage to get a look at the girl who'd finally captured Rebel's heart. Overwhelmed by all the attention and marital advice, Gypsy was ready to run away and hide by Thursday afternoon.

Gypsy was sitting on a tree stump behind the garage when Judd came up to her. She had her knees up, arms folded across them, head down. "Mind if I sit?"

She looked up. "Only if you promise to talk about something other than weddings, Rebel's unholy promiscuity as a teenager, or the hundreds of different ways to cook and store venison."

He sat in the grass across from her and apparently tried to hide his smile. "The family finally got to you, huh?"

Gypsy rolled her eyes and put her head back down.

"It'll be over soon, girl. Right now, you're a novelty. No one ever thought ol' Reb would settle down, and here he is getting married."

"No kidding," she said without bothering to look up, "one of your great aunts even offered me money to tell her the trick I used to trap your brother. It seems her granddaughter is ... how did she put it ... looking to nab an unsuspecting man just like I did, and could use all the help she can get."

Judd winced. "Having to deal with stuff like that kind of makes hanging out with us guys at the garage all the time not seem so bad, huh?"

When Gypsy gave no response, he continued in a serious tone. "You're good for him, you know."

That brought her head up, but she remained quiet.

"For both of us actually. He and I haven't had a fight since we met you."

She'd noticed. It piqued her interest that it seemed to be important to Judd. "How come?"

He shrugged. "I can't speak for Rebel, but when I found out about everything you'd been through, it seemed pretty silly to me for two brothers in their thirties to be fighting like kids. I started most, if not all the problems we had. Rebel's been bailing my ass out of trouble ever since I can remember, and sometimes it just gets to me that he's a better person than I am."

It saddened Gypsy to hear Judd put himself down. He was every bit as good as Reb. He just hadn't realized it yet. "That's not true, Judd."

"Yeah, Gypsy, it is. My brother's a born leader. People are drawn to him. They look to him for approval. The campout we had last weekend wouldn't have happened if Rebel hadn't given the okay."

"Why?"

Judd shrugged again. "That's the way it's always been. Growing up, Rebel was as wild and reckless as the rest of us. But being smart and sure of himself was what made him different. He was never much for starting trouble, but was

always there to finish it if me and the boys got into something we couldn't handle. My brother deserves the best, and he found that in you."

Embarrassed by the compliment, she smiled shyly. "I don't know what to say."

"You don't need to say anything, just listen. Being around you these past few months has really affected me. You've been to hell and back, yet still find something to smile about everyday. Besides Rose, you're the only woman who's ever gotten my respect, and you've earned every ounce of it. You make me want to be a better person, Gypsy. I'm proud to be getting you as a sister."

"A sister, really?"

"Really."

"Even though my father—"

"Don't even go there, girl. My brother loves you, I love you, and the rest of the family loves you. There's no way the McCassey boys are going to let anything happen to you. And no one's going to get hurt, either."

"Reb told you?"

"He's concerned that you're so worried about us, so I'm going to set you straight once and for all. Our family's been fighting one battle or another for well over a hundred years. Most of us have been shot at, arrested, and in and out of trouble our whole lives. We're used to it. Some of us even thrive on it. And not much of anything scares us. So do yourself a favor and stop worrying. Everything will be all right."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Look, you may be Rebel's wife, but you're going to be my sister. And no self respecting man ever lets anything bad happen to his sister."

"But—"

Judd stood up and pointed at her. "That's enough, Gypsy. Forget about your father and enjoy the fact that you're about to marry a man who loves you."

He was right. If by chance The Baltimore Sun had picked up the article about her being rescued, and her father had seen it and decided to come to Hagerstown, there was nothing she could do. They'd deal with it when the time came, just like Reb said.

Judd offered her a hand up and she took it. "You're coming tomorrow, right?"

"I wouldn't miss it," he told her. "I'm wearing my good jeans and everything."

She smiled. Judd wouldn't be Judd in anything else. "Perfect."

He put his arm around her shoulders and started to lead her around to the front of the garage, but she stopped him. "Judd?"

"Hmm?" he murmured, trying to light a cigarette.

"Thanks."

"For what?"

"Being such a good brother to Reb. And to me. When I was a kid, I thought I'd be safer if I had a big brother to look out for me. And now I do." She stood on her tiptoes and kissed his cheek. For once, it seemed Judd McCassey was almost speechless.

"No worries, Gypsy. Remember that."

* * * *

Aside from his duties at work, no one had ever, could ever, count on him for anything important. Now, suddenly, the girl who had once jumped into an argument between two men she didn't know, just to defend him, was asking him to watch out for her. Judd had no idea that being needed could feel so good, and he had his brother to thank for that.

Rebel was tough and smart, much smarter than he was, and he didn't think his brother was going to have any trouble protecting Gypsy. But Judd was going to be there for them ... just in case.

* * * *

Rebel and Gypsy exchanged their vows in the judge's chambers of the Hagerstown Municipal Courthouse, at eleven-thirty Friday morning. Judd, Frank, Rose, and Jimmy were their witnesses.

The first thing Gypsy did when the ceremony was over and they left the courthouse, was pull out the dozens of pins holding her hair up. Since she'd refused to wear a wedding dress, Rose had insisted Gypsy at least do something elegant with her long thick hair. So Gypsy had allowed the older woman to fuss over her, and wound up with most of her curls pinned on top of her head and a few spilling down over her shoulders.

Judd shook hands with his brother and kissed his new sister-in-law's cheek. "You made a beautiful bride, Gypsy."

"Uh-huh," she said, returning his kiss. "I'm sure Modern Bride Magazine will be here any minute to take my picture for their cover, jeans and all."

"Hey, I like your jeans," he told her. "They're as old and ugly as mine."

"Thanks, Judd, you really know how to make a girl feel special."

He winked and lit a cigarette. "So I've been told."

Gypsy looked at her new family and stifled a giggle.

Rebel punched his brother in the arm. "Shut the hell up. No one wants to hear that shit. Especially me."

"What's wrong, little brother? Afraid you won't measure up to my talent?"

"No, asshole, I'm afraid I'll throw up."

That time Gypsy giggled out loud. Then she squeezed between the two brothers, looped one arm around each of them and began leading them toward the parking lot.

When the wedding party got back to the garage, it was deserted.

"Where the hell is everybody?" Rebel asked.

"Frank and I made an executive decision to close up at noon," Jimmy told him. "We figured you and Gypsy deserved a little privacy on your wedding day."

Gypsy blushed and stepped forward to hug Frank and Jimmy. "Thank you," she said. "And thanks for being there today."

"We wouldn't have missed it," Rose told her. "Welcome to the family, Gypsy."

"Hey, where's mine?"

Gypsy turned to see Judd standing behind her grinning. She smiled and walked into the arms of the man she now called 'brother'. He gave her a gentle squeeze. "You take good care of my baby brother," Judd said. "But if he gives you any trouble, I want to hear about it. No man messes with my sister and gets away with it."

Rebel laughed and threw out a sarcastic, "I'll be sure to remember that."

Judd winked at Gypsy. "You'd better."

"Go on upstairs, darlin'," Rebel told his new wife. "I'll be up in a minute."

She nodded and headed for the metal stairs. "Bye, Judd."

"See ya, girl."

Once Gypsy was gone, Rebel dug into his tool cabinet and pulled out a pack of Marlboro's. Unable to find matches, he turned to his brother. "You got a light?"

Judd reached into his front pocket and tossed a lighter to Rebel. "I'm really happy for you, bro." He extended his hand. "Truly."

Rebel took a long drag on the cigarette and shook his brother's hand. "Thanks."

"You tell Blackie yet?"

Rebel grinned as he nodded. "I talked to him yesterday. He said women are nothing but trouble and wished me luck."

Judd laughed. "Sounds like you caught him in a good mood."

"Yeah."

"Don't worry, bro. He'll love Gypsy once he gets to know her. Just like we all do."

"I'm not worried about him liking my wife, Judd."

"Then what is it?"

"He told me he's got a parole hearing in a couple of weeks, said it looks like he'll get out this time."

"Already?" Judd sounded surprised.

"It's been three years."

"I guess it has." Judd squinted at his brother. "So what's the problem?"

"Wherever Blackie is," Rebel said, taking another long drag on his cigarette, "trouble's never far behind."

"You worried about Gypsy?"

"Concerned."

"He wouldn't do anything to put her in danger."

"Not on purpose."

"What are you going to do?"

Rebel dropped the butt of his cigarette on the floor and crushed it with the heel of his boot. "What can I do? He's my brother, for Christ's sake. Our brother. I can't tell him not to come around; I want him here. But I can't afford to take chances by getting involved if he gets himself in trouble again. The last two times won me a night in jail, and I don't want to leave Gypsy alone, even for a minute. At least until we settle this thing with her father."

"Don't worry about Gypsy, Rebel. You can count on me for help if you need it."

Rebel studied his brother and knew he was sincere. "I appreciate that. Let's just hope I don't."

Judd raised his right fist to Rebel, who lightly touched it with his own. Then the brothers embraced. It'd been a long

time since they'd hugged one another; probably since the first and only time they ever got lost in the woods. Judd was four, Rebel a couple of months away from turning four. They'd been out all night before Frank found them the next morning huddled together under a tree. It had felt good for each of them to know they weren't alone then, and it felt good now.

"I really am happy for you," Judd told his brother. "You got yourself a hell of a woman. Maybe I'll find me one just like her someday."

Rebel bent down and began unlacing his boots to try and hide his surprise. That was the first time in Judd's thirty-one years that he'd said anything about wanting to settle down. He'd always been just as adamant as Blackie about women being trouble. The only difference between Rebel's two older brothers was that Blackie stayed away from women all together, except to use them for sex, but there were a handful of them that Judd had been slightly interested in over the years.

In the end, Judd, too, wound up only using them. But Rebel always thought Judd might get married someday ... he liked to talk way too much to wind up old and unmarried with no one but the walls to listen to him ramble on about nothing.

"I know what I got when I found her," Rebel told Judd. "I just hope she doesn't bolt when she finds out what she got in return."

Judd grinned and gave Rebel a playful punch in the arm. "Deep down, she already knows. She's just too in love right now to care."

Rebel grinned in return. "I'm going to let that one slide ... but only because I don't want to spend anymore time away from my new wife. Go home, Judd."

"I'm going, I'm going. You want me to take Outlaw?"

Rebel looked over at the sleeping German Shepherd. "Nah, I'll put him out front. He'll be fine until morning."

The brothers said their goodbyes, and Rebel locked up the garage before heading up to see Gypsy. When he entered their small apartment, she flew into his arms and greeted him with a long, slow kiss.

"Well, hey, darlin'. If I'd known I was going to get this kind of reception, I'd have thrown Judd out ten minutes ago."

She backed away and looked up into the blue of his eyes. "I missed you."

He leaned down and removed the boots he'd loosened earlier, then pulled his shirt over his head—a pair of blue jeans the only article of clothing left covering his body.

"Well, I'm here now," he told her, and she squealed in delight when he suddenly scooped her into his arms. "And I'd like to make love to my wife."

So with the shades closed tightly and all the lights off, Rebel and Gypsy spent the day in bed. They tasted and touched and explored each other's bodies until there wasn't an inch of either one of them that wasn't familiar. With their energy spent, the newly married couple fell into an exhausted, contented sleep.

* * * *

The sound of a striking match was what finally woke Gypsy. The room was darker now, the sun was down and night had fallen. She rolled onto her right side and propped her head on a pillow. "What time is it?"

"Ten-thirty. Did you sleep well?"

"Uh-huh," she said in a raspy voice, crawling out from underneath the covers. When she reached Reb, who was sitting on the edge of the bed, she rose onto her knees, wrapped her arms around his waist, and started kissing his back and neck.

Obviously aroused by her soft touch, Rebel hardened instantly. He turned and set his cigarette in an ashtray, then gently pushed Gypsy onto her back, kissing her neck in return. "You're going to wear me out, woman."

And they made love again.

"Reb?" Gypsy said when they were finished.

"Hmm?"

"I'm starving."

The chuckle came from deep in his throat. "Me too, but we have a problem."

"What kind of problem?"

"There's no food."

"None?"

"Cereal and beer," he told her, "but my guess is that you don't consider that a good meal."

Gypsy felt around in the dark for his T-shirt, found it, and slipped it over her head. "Guess again, Mr. McCassey. I'm desperate."

As she threw the covers off, Rebel turned on the small lamp next to him and grabbed her before she could get out of bed. "Don't leave."

"I have to," she said squirming, "I'm hungry."

He pulled her into his arms and began tickling her. "I'll make you a deal."

She was almost laughing too hard to answer. "What kind of a deal?"

"Stay in bed five more minutes, then we'll grab a shower, and I'll take you out to eat. Anywhere you want."

She caught her breath and looked at the digital clock on the dresser. "At eleven o'clock at night?"

"Shit." He sighed and rolled over onto his back. "I forgot it was so late."

"That's okay. How about hot dogs from the convenience store?"

"Seriously?"

"Sure, why not?"

"That's not much of a wedding day dinner."

"I don't care what kind of dinner we eat as long as we're eating it together. And besides, I could use a little fresh air. Can we go for a ride afterward?"

Rebel wondered how in the world he'd gotten so lucky. Here it is her wedding night, and instead of expecting some formal expensive dinner, Gypsy was willing to eat hot dogs from a convenience store. "You're a hell of a woman, Mrs. McCassey." He sat up and held a hand out to her. "Care to join me in the shower?"

"You think we can both fit?"

"Only if we stand really, really close."

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Chapter 12

After getting side tracked in the shower, it was another thirty minutes before Rebel and Gypsy left the garage. Dressed once again in his work boots and jeans, Rebel opted for a white tank top to keep him cool in the muggy, early August air. He shoved a pack of Marlboro's in his front pants pocket and held his hand out to Gypsy.

Dressed much the same, except in a gray T-shirt with McCASSEY'S GARAGE written in black script across the back, Gypsy had left her wet hair down to dry; the humid air transforming her curls into tight ringlets with more body than Rebel had ever seen.

Trying to suppress a laugh, Rebel reached out and brushed at one of her stray curls. "Humidity isn't really a friend of yours, is it?"

Gypsy smiled then laughed. "I know my hair has a tendency to get poofy when it's humid. Is it that bad?"

"Let's just say that you and your hair are going to have to go to the store by yourselves, darlin'. There's not enough room in the cab of the tow truck for all three of us."

"Well, in that case, I'll leave it down instead of forcing it into a ponytail. I'm rather enjoying the amusement on your face."

He laughed and patted her behind. "Suit yourself. But let's get going, I need food."

Rebel fired up the tow truck's diesel engine and turned on the air conditioner while Gypsy put Outlaw back into the

garage. She quickly made sure the middle bay door was the only one left unlocked, then walked to the truck where her husband was holding the door open.

Gypsy climbed up and slid into the middle.

They stopped at the convenience store on the corner of Franklin and Cannon Streets and spent ten minutes in the store picking out snacks. When they got back to the tow truck, they heard Jimmy trying to get Rebel on the CB.

"How the hell did he know we were out here?"

Gypsy climbed up into the truck through the driver's side door and sat down in the middle of the bench seat. Rebel followed her in, closed the door and picked up the CB mic.

"Yeah, Jimmy?"

"Where the hell have you been? I've been calling your apartment for the last ten minutes."

"We came out to get something to eat," Rebel said impatiently. "What's wrong with you?"

"There's trouble over at Diggers. Judd, Brady, Kane, Flynn, and a bunch of those Jenkins boys just got themselves thrown out of the bar. Now they're circling each other in the parking lot."

"Goddamn those guys!" he said, slamming the truck into first gear. "I'll be there in ten minutes."

Rebel put the CB mic back on its hook and pulled out of the parking lot. Torn between dropping Gypsy off at the garage and dragging her into a potentially violent situation at the bar, he decided to take her home. Leaving her alone was risky. But it was far riskier taking her somewhere she could get hurt, or have to watch something worse happen to him.

"Sorry, Gypsy, the ride's going to have to wait. I'll drop you off at the garage but I don't have time to walk you in."

Gypsy's left hand touched his forearm. "Why can't I go with you?"

"Because this isn't a game. My family's been fighting with the Jenkins bunch since my grandfather was a kid. Most of them live down in Frederick now, which is about a half hour from here, so our paths don't cross too often. But when they do, it's always messy. Last time Flynn wound up in the hospital. It's too dangerous to take you there."

"Please?" she begged. "I'll stay in the truck."

When Rebel and his brothers and cousins were in junior high school, they actually invited girls to watch when they were going to fight someone. But that was when the most dangerous fighting they ever did was with their fists in the schoolyard.

Nowadays, the McCassey boys' occasional fighting was serious business, and the thought of Gypsy getting caught in the crossfire turned his stomach. He really didn't want to take her with him, but decided she shouldn't be left at home alone. Reluctantly, Rebel gave in to her request, making her promise to stay in the truck and to leave at the first sign of any real trouble.

"If anything happens, take the tow truck back to the garage and make sure to keep Outlaw inside with you. I'll meet you there later," he assured her as they pulled into the back part of Digger's gravel parking lot where a full fledged brawl was raging.

"Shit!" Rebel leaned across Gypsy and opened the glove compartment. In his haste to get to his family's aid, he missed Gypsy's stunned expression when he pulled out a handgun, cocked it, and jumped out of the truck.

* * * *

Rebel's gunshot sent an echo into the air that stopped the rumble immediately. The two families separated, McCassey's on one side, Jenkins on the other.

Watching out of the open window, Gypsy counted eleven people, not including Reb, every one of them staring at him in surprise.

"Jesus, Rebel," she heard one of the Jenkins boys say. "Put the gun away, man. We were just havin' a little fun."

Rebel turned and pointed the gun at him. "Fun's over, Davie. Take your brood and get out of here before I get angry."

"Look, man, you weren't here. This has nothin' to do with you." He took a step toward Rebel, who fired another shot into the air, stopping Davie Jenkins in his tracks.

"Wrong. My family has everything to do with me." Before Rebel finished his sentence, he was surrounded by McCassey's. Judd and Jimmy flanked him. Brady, Kane, and Flynn stood directly behind him.

As the men stared at one another in silence, Gypsy wondered why, after two gunshots, she didn't hear the high pitched screaming of police sirens. Didn't anyone in the bar care what was going on outside? Or were they just too afraid

to interfere in any trouble that had to do with the McCassey's?

Davie put his hands in the air and backed off. "Okay then. Get rid of your piece, and let's make this a fair fight. Skin on skin."

Rebel smiled, tossed his gun to Judd, and punched Davie in the jaw before he knew what hit him.

The Jenkins boys all piled on Reb then, and Gypsy screamed inwardly when she saw him go down. Seconds later, he came up swinging and took out two guys with as many punches.

Judd and Jimmy got one guy each, and Brady, Kane, and Flynn, were pounding on the remaining three.

When it was over, all six McCassey's were still standing, their opponents quietly limping away from the battlefield. By the time their enemies were out of sight, Gypsy would've bet that Rebel's anger had reached the boiling point. When he walked a few feet away and turned on his family, she knew she was right.

"On my fucking wedding night?" he yelled to no one in particular. "What the hell is wrong with you guys?"

No one answered.

Rebel made his way back to the quiet group and stood directly in front of them. "I asked a question." He looked from Judd to Jimmy then glanced at Brady, Kane, and Flynn. "Somebody better tell me what the hell went on here tonight. Now!"

Jimmy finally spoke up. "Let's go back to the garage and discuss this, Rebel. The cops in this town may be lazy, but

they're not stupid. Those gunshots aren't going to be ignored for long."

"Too late," Flynn announced, pointing to the opposite side of the parking lot. "We got company."

When Rebel saw the slow-moving sheriff's car, he sighed and raked a hand through his hair. "Terrific."

Gypsy noticed the sheriff at the same time she remembered the gun her husband had tossed to his brother. Judd was on probation, and if he was caught with it, he'd go to jail for sure.

Rebel had been keeping a close eye on her from where he was standing, but with his attention now focused on the sheriff, she was able to slip unnoticed from the cab of the truck.

The six McCassey's stood tall, shoulder-to-shoulder, as the car came to a stop and Sheriff Ben Johnson opened the door. Just before he got out, Gypsy snuck up behind the guys. Her small body hidden by their large sizes, she placed a hand on the waistband in back of Judd's jeans. He moved slightly, motioning for her to go away, but she ignored him. Finding what she was looking for, Gypsy lifted the back of his shirt, removed the gun, and tucked it into the waistband of her own pants.

She forced her way into line between Rebel and Judd just as the sheriff approached them. Rebel looked down and glared at her, and she knew he wasn't happy about being defied.

Wearing a smug look, the sheriff stopped only inches in front of Rebel. "Somebody reported hearing gunshots out here, McCassey. You know anything about that?"

Rebel's stone cold expression forced the sheriff to take a step back. "No sir, not a thing."

Frowning, the lawman turned his attention to Gypsy and greeted her. "Ms. Lance."

"It's Mrs. McCassey ... Sheriff."

"You made a big mistake getting yourself mixed up with this bunch," he told her. "Now you're nothing but trash, just like the rest of them."

Gypsy felt Reb stiffen next to her. To divert his attention, she stepped forward. It was easy to tell that she'd surprised both her husband and the sheriff. "I'm proud to be a McCassey," she spat back. "You, on the other hand, are an embarrassment to law enforcement officers everywhere."

The sheriff's face reddened as chuckles and low whistles came from a few of the guys. "One of you has a gun, and I'm not leaving here until I find it." He waved his hand in the direction of the building. "All of you against the wall and spread 'em. Now!" He glared at Gypsy. "You, too ... Mrs. McCassey."

Jimmy, Brady, Kane, and Flynn walked over to the side of the building, but Rebel and Judd stayed next to Gypsy.

She crossed her arms in front of her body and took a defiant stance. "You're not laying a hand on me, Sheriff. Unless there's a female officer present, you have no right to search me."

He stared at her in disbelief.

"That's right," she said smugly, "I know the law. So unless you're going to get on your radio and call for a woman to come up here, I'll be over by my husband's truck." Head held high, Gypsy turned her back on him and stalked off.

* * * *

Marveling at Gypsy's courage, Rebel and Judd watched her stroll away and sit down on the front bumper of the tow truck. Confident she was safely out of the sheriff's reach, the brothers started laughing. "Guess she told you, huh, Johnson?"

The sheriff pulled his gun from its holster and aimed it at the brothers. "Shut the fuck up, Judd. As I recall, your probation prohibits you from even thinking about firearms. If I find that gun on you, I'll drive you to prison myself."

Judd smirked and held his hands in the air. "No gun here, Sheriff. But you're welcome to look."

"Against the wall, Judd." He waived the gun in the direction of their cousins. "You too, Rebel. Move."

The six men turned to face the wall. Arms and legs spread, they stood still as Sheriff Johnson made his way down the line, thoroughly searching each one. After finding nothing, he told them they were free to go.

"But I'll be watching," he said and turned to leave. Halfway to his patrol car, he stopped. "I suggest you keep a close eye on your wife, Rebel. And teach her some manners while you're at it. Next time, I won't be so tolerant of that sharp tongue."

Using every ounce of restraint he could muster, Rebel ignored the comment. "Have a nice night ... Sheriff."

Lined up next to each other once again, the McCassey's watched the sheriff's car pull out of the parking lot. When it was out of sight, Gypsy rose and made her way over to the guys.

Rebel turned and gave his closest relative, which happened to be Judd, a hard shove. He flew backward and landed in the dirt. "Somebody better tell me what the hell went on here tonight!" he yelled. "And where's my goddamn gun?"

"I have it."

Rebel whirled around at the sound of his wife's voice.

"Here." She reached behind her, pulled the gun out of the back of her jeans and handed it to him.

Rebel snatched the .38 Special from Gypsy and unloaded it; shoving the bullets into the front pocket of his jeans. "I told you to wait in the truck," he reminded her, fighting to control his anger.

"I was just trying to help Judd," she explained, and Rebel's anger faded immediately. He couldn't hold it against her that she wanted to help his brother.

"I know," he told her as he leaned in and kissed her forehead, "and I'm proud of you. But we'll talk about it later." He draped his right arm around Gypsy and turned to his family. "Start talking boys."

Jimmy began the story with how the five of them were sitting in the bar minding their own business when the Jenkins boys approached them.

"We haven't had trouble with them for years," Rebel said. "Why all the sudden would they start something?"

"Who knows? But Davie came right over and started in on Judd, knowing he's always the first one to lose his temper. They were definitely looking for a fight."

Rebel shook his head. "Something's not right."

"You think they had something else in mind besides just giving us a little trouble?" Judd asked.

"I know they did."

"How?"

Rebel turned to his brother. "Judd, you remember what happened the last time Johnson and his men showed up during one of our fights with the Jenkins boys?"

Judd laughed. "Yeah, we all got hauled in, and they had to put the families in separate cells."

"And what happened this time?"

It seemed to dawn on all of them at the same time.

During the last fight, the sheriff and his deputies grabbed all the McCassey's and chased down every last Jenkins who tried to run and hide in the woods. Tonight, not only did the sheriff show up alone and let the other family go without a chase, but he didn't arrest a single McCassey.

"Let's get back to the garage," Rebel told them. "Flynn," he called, to his inquisitive younger cousin, "I got a feeling the Jenkins were sent here to start something with you boys. The question is, why? And by who? Go back inside and ask around, see if you can find out anything. Brady ... stay with him." Rebel looked at his watch. "It's twelve-thirty. If you two

aren't back at the garage in an hour, the rest of us will come looking for you. Be careful."

Slick and sneaky, Rebel knew that if anyone could get the information they needed, it was Flynn. Just after he and Brady re-entered the bar, Rebel led Gypsy over to the tow truck. He opened the door and lit a cigarette as she climbed inside.

"Are you going to yell at me?" she asked, nervously, after he'd gotten in.

"No." He released the smoke from his lungs. "I'm going to very calmly explain that when I tell you to do something, it's for a good reason. You got lucky tonight, Gypsy. Next time, and believe me, at some point, there will be a next time; you have to promise you'll do exactly as I say, no matter what."

"I'm sorry I didn't listen, I just wanted to help Judd," she said again, her voice cracking. "I didn't even know you kept a ... a ... gun ... in the truck." Then suddenly, she burst into tears.

Since it was uncommon for Gypsy to be so emotional, her tears took Rebel by surprise. He immediately tossed his cigarette out the window and gathered her into his arms.

"Shh, it's all right," he said, tenderly, "it's over now."

"But you weren't even scared." She sobbed. "How come you're not afraid of anything?"

"I've been involved in things like this my whole life Gypsy. I'm used to it ... we all are. But that doesn't mean I'm not afraid of anything. You know what?"

She sniffed. "What?"

"You've got more guts than any woman I've ever met. That was a brave thing you did, sneaking the gun away from Judd and challenging the sheriff to find someone to search you. I'm not happy about you taking a chance like that, but I'm damn impressed that you did. And the way you stood up to Johnson when he called us all trash. That took balls, girl. How'd you know it was against the law for him to search you?"

She sat up and wiped at her tears. "I heard it somewhere once. I didn't even know it was true until I saw the look on the sheriff's face."

Reb chuckled and sat up. "You sure are something."

He started the truck and leaned over to give her a kiss. "You'll feel better once we get back to the garage."

She nodded, curled both her arms around his right one, laid her head on his shoulder, and fell asleep almost instantly.

Judd, Jimmy, and Kane were inside the garage waiting when Rebel pulled into the parking lot. He gently lifted Gypsy down from the truck. She didn't stir once as he carried her past his awaiting family, up the stairs, and tucked her into bed. Just in case she woke up, he turned on the small light sitting on the dresser and left a note next to it saying he was downstairs.

"Gypsy okay?" Judd asked when Rebel joined them at the table.

"Yeah, a little shook up is all. I don't think she realized what she did tonight until it was all over."

"I can't believe the way she stood up to Johnson. She must really love you, bro."

"She loves us, Judd. She took the gun to help you. I'm sorry. I never should've thrown it to you."

Judd rolled his eyes. "It's not the first time I've touched a gun since I've been on probation. There was the time—"

Rebel put his hand up and stopped his brother in mid-sentence. "I don't want to know about it."

Before Judd could continue teasing his brother, Flynn and Brady walked in.

"Well, what'd you find out?"

"You were right, Rebel. Something's definitely up."

Rebel grabbed a chair from the table, turned it around backward and straddled it. "Well, spill it already."

"Ten minutes after you all left, Davie Jenkins's younger brother, Byron, came back into the bar alone. He slid into our booth and just started talking."

Rebel was agitated. Flynn might be good at gathering information, but getting him to tell you what he found out was almost impossible. "Well, did he have anything interesting to say or not?"

Flynn raised his eyebrows and nodded. "Yeah, get this. About a week back, Davie gathered his brother and cousins and told them they were coming up here to give us some trouble."

"We haven't tangled with them for years, and they've never beaten us," Rebel reminded him. "Why would they want to start something now?"

"Byron didn't know. But he did say that he thinks Davie was blackmailed into doing it."

"Blackmailed? By who?"

"Byron didn't know that, either. He said he tried to get Davie to tell him what's going on, but Davie refused to talk."

Rebel had a feeling there was more. "What else?"

Flynn stared at his cousin. "Davie made it clear to his boys that they weren't to start anything with us unless you were there."

"Why me?"

Flynn shrugged.

"But I wasn't there tonight."

"They thought you were. Somehow, Davie found out you and Gypsy got married today. They thought we took you to Digger's to celebrate. When they realized you weren't there, they started with Judd and got us all thrown out of the bar on purpose. You're our leader, man. I guess they knew you'd show up sooner or later."

Rebel didn't feel very much like a leader right now. In fact, he found himself wishing Blackie was out of prison and sitting in the garage with them. His oldest brother was wild, impulsive, and hopelessly irresponsible, but he was also always good for an idea. Judd, Jimmy, and the rest of the guys watched him stand up and pace the floor for five minutes before he stopped and sat down again. "Did he mention anything about Gypsy?"

"Nope, Byron never said a word about her. Almost like he just assumed she wouldn't be there."

"Why the hell wouldn't my wife be with me on our wedding night?"

Flynn shrugged. "You want to know what I think?"

Reb nodded.

"Everyone knows you put family first, Rebel. Maybe the Jenkins thought you wouldn't turn us guys down if we wanted to take you out for a beer. Or they could've assumed Gypsy wouldn't want to go. Digger's Bar is a rough place. His sister, Angel, is one of the only women I've ever seen inside. She's a tough, smart ass bartender and can handle just about anything. Excuse me for saying so, but Gypsy's not like that. Maybe the Jenkins had seen her in the diner and thought a girl like that wouldn't want to go into a wild bar; they probably figured she'd pass on the beer and want to stay home."

The revelation washed over Rebel like a wave. "That's it! Someone wants us out of the way."

"What are you talking about?" Judd asked. "Who wants us out of the way?"

"That's what I'd like to know."

Judd looked skeptical. "But why would—"

"Because someone's after Gypsy, you moron!"

"Her father?" Jimmy asked.

"That's the only person I can think of. I'm not sure how her father would know the Jenkins, though. Gypsy doesn't think he's ever been out of Baltimore City, but there's a chance she could be wrong." Then he shook his head in frustration. "Aw hell, I don't know. The Jenkins boys stick pretty close to Frederick. It'd be almost impossible for them to know each other."

"So you think this is it?" Judd asked. "You think Gypsy's father's after her?"

Rebel shrugged. "It's the only thing that makes sense right now. Why else would someone want all of us, especially me, out of the way? The only reason I can think of is so that they'd have an easier time grabbing Gypsy."

"How do you think he found out where she is?" Kane asked.

"Blackie and Johnny Cooper, Gypsy's father, are in the same prison. When I talked to Blackie the day after the tornado, he said he read the article about Judd and me rescuing Gypsy in The Baltimore Sun. Chances are Cooper read the same article. His parole hearing is supposedly sometime this month, so the timing's perfect. The person after Gypsy could very well be her father."

Judd got up and went in search of a cigarette. He took the pack from the top drawer of Rebel's tool cabinet and lit one for himself and his brother. "What about asking Blackie if he knows Cooper?"

"I already did. Months ago. He'd never heard of a Johnny Cooper, but asked around and did eventually find out who he was. As of last week, Cooper was still inside. Blackie didn't say anything about him when we talked yesterday."

"What are you going to do?" Judd asked.

"I'm not going to let Gypsy out of my sight for a second. That's for damn sure."

"What about us, bro? What do you want us to do?"

"Keep your eyes and ears open but play dumb, just in case whoever's after her is roaming around town. Pay close attention to people you don't recognize. And no one, no one, comes into this garage. All customers, no matter who they

are, stay in the waiting area. I don't want anyone having easy access to my wife."

"Are you going to tell her?"

"I have to, Judd. I can't keep something like this a secret."

"What do you think she'll do?"

Rebel remembered the way Gypsy tried to run away from Pizza Hut and shrugged. "There's only one way to find out." He extinguished his cigarette and headed up the stairs, leaving his family to lock-up behind them.

The walk from the garage up to his apartment was the longest one Rebel had ever taken. How in the world was he supposed to tell his wife that he thought her worst nightmare was coming true? That the father who'd promised to kill her eleven years ago was out of prison and coming to get her?

Worry kept Rebel from getting any sleep. He lay awake all night trying to figure out the possible connection between Davie Jenkins and Gypsy's father, what to do about it and how to keep her safe.

He'd hoped to get a chance to let her know what was going on before his uncles and cousins showed up at the garage the next morning. But she slept until the loud sounds of Frank and Jimmy opening the bay doors woke her.

* * * *

It wasn't until Gypsy sat up and realized she was still in her clothes that the events of the night before came slamming back into her memory: Reb's gun, the fight, Sheriff Johnson. "I'm sorry I fell asleep."

Rebel rolled over and pulled her into his arms. "I'm not. You needed the rest."

"Were you up late?"

"Yeah, the boys and I had a little meeting after I put you to bed. Flynn came across some interesting information."

The tone of his voice made the tiny hairs on the back of her neck stand up. "Anything I should know about?"

"Unfortunately."

For the next twenty minutes, Rebel told his wife all the information Flynn got from Byron Jenkins, and the conclusion he came to that Gypsy's father was after her.

"You're taking this a lot better than I thought, Gypsy. Please say something."

She gave a short laugh. "I guess you were expecting tears, panic, or maybe even surprise, huh?"

"Any one, hell, even all three of those emotions would be normal for you to have. But that glare you're giving me is one borrowed from a page in my book, darlin', and that's scary as hell. Talk to me."

"All I want to know is what you think I should do. I'm not some dainty, fainting flower, Rebel. You don't have to keep secrets or treat me like I'm going to break. I've known for a long time that something like this was going to happen."

"I told you everything I know, Gypsy. All we can do now is wait."

She sighed, her shoulders slumping in defeat. "That's the hardest part."

"Tell me about it. I'm not going to sleep until I figure out what we're up against here. Going to the sheriff for help is

out of the question. I don't trust Ben Johnson, and I'll be damned if I'm going to give him the satisfaction of knowing a McCassey needs help."

It was up to Rebel alone to protect his wife. Now all he had to do was figure out how the hell he was going to keep her safe.

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Chapter 13

Gypsy was surprised by how normal everything was around the garage that morning. She figured everyone would be on edge waiting for something to happen. Lord knew she was. But everything was pretty much the same. Customers and cars came and went, Judd bought lunch Monday, Jimmy on Tuesday, Brady and Kane goofed off and got on everyone's nerves, and Rebel spent the days with his head buried in the engine he was trying to finish rebuilding.

Wednesday was the day her world fell apart.

The demolition of what was left of the diner was complete, and the construction company that had been camped across the street for the past two weeks was in the process of loading their heavy machines onto flatbed trailers. It'd been pouring down rain since dawn, and they were working as fast as they could to get their equipment loaded before the mud became too deep for them to maneuver around.

Just before ten o'clock in the morning, the construction crew ran into a problem and their foreman came over to the garage asking for a hand. Since the workers were around all the time, they'd gotten to know Brady and Kane, whom they'd run into several times over the past fourteen days at Digger's Bar.

"We got a backhoe hung up in the mud pretty bad. Can you tow it out?"

"Nah," Kane told him. "Judd's out on a call with the truck. But we could probably push you out."

Kane, Brady, Jimmy, and Flynn set their tools down and started to leave the garage.

"You coming, Rebel?" Flynn asked.

"In a minute." He closed the hood of a car and wiped his hands on a white rag. "I want to run upstairs and check on Gypsy first."

Because she wasn't feeling well that morning, Rebel had made Gypsy eat a handful of crackers and talked her into staying in bed. She hadn't been happy about it. In fact, she'd put up a hell of a fight. However, when she stood up and became dizzy, she changed her mind and crawled back in bed.

Rebel quietly opened the door to their apartment and walked in. With the lights off and shades drawn, the small room was dark as night. Not sure if his wife was awake, he tiptoed to the bed and gently sat down.

Once his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he saw that Gypsy was sound asleep. The covers he'd pulled up to her chin earlier had slipped to her shoulders, partially revealing the threadbare T-shirt she insisted on using as pajamas, even after he'd offered to buy her new ones.

"What do I need new pajamas for?" she'd questioned seductively. "It's not like I wear the old ones very long once we're in bed." Her little statement had been cute at the time, but now Rebel was sorry he'd listened to her. Winters in the western panhandle of Maryland were sometimes frigid, and when the cold weather came, she was going to be wearing something warmer than a ratty old T-shirt whether she liked it or not.

But then Rebel smiled to himself as he thought about how they'd made love every night, sometimes several times, since he'd taken her virginity in the woods. Warm, willing, and not the least bit shy, Gypsy was an eager student when it came to learning about love-making. She trusted him unconditionally, and that alone caused his love for her to grow by the minute.

Because he was happier than he felt he had a right to be, Rebel worried about Gypsy constantly. Just that morning, when she'd woken up pale and nauseous, he'd been terrified. Keeping her safe from someone who wanted to harm her was one thing, but an illness was something else. There was nothing he could do to stop it, nothing he could do to make her feel better except force her to take it easy. And force was exactly what he'd had to do that morning after she'd protested his order to stay in bed.

"I can rest just as easily sitting at a desk in the office helping Rose," she claimed.

Both impressed and annoyed by the obsession Gypsy had to pull her own weight, Rebel crossed his arms and leaned against the bedpost grinning. "How the hell do you expect to get any rest down in the office answering the phone?" Before she could answer, he added, "Better yet, how do you expect to get to the office? It's a long trip down that flight of stairs for someone who could barely get out of bed just now."

"If you could just carry me—" she started to suggest, but stopped in mid-sentence when he arched his brows.

He could tell that despite her body not feeling well, there was nothing wrong with Gypsy's temper. She lifted her head

from the pillow and pointed a finger at him. "Rebel McCassey—"

Rebel laughed and shook his head, wondering just where inside her tiny body all that spit and vinegar came from. "Uh-uh, darlin'. Don't even think about unleashing that red-headed temper on me. If you can't make it downstairs by yourself, you're not going."

"Oh, what's the big deal? Just take me down. If I start to feel bad, I'll come back up, I promise."

Rebel admired her efforts, but wasn't giving in. "The bottom line is that you're too sick to work. And it doesn't matter how angry it makes you, I'm not letting you out of this apartment until I'm damn sure you're well enough."

Gypsy tried changing her tactics from anger to pouting and gave him the saddest look she could come up with.

"Forget it, darlin'. It won't work," he said as he tucked her in. "I'll be back to check on you at lunch."

* * * *

As gently as possible, Rebel brought his hand up and brushed a stray curl from Gypsy's face. He was apparently trying not to disturb her, but when he lightly kissed her forehead, she stirred.

"Hey," she said groggily. "Is it noon already?"

"No," he whispered, "it's just after ten. How do you feel?"

Gypsy took a deep breath and felt her stomach turn over. Grateful Reb had made her stay in bed, she closed her eyes and grabbed for his hand, drawing comfort from his touch.

"The same. It's probably just a twenty-four hour bug or something. I'll be fine."

Rebel frowned. "Gypsy, I think I know what's causing you to feel sick."

"You do?"

"I don't know any other way to say this but to just spit it out." He paused and then said, "Has it occurred to you that you could be pregnant?"

"What?" she asked, more than a little surprised by the question. "Why would you think..."

Gypsy stopped, did some quick figuring in her head, and answered her own question. She hadn't had her period, which had always been a little irregular, since three weeks before the tornado. Five weeks ago.

Dizziness. Nausea. No period for eight weeks.

She had to be pregnant.

The very thought of Rebel's baby growing inside her made Gypsy want to leap out of bed and dance around the room, but the queasy feeling in her stomach forced her to stay where she was.

"Well?" he asked, anxiously, "are you?"

She had to tell him, but would he be happy? "I don't know," she said tentatively, "my period has always been irregular, but I've never gone eight weeks without one. It could be a little early to tell, but ... I think I might be."

"I love you," he whispered.

"You mean you're happy?"

"Of course I'm happy, Gypsy. Why wouldn't I be?"

"Because it's so soon. We just got married. I thought maybe—"

"I know where you're headed darlin' but don't even go there. There's no greater gift you could ever give me than a baby. Today, tomorrow, next week; it could never be too soon."

Her dizziness and nausea temporarily forgotten, Gypsy sat up and threw her arms around her husband as tears of joy sprang to her eyes. "Oh, Reb."

Rebel drew her close and buried his face in her hair. After a minute of tender silence, he said, "I think we should get a test or maybe take you to the doctor. Just to be sure."

"Okay," she agreed. "Just not today. I don't feel much like going anywhere."

Rebel kissed her on the lips and eased her head back down onto the pillow. "I'll call and make you an appointment for later in the week," he told her. "That way, I can go with you."

That was unexpected. "You'd really go with me?"

"I wouldn't miss it," he said, standing up. "But right now I have to go. Kane's new friends from across the street have a backhoe stuck in the mud, and he was nice enough to volunteer us to push them out. I'll be back as soon as I can. Frank and Rose are in the garage if you need anything."

"Okay."

"I'll come up and check on you when I get back," he said and bent over to give her a kiss.

She tightened her grip on his hand as he tried to walk away. "I love you."

He gave her hand a careful squeeze and tucked it back under the blanket. "I love you, too, darlin'. Get some sleep."

The door to their apartment clicked shut and Gypsy listened to the sound of Rebel and his heavy, steel-toe work boots thundering down the metal stairs. She heard the clank of a big bay door opening, followed by Outlaw's loud barking and obnoxious shouts and laughter as her husband and his cousins left the garage. Sometimes, she thought, they were no more mature than a bunch of ten-year-olds.

Thinking about kids caused her mind to wander to the tiny life growing inside her. Besides her mother, this baby would be the first blood relative she ever had. She'd love to have a little boy that looked exactly like Rebel, jet-black hair and those McCassey royal blue eyes. But no matter what it turned out to be, Gypsy knew she and Reb would make sure the baby knew how much it was loved.

Still dizzy, Gypsy flipped off the covers and slowly sat up, figuring as long as she was awake, she might as well use the bathroom. Even though it was only ten feet down the hall and everyone but Frank and Rose had gone across the street, she pulled on a pair of cutoff jean shorts anyway, just in case. Her long white T-shirt completely covered them, but she felt more comfortable not being half naked.

As she passed the door to the fire escape halfway to the bathroom, Gypsy thought she heard a noise on the metal steps. Before she could check it out, her stomach lurched and she barely made it to the bathroom before throwing up the crackers Reb had talked her into eating earlier.

Twenty minutes later, Gypsy emerged from the bathroom no longer nauseous, but not even close to feeling normal. She'd managed to relieve herself and brush her teeth without much of a problem, but wasn't up to taking a shower and couldn't wait to crawl back into bed.

The well-worn planks of the wooden floor were soft against the bottom of Gypsy's bare feet as she made her way down the hall. Once inside the apartment, she closed the door behind her. But before she had the chance to lock it, someone grabbed her from behind, a hand inside a leather glove clamping tightly over her mouth. Swallowing the bile that had risen in her throat, Gypsy began to struggle.

When she felt the cold steel of a gun touch her temple, her mouth went dry, she broke out into a sweat, and her body went deathly still.

"That's a little more like it," an unfamiliar male voice said when she stopped struggling. "You give me any trouble, the couple downstairs is history. Understand?"

Gypsy nodded.

"Come on." His gloved hand quietly opened the door, and he half dragged Gypsy into the hall.

Who was this person? And how did he get into the garage without being seen?

When her captor stopped midway down the hall in front of the door leading to the fire escape, Gypsy's stomach did another flip and she almost threw up again as she realized how the man had gotten in. The noise she'd heard earlier must have been him climbing up the fire escape. She didn't know how he'd managed to get the door unlocked, but that

didn't seem to matter now. He was in, holding her at gunpoint, ready to kill, or have someone else kill Frank and Rose if she made any noise.

Gypsy began to panic. What was she going to do? There was no way she'd risk two innocent lives by trying to alert them to the intruder's presence. And since she was barely dressed, she didn't have anything to drop to leave a trail for Reb to follow. All she had was her wedding ring, which would make noise upon landing on the wooden floor. Gypsy didn't really want to part with it anyway. For all she knew, it was the only part of her husband she would ever see again.

* * * *

For two, muddy, rain-soaked hours, Rebel, his uncle, and cousins worked to free the sunken backhoe. After handshakes and thanks, the construction foreman offered to buy lunch, but the five exhausted McCassey's declined and trudged back across the street. They stopped in front of the office door and stripped off their polyester coveralls and work boots, which were sopping wet and covered in mud.

Rose was waiting with an armload of dry towels and generously handed them out as the men came back inside.

"Thanks, Rose," Rebel said, taking one to wipe his face. "Has Gypsy been down?"

Rose shook her head. "She was in the bathroom for a while just after you boys left but didn't come downstairs. I haven't heard a peep out of her since. Maybe you should go check on her."

Rebel tossed his towel into the barrel they used for dirty rags. "I'm headed up now." He turned to his cousin. "But first I want to thank Kane for volunteering our services. It's not like I had any real work to do today."

"Sorry, man," Kane said, sounding not only surprised, but also grateful to hear the slight hint of humor Rebel had put into his statement. "But you know you would have gone over and helped whether I volunteered you or not."

"Yeah, right," Rebel said sarcastically, throwing his cousin two twenty-dollar bills. "It's my day to buy lunch but you're going to pick it up. I'm worn out."

Kane started to protest then closed his mouth. "Hey!" he said, obviously trying to lighten the mood a little more. "I can't help it if something I was sure would take no more than fifteen minutes wound up wasting the entire morning. The hole that backhoe was stuck in couldn't have been any deeper if someone had taken a shovel and dug it themselves."

"You're treading on thin ice, Kane," Rebel warned, no longer in the mood to fool around. He felt like a drowned rat, and wanted nothing more than get cleaned up.

Kane changed the subject immediately. "What do you want to eat?" he shouted, as Rebel turned and headed toward the stairs.

"I don't care," he shouted back, "something hot."

Instead of walking into the apartment filthy and wet, Rebel detoured into the bathroom to take a shower first.

Standing under the hot water, he thought about how much his life had changed. Less than six months ago, he hadn't even been dating anyone. Now he had a wife, and together

they were going to have a baby. Even though babies born into his family had an immediate strike against them because they were McCassey's, Rebel vowed that his children would have a better life than he did. And they weren't going to grow up around violence or be beaten the way he and his brothers were. Any kids he and Gypsy brought into the world were going to know from day one that they were wanted and loved by two parents who loved each other.

Thoroughly excited about the idea of becoming a father, Rebel finished his shower and dried off. Thankful for the extra change of clothes he kept under the bathroom vanity, he dressed in the old blue jeans and white sleeveless shirt.

He debated about whether or not to disturb Gypsy, but he'd promised to check on her when he got back, so he decided to see if she needed anything.

The inside of the apartment was still too dark to see. He turned on the small kitchen light. When he glanced at the bed and noticed it was empty, he became alarmed. "Gypsy?"

When there was no answer, he realized she must be in the garage, and headed downstairs.

"Gypsy?" he called when he reached the bottom of the metal steps.

Rose walked out of the office. "Rebel, I told you she hasn't been downstairs all morning." She frowned. "Didn't you check on her?"

"You mean she didn't just come down here?"

She shook her head. "No."

He put his hands on her shoulders and squeezed a little harder than he meant to. "Are you sure?"

Rose winced, and he let go immediately. "Yes, I'm sure. I can see the stairs from my office window. I've been in there all morning, and Gypsy hasn't been down."

Rose took a deep breath and backed away. "Frank!" she called to her husband frantically. "Frank!"

Frank walked around the corner with a greasy rag in one hand and ratchet in the other. "What is it?"

Instead of answering her husband, Rose raised her arm and pointed at Rebel, whose face had gone completely white.

Frank took a step forward. "Good Lord, boy, what's wrong?"

Struggling to keep calm, Rebel told him, "Gypsy's missing."

Upon hearing that, everyone in the garage dropped what they were doing.

"What do you mean missing?" Frank asked. "She couldn't have gone anywhere, Rebel. She never came downstairs. Not once."

"Well she's not upstairs, either."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure, Frank! This is a small place; it's very hard to miss someone!"

Hot with a mixture of anger and fear, Rebel began searching his tool cabinet for a pack of Marlboro's.

Judd, who'd returned just fifteen minutes before they'd gotten the backhoe free, was suddenly by his side. He put a comforting hand on his brother's shoulder and handed him a lit cigarette. "Tell us what happened, bro."

In less than a minute, Rebel spit out the whole story, beginning with Gypsy feeling sick that morning and ending with finding the bed empty after his shower.

"You don't think she just went for a walk or something?" asked Kane, who had just returned with lunch.

"In the pouring rain?" Rebel was glaring in such a threatening way that Kane actually took a step back.

Judd stepped forward and suggested they take a few minutes to search for her. "Maybe she just needed some air."

Rebel whirled around and yelled, "She's pregnant, goddammit! She wouldn't take a chance on getting sick by walking around outside in a downpour."

Judd froze. "Gypsy's pregnant?"

Looking shocked, everyone watched as the man who was usually more calm than anyone in a desperate situation sat down in a chair, bent his head, and sighed. "Yes."

"How far along is she?"

"I don't know, a few weeks." He raised his head and looked at his brother. "She was too sick to get out of bed this morning, Judd. There's no way she left here on her own."

"What about Outlaw? He would've barked if anybody strange was sniffing around."

"He was across the street with us," Jimmy said from a few feet away.

Rebel didn't need to hear the sound of Kane throwing up into a trashcan to know his cousin was feeling more than a little guilty. He also knew that Kane would be useless in their search for Gypsy unless he was sure Rebel wasn't mad at him. "It's not your fault, Kane," Rebel said, flatly. "If someone

was able to sneak Gypsy out of here while the garage was quiet without Frank and Rose hearing anything, they could've gotten her out from under our noses, too."

"Not fucking likely. Nobody's ever pulled one over on you, Rebel," Kane reminded him, "nobody. You're too smart for that."

"Yeah, well, this time I wasn't."

Kane walked over and held a hand out to his cousin. "I'm sorry I let you down, man. Really. If I thought for one minute something was going to happen while we were gone, I would've told those guys to dig their machine out themselves, Rebel. I swear."

Rebel gave his hand a quick shake. "What's done is done. It's not your fault."

"Thanks."

Ignoring Kane, Rebel stood and began talking to no one in particular. "The only way someone could enter or leave the garage without being noticed is through the fire escape."

Followed by Judd, Kane, Brady, and Flynn, Rebel took the metal stairs two at a time. When he reached the door to the fire escape, he held his breath and wrapped his large hand around the doorknob, praying it was still locked. When the knob twisted and the door opened, the five men stared in shock at the muddy footprints leading up and down the steps.

"Son of a bitch!" Reb yelled.

No one spoke.

"Whoever grabbed her took a lot of care not to leave footprints anywhere else but here in the stairwell. There's none in the hall or my apartment."

Before the others knew he was moving, Rebel had pushed passed them and walked into his apartment. They followed, catching him just as he sat down to put on his boots.

"What are you doing?" Judd asked.

Rebel stood and opened a dresser drawer. "Going to find my wife." He pulled out a .22 caliber pistol, checked the clip, then reached behind his back and put it in the waistband of his pants.

Judd stepped forward and grabbed his brother's arm. "I'm not letting you go alone."

Rebel yanked his arm from Judd's grasp and made his way to the door. "You don't have a choice."

"You don't even know where she is!" Judd yelled as he and the boys chased Rebel down the stairs.

"Well, I'm not going to find her standing around here arguing with you!"

Rebel raced down the stairs, the four men close on his heels. Halfway across the garage floor, he stopped short at the unexpected sight of his oldest brother, Blackie. Arms crossed, the man with waist length, wavy, dark brown hair was leaning with his shoulder resting against the wall, cigarette dangling from his lips. The shaggy, dark colored five o'clock shadow was new. So was his enormous muscular build; twice what it had been the last time Rebel had seen him. What hadn't changed was the cocky tilt of his head and come-on-I-dare-you look on his face.

Paying no attention to where they were going, Judd, Brady, Kane, and Flynn slammed into Rebel.

"Back off!" Reb yelled, still staring at Blackie.

Muffled apologies came from behind him just as Blackie began laughing. "I see you four assholes are still playin' follow the leader; never could figure out what made you the fuckin' Pied Piper, little brother."

Rebel smirked at his oldest brother. "Nice to see you, too, Blackie."

Ignoring his other brother and cousins, Blackie took one last drag on his cigarette and dropped it to the floor. Without bothering to extinguish the butt, he pushed away from the wall and walked to his youngest brother. They embraced then Blackie backed away. "I got some information you might be interested in."

Rebel shook his head and went to his tool cabinet in search of his truck keys. "I don't have time to screw around, Blackie. My wife's missing."

"How long has she been gone?"

Something about the seriousness in his brother's voice made him stop and look up. "A few hours at the most. Why?"

"Then you might want to listen to what I have to say."

Squinting suspiciously, Rebel took a threatening step toward his brother. "What do you know about Gypsy?"

Blackie grinned. "You ain't changed much." Rebel was a big man now, but thanks to constant weightlifting, Blackie was, and always had been, much bigger. His size was intimidating, but even as a scrawny kid, Rebel hadn't been afraid to challenge his oldest brother; though he usually wound up getting his ass kicked for doing it. By never showing any fear, Rebel had earned a lot of people's respect, including Blackie's. And despite the fact that they looked at

just about everything completely different, the brothers were very close.

"Only what you told me on the phone," Blackie replied, "but I know plenty about her father."

Rebel stared at Blackie.

"I guess you want to listen now, don't you?"

"Shut the fuck up. Keep your sarcasm to yourself and tell me what you know."

Blackie walked to the table in the middle of the room, turned a metal folding chair around backward, straddled it, and sat down. "You got a smoke?"

Following his brother's lead, Rebel sat down opposite Blackie and not-so-gently tossed a book of matches and half empty pack of Marlboro's across the table. "Talk."

He chuckled. "I got a story you ain't never gonna believe, little brother."

Rebel lifted a brow and Blackie finally started talking. "Okay, so after you asked me about Johnny Cooper, I did some askin' around and found out who he was. After watchin' him for a few weeks, I decided to find out who his cellmate was and talk to that guy instead of Cooper, just so Cooper wouldn't get wind I was lookin' for information on him.

"So one day in the yard, I make sure Cooper ain't around and approach his cellmate. Man did that guy hate to see me comin'." Blackie paused to laugh. "He turned white as a ghost. Probably thought I was bein' sent to kill him or somethin'."

Blackie finished his cigarette and lit another one before repeating, word for word, the conversation he had with Cooper's cellmate...

* * * *

"I'm lookin' for a guy named Johnny Cooper," Blackie announced. "You know him?"

The man, who was probably a good nine inches shorter than Blackie, didn't do much to hide the fact that he was very afraid. "Yeah, I know him. We been sharin' a cell since I got here."

"How long is that?"

"'Bout ten years give or take. What do you want with Cooper?" the man asked, nervously. "He done somethin' to you?"

Blackie tossed the man a pack of cigarettes. "I need some information."

"I'll tell you anything you want to know, man."

"Cooper ever mention that he's lookin' for someone?"

"Funny you should ask that. Up until a couple of weeks ago, Cooper hadn't said more than ten words to me or anyone else the whole time he's been in The Joint."

"What happened to make him start runnin' his mouth?" Blackie asked.

"Cooper likes to read a lot. Newspapers mostly. One day at the end of July, he's readin' The Baltimore Sun, and just like that, out of the blue, starts laughin'. Since he seemed happy, I took the chance he might want to talk and asked him what was so funny."

"What'd he say?"

"He said that he was finally gonna get revenge on the person who'd ruined his life. He said he'd been searchin' for eleven years."

"Eleven years is a long time," Blackie commented. "Who's he searchin' for?"

"I asked him the same thing. I said, 'Hey Cooper, what'd this guy do to you that you been searchin' for him eleven years?' That's when he told me it wasn't no guy he was lookin' for, it was a girl. After hearin' that, I lost interest and didn't ask no more questions. I figured it was just some girl who'd fucked him over or somethin'. Bullshit as far as I'm concerned."

Shit like that was bull as far as Blackie was concerned, too. "You ever find out what that article was about he was readin'?"

"Somethin' about a tornado they had somewhere out west. Hagerstown, I think."

Blackie nodded. Cooper's cellmate had told him exactly what he wanted to know, that Cooper was planning on going after Gypsy the minute he was released from prison.

"I heard Cooper's got a parole hearin' comin' up. Any idea when it is?"

The man shrugged. "Any day now. Cooper don't even know for sure."

Blackie nodded again. "You'll keep quiet about our conversation?"

Cooper's cellmate eyed Blackie from head to toe. "Sure thing, man."

Blackie tossed the man another pack of cigarettes and walked away.

* * * *

Rebel's stomach tightened into a knot. "You ever get a chance to talk to Cooper?"

"No, but I followed him around for a few more days, watched him make a mess of phone calls the last week or so he was there, traded nearly everything he had to other inmates for their phone privileges."

"Is that it?"

"Nope. Someone he knows owns an old two-story huntin' cabin on the outskirts of Frederick. I overheard him repeatin' the directions to whoever he was talkin' to on the phone the day before he was released. I'll bet you a carton of smokes that's where your wife is."

A million thoughts were running through Rebel's head as he stared at his oldest brother. Had Cooper himself snuck into the garage and taken Gypsy? If not, then who? Rebel thought for a minute that maybe the person who owned the cabin in Frederick lived in Hagerstown. That made sense, because whoever took her had to be familiar enough with the garage to know they'd need tools to cut the locks off the fire escape door. But how would Cooper know anyone in Hagerstown? Rebel recalled Gypsy saying she didn't think her father had ever been out of Baltimore City. Was she wrong? Shit! He didn't have a single answer for any of his questions.

"Well come on, Rebel." Blackie stood suddenly and swung his right leg over the chair, turned it around, and pushed it back under the table. "Let's me and you go get your wife."

"Let's go get my wife?" he repeated, borrowing some of Blackie's sarcasm. "Just like that?"

"Yeah, little brother, just like that. The cabin ain't more than twenty miles from here. You got any of my guns handy?"

"You're on parole," Rebel reminded him. "And half of them," he swept an arm in front of the group of cousins gathered behind him, "are on probation. I can't ask anyone to risk being thrown in jail. I have to do this alone."

"Fuck that," Blackie yelled. "Mess with one of us, mess with all of us. Right boys?"

Every man standing behind Rebel shouted in agreement.

Blackie moved around the table and put an arm around Rebel's shoulders. "But we don't need their help, little brother. Just you and me this time. Besides, whoever's got your wife ain't gonna try and chase us away with sticks. We're gonna need firepower."

Rebel momentarily considered what Blackie had said and knew his brother was right. "Your guns are up at Ten Acres. My .38 Specials are in the tow truck, they're much better than this," he said, setting his .22 on the table.

"The rest of you boys go up to Ten Acres and wait for us," Blackie instructed, as he and Rebel started to leave. "We'll meet you there sometime tomorrow and figure out what to do next." On their way out the door, Blackie stopped in front of Rose. "Pack a bag for Gypsy—a couple of changes of clothes, a pair of shoes, and whatever else you think she might need."

Give it to Judd before he leaves." Then he turned to Frank and tossed a tiny scrap of white paper in his lap. "The address to the cabin," he whispered, "in case we don't come back."

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Chapter 14

Soaking wet, Gypsy shivered uncontrollably as she curled into a ball and tried to keep warm. There was no doubt in her mind that her father was responsible for her kidnapping. At least she could be thankful none of the McCassey's had gotten hurt when she was taken.

At least she didn't think anyone had been hurt.

Shuddering, Gypsy wished she'd been wrong when she told Reb that her father would someday catch up to her. And wishing, too, that he'd been wrong the other day when he said he believed her father was now after her.

Rebel, more than likely, had discovered by now that she was missing. Her heart ached for him, knowing he must be going crazy wondering where she was. She just prayed he'd figure out that she hadn't run away this time, but instead, was taken against her will.

A single tear slid down her cheek when the reality of the situation sunk in. "He won't even know where to look for me," she cried out loud, convinced the chances of seeing her husband and his family again were slim to none. Her father had wanted to kill her for eleven years, and now he had his chance.

She'd probably be dead before nightfall.

Lying at the foot of the bed, Gypsy closed her eyes and tried to recall everything that had happened since she was taken.

Whoever grabbed her from the apartment had carried her down the fire escape and into the woods behind the garage. Blindfolded, she was handed off to a man waiting on some kind of all-terrain vehicle. After a long ride through the pouring rain; wet branches slapping and scraping her face, they stopped and she was thrown into the back of a car and driven to the place she was now being held.

The man driving removed her blindfold when they arrived, but Gypsy didn't get much of a chance to look around before she was dragged inside a small, dilapidated two-story cabin. Once through the front door, she was ushered up the stairs and into the only room on the second floor. The spacious area had just one window and one piece of furniture, a bare single mattress on top of a rusty metal frame.

"Sit," the tall, skinny man demanded.

Thinking about what would become of the tiny life growing inside her if she made the man angry, Gypsy obeyed and sat on the edge of the bed.

She gasped in fear when he suddenly grabbed her legs and swung them up onto the mattress, but was relieved when all he did was reach under the bed and pull out a pair of shackles, realizing his only intention was chaining her to the frame.

The man worked quickly, silently. He closed the shackles tightly around each of Gypsy's ankles, wrapped the chain around the frame of the bed several times, and secured it with a padlock. With his task complete, he turned and left the room without another glance at his prisoner.

The second the door closed, Gypsy sat up and tugged on the shackles and chains.

Nothing budged.

"I'll never get out of here," she said as she lay down again. Trying frantically to get a handle on the flood of emotions running through her, Gypsy fought the tears and hysteria that threatened to take over. In the end, the tears came anyway. She cried for everything from her unborn baby to the mother she'd lost and everything in between, missing the comfort and safety of Rebel's big, strong arms, the sense of home she'd felt at the garage, and because she just didn't feel good. Then she prayed that somehow Rebel would find out where she was being held, and come for her so that they could be together again.

Gypsy had tried to be strong her whole life—mostly because if she didn't take care of herself, no one else would. But all the time she'd spent with the McCassey's the past few months had shown her what it was like to be part of a family. Gypsy didn't want to lose that. And she didn't want to lose Rebel.

So she made up her mind that if given a chance to face her father, she would be brave. She would stand up to him, for herself and for her mother, who never got the chance. She may have been scared and weepy now, but not for long.

She was going to fight for her freedom.

Just as soon as she got the chance.

* * * *

The slamming of the bedroom's heavy, wooden door caused Gypsy to wake with a start. When she turned toward the noise, she focused on a slim man whose dark brown eyes were boring into her.

A few inches shy of six feet, he was dressed in work boots, faded black jeans, and a threadbare grease-stained T-shirt that probably, at one time, had been white. His short red hair was sprinkled with the same small patches of gray as his disheveled beard, and was as filthy as the shirt. He flashed an evil grin, revealing a mouth missing more than half the number of teeth he should've had. Those that remained were badly decayed and yellowed.

"You know who I am, girl?" he asked in a low, raspy voice.

When Gypsy said nothing, the man's grin widened. "You do know, don't you bitch?"

Gypsy's eyes widened in terror. This was her father. This was the man who'd murdered her mother in cold blood then threatened to kill her, too.

And he was standing ten feet away.

Although she tried to remember her vow to be brave, the fear of this man she'd been afraid of seeing again for so long paralyzed her. Barely breathing, all she could do was stare as he came closer.

His first backhanded slap caught her on the right side of the face, sending searing pain through the scratches she'd gotten from the wet tree branches. He immediately gave her another vicious slap, and after a third brutal backhand, Gypsy's entire face went numb.

Dazed, Gypsy fought the darkness that threatened to take over, forcing herself to remain awake and alert by thinking of Rebel and their unborn child. Trying desperately to block out the throbbing pain in her face and ignore the ringing in her ears, she remained focused on her father. He was laughing at her efforts to stay upright.

"Don't give up, do you, girl?" He cackled, watching her struggle to remain conscious. "That comes from me. Your mother was weak. One little slap and that was it, bam, she was dead. That little incident was damn inconvenient, too. She died before I could find out where she hid my key."

Tears threatened at the mention of her mother, but she fought them off, vowing not to give this man the satisfaction of knowing he'd upset, hurt, and scared her. She stared at him in silent defiance for several minutes before he stepped forward, pulled back his arm and struck her with a blow that would have sent her flying off the bed if her ankles hadn't been chained to the frame.

"I'm in charge here," he said sternly, "not you."

Did he actually think she was trying to play mind games with him? All she wanted to do was stay conscious, a feat that was becoming more and more difficult by the second.

"I should've wasted you the same day as your mother."

Wide-eyed, Gypsy stared at him.

Wearing the same toothless, evil grin as before, he took another step forward. "I spent almost eleven years in prison because of you, you little bitch. I had to keep quiet and put up with a lot of shit for a long time to be able to make parole on my first try. But it was worth it. You know why? Because

the whole time I was in The Joint, all I thought about was you."

Gypsy hoped the terror she felt wasn't showing on her face.

"That's right. I thought about getting the key your whore of a mother stole from me, because I know you have it. And I thought about how I was going to kill you once you gave it to me. I think the best way would be for me to torture you ... slowly. That should almost pay me back for the torture I suffered in prison trying to behave myself.

"I got through a lot of those days by reading the newspaper, hoping that one day I'd see your name in there, maybe pick up a clue where to find you when I got out. I almost couldn't believe it when I finally struck gold; that was a real nice story the reporter wrote about those McCassey boys pulling you from a collapsed building. The article said you would've died if they hadn't gotten you out." He knelt in front of Gypsy, raised his left hand, and grabbed a bunch of her hair that had escaped her ponytail. "It's too bad they wasted their time, because this time tomorrow night, you'll be dead."

Cooper reached under the bed with his right hand and pulled out a .22 pistol. He cocked it, put his finger on the trigger, and pressed the end of the gun to her lips. "That key is going to make me a rich man. So tell me where it is, and maybe I'll take mercy on your pathetic soul and just blow your brains out, quick and painless like. Refuse, and I'll torture you slowly and painfully until you tell me where it is.

Either way, you're going to die. But how it happens is up to you."

Johnny Cooper let go of his daughter's hair and walked to the door. "It's getting late and I got some business to tend to before dark." He pointed the gun at her, tilted it slightly upward, and fired. The bullet tore into the cabin's wooden wall just above her head, sending splinters flying into Gypsy's already battered face. Her father flashed a grin that made Gypsy's blood run cold. "You think about what I said, girl. I'll be back first thing in the morning expecting some answers."

He turned and disappeared through the door, and Gypsy passed out.

* * * *

Rebel and Blackie crouched in the woods behind the cabin, squinting against the rising sun, grateful it had finally stopped raining. They'd been watching the area for hours trying to figure out what they were up against. There hadn't been much activity outside the cabin all night, but that didn't mean there wasn't an army of men inside.

"I've had it with sitting in these damn trees," Reb whispered to his brother. "We've been out here all night, and the only thing that's moved has been that old man every time he comes outside to take a piss."

"So?"

"So that tells me there's no indoor plumbing. If anyone else besides Gypsy was in that cabin, they would've been coming out here to do the same thing the old guy's been doing. He's probably the only one here guarding her."

"Well, what do you wanna do, little brother?" Blackie asked. "It's your call."

Rebel splayed the fingers on his right hand and ran it through his still damp, jet black hair. "Let's take out the old guy first. Once he's out of the way, we'll do a quick sweep of the first floor to make sure no one else is here. My guess is that Gypsy's in that room upstairs."

The brothers glanced simultaneously at the lone window on the second floor.

Rebel started to rise, but Blackie grabbed his arm and pulled him back. "Wait here," he whispered, "I'll take care of the guard."

Blackie got to his feet. When Rebel started to follow, his older brother pointed a loaded gun in his face. "I said stay," he repeated, low and threatening, "I'll signal when I'm ready for you."

Knowing Blackie would knock him out, or at least try if he didn't obey, Rebel nodded, cursed under his breath, and returned to his crouched position. He wasn't happy about being left behind. As Gypsy's husband, he felt it was his duty to rescue her. But he'd be damned if he was going to get shot by his own brother doing it.

Rebel waited silently at the edge of the woods for Blackie's signal. When his brother finally stepped around the corner and waved him over, he took off like a shot.

"Well?" he asked in anticipation when he reached Blackie. "What happened?"

"Ain't no one else downstairs," was the only answer his brother offered.

Confused, Rebel stopped short of entering the cabin.
"Where's the guard?"

"Dead," Blackie said matter-of-factly. "Now go get your wife."

Rebel stared at Blackie in disbelief. He'd always wondered if his older brother had enough self-control to stop himself from killing someone. Now he knew.

"I ain't gotta explain myself to you," Blackie said, giving Rebel a shove toward the door. "Get your ass inside and find Gypsy before company shows up."

Knowing his brother was right, Rebel drew his gun and entered the house. Quietly taking the stairs two at a time, he stopped in front of the bedroom door and listened for any signs of life inside.

Everything was quiet.

Knowing there could still be guards lying in wait, Rebel readied himself and gently turned the knob.

* * * *

Gypsy's breath caught in her throat the instant she heard the clank of the metal doorknob turning. The man guarding her from the wooden chair just inside the door took a long swig from his beer bottle and smirked. "You're in for it now," he whispered.

Assuming the person coming in was her father, Gypsy lay down on the mattress and turned away from the door. It wasn't until she heard her guard's chair crash to the floor that she turned back around to see what was happening. Her eyes widened in amazement when Rebel appeared in the doorway.

Rebel spotted the guard immediately and fired his gun into the man's stomach. At the same time, the guard managed to shatter the half-empty beer bottle across Rebel's temple. Gypsy's scream died in her throat as both men fell to the floor.

Unable to take her eyes off her husband, Gypsy struggled to sit up. What was Reb doing here? How had he found her? How was she going to help him?

Her train of thought was suddenly broken when a large man burst into the room. Frightened by his size, Gypsy wrapped her arms around her half-naked body and curled into a ball, inching into the corner as far as the shackles would allow.

A good four inches taller than Reb, the stranger's long, shaggy, dark brown hair fell around his face, which was covered in a few days growth of dark stubble. Assuming he was coming for her, Gypsy was surprised when he focused his attention on Reb instead. Kneeling, he ran his large hands along Reb's arms and legs. She could've sworn he was checking for broken bones, and knew she was right when she heard him sigh with relief when he found none.

Taking a deep breath, he carefully shifted around tufts of Reb's hair until he found the source of the blood. After close examination, he said, "You're gonna be fine, little brother."

Little brother? Gypsy squinted and took a closer look at the man who was now slowly rolling her husband onto his back. When he turned his head in her direction as he scooped Reb into his arms, Gypsy wondered why she hadn't recognized him sooner. He was taller, more muscular, and his hair was

much longer than in the picture taken fifteen years earlier, but she knew she was staring at Blackie McCassey.

"Blackie?" she said, not realizing she'd actually uttered his name out loud.

He froze, then turned and looked at her as if just realizing she was there. "Holy shit!" he rushed over, depositing his brother on the mattress next to her. "I almost forgot about you."

"I'm Gypsy."

"I know who you are, girl," he said, taking in her bruised and swollen face, along with the bloody scratches covering her arms and legs. "We waited outside all damn night in the rain to come in here and get you." He knelt down to feel her limbs for broken bones the same way he did to his brother, but when he went to touch her, she flinched and tried to move farther into the corner.

He backed away immediately. "I ain't gonna hurt you, Gypsy. I just wanna make sure you're okay."

"I'm fine," she said just a little too quickly, drawing a suspicious glance from Blackie. To avoid the questions she knew Blackie was about to ask, Gypsy changed the subject. "What about Reb?"

Blackie looked down at his unconscious brother. "He's okay. But he's gonna have a hell of a headache when he wakes up."

Hearing that, Gypsy burst into tears.

"Hey!" Blackie shouted as if he was angry, "don't do that!"

Gypsy looked at him and continued to cry, tears silently rolling down her cheeks.

"My lovesick little brother ain't quit talkin' about you since we left the garage," he told her. "He said you been through a lot and don't get upset easy. So why the hell are you cryin', girl? I just said he's gonna be fine."

She wiped at her tears. "I'm sorry. I just didn't know how bad he was hurt. I was afraid he was going to die."

Blackie took a closer look at Gypsy. "You know, with no make-up and your hair in a ponytail like that, you look more like someone's little sister than my brother's wife."

Was he for real? Her husband, his brother, was lying in front of them unconscious, and all Blackie could say was that she looked like a little kid? "What?"

He sighed. "Gypsy, I can tell how much you love Rebel, and I'm sorry for yellin' at you. It's just that I don't deal well with cryin' females."

When Gypsy's only response was a loud sniff, Blackie, looking very much like Rebel as he ran a hand through his long hair, squatted in front of her. "Look," he explained calmly, "I may be a lot of things, but I ain't no liar. Rebel's gonna be fine. One good slap in the face, and he'll be wide-awake. Okay?"

"A slap in the face?"

"Yeah. It always worked when he was a kid."

She shrugged, knowing full well that Rebel wasn't going to be happy about his brother slapping him in the face. "Okay," she agreed, expecting to have to dive for cover when Reb came to and realized who'd hit him.

"Good." He flashed a quick grin, revealing perfectly straight teeth. "Now let's get the hell out of here before someone discovers the dead guard downstairs."

"Dead?" Her eyes widened a little. "You killed him?"

Blackie shrugged, showing no remorse. "It was him or me, honey. And I ain't much good to you and my brother dead. Am I?"

"No."

"Right, now let's go."

"I can't," she told him, pointing to the shackles around her ankles and the chains locked to the bedpost.

"Shit!" Blackie bent down to examine the chain and ran his hand along the thin metal. "I ain't got nothin' to cut these off."

"It's okay," she said. "Just get Reb out of here before they come back."

Blackie looked at her in amazement. "You really would sacrifice yourself for my brother, wouldn't you?"

She nodded, and he changed the subject. "How many of them are there?"

"I'm not sure exactly. One guy grabbed me from the garage, there was one on an ATV, one driving a car, the two guards, and my ... and Johnny Cooper." She paused to look out the window at the rising sun. "He said he'd be back first thing this morning. Please hurry and get Reb out of here, Blackie. He got hurt trying to help me, and I'll never forgive myself if something else happens to him."

"And he'd never forgive me if somethin' happened to his wife." He looked her dead in the eye. "I ain't leavin' you behind."

Blackie took a quick look around the room. Seeing nothing to cut the chains off Gypsy's ankles, he reached behind his back and pulled out the pistol. "There ain't no other choice, I gotta shoot the chains off." He quickly removed his T-shirt and handed it to her. "Cover your head with this. I don't want no metal ricochetin' into your face."

She started to lift the shirt but he put a hand out to stop her. "One more thing," he said. "The sound of this gun goin' off is probably gonna attract some attention, it not bein' huntin' season and all. So we're gonna have to run like hell if we want to get out of here unnoticed. Can you make it?"

Gypsy looked down at her bare feet and bruised, swollen ankles, not even sure she could walk. "I can do it."

"Good deal." He looked down at Rebel's large, still form and shook his head. "I'm gonna try and rouse him one more time before I fire this gun, 'cause it's gonna be a long walk outta here if I gotta carry him. My baby brother ain't as little as he used to be."

Blackie turned away from Gypsy and knelt in front of his brother again. With an open palm, he not-so-gently tapped the side of Rebel's face until he began to stir. "Nap time's over, little brother, wake up."

Rebel's eyes went wide when he opened them. "What the hell..."

"Your head lost a fight with a beer bottle. You got a hell of a knot."

* * * *

Rebel's hand flew to the left side of his head, and he groaned when it came in contact with a baseball-sized lump and warm, sticky blood.

Wiping the area with the bottom of his shirt, Rebel sat up and took a good look at Gypsy's face. She'd been beaten, that much was obvious. But what else had they done to her? The clothes on her body, scant as they were, seemed to be intact; no rips or tears, and there wasn't any blood on the mattress. It didn't appear as though she'd been raped, and Rebel thanked the Lord for small favors.

Careful of any wounds she may have that he didn't notice, Rebel cautiously pulled his wife close. "Are you all right? He didn't hurt you too bad, did he?"

Too choked up to talk, she shook her head to tell him no.

"Don't worry, darlin', we'll get you all fixed up when we get out of here."

"We got somethin' else to worry about first." Blackie moved out of his brother's line of vision to reveal Gypsy's ankles; black and blue, chained to the bed.

Rebel let loose with a string of profanities and jumped up to examine her ankles. "Good God." He sat on the bed next to her and raised his hands, wanting to pull her into his arms again. "What did he do to you?"

She took a deep breath and managed a smile. "It's not as bad as it looks. I'm just glad you're okay. I thought you were going to die."

"Sorry, Gypsy, I'm afraid you're stuck with me."

"Ahem," Blackie cleared his throat to get their attention. "This is real sweet and all, but we need to get those chains off and get the hell outta here."

"How?" Rebel asked. "There's nothing here..." Then he noticed the .38 in his brother's hand. "Good idea."

Blackie grinned, reached into his waistband, and pulled out the gun he picked up off the floor. He tossed it to Rebel. "The clip's full. Ready when you are."

Rebel returned his brother's grin. "I'm glad you're back."

"It's good to be back, little brother," he aimed his gun at the chain on Gypsy's right ankle. "Let's get this over with."

"Cover your face, darlin'," Rebel said after giving her a quick kiss. "This'll only take a second."

Gypsy put the T-shirt over her head and squeezed her eyes shut. The brothers fired two shots each and she was free.

She swung her legs over the edge of the bed, wincing when the shackle still attached to her left ankle struck the metal frame. Planting her feet on the floor, she stood.

"No shoes?" Rebel asked.

She shook her head.

"It's okay," Rebel offered reassurance by touching her shoulder. "Can you walk?" he asked.

"I think so."

Blackie looked out the window to check for anyone who might have heard the shots. "It's clear," he said. "I'll go out first. If somethin' happens and I go down, leave me. Don't take a chance on gettin' caught by these guys again." Blackie took a deep breath and checked the window one last time.

"Don't forget, the truck keys are still in the ignition. You two ready?"

Rebel looked at Gypsy, who nodded. He took her right hand in his left. "Ready."

All three moved toward the door as one. Blackie reached for the knob, but before turning it, he made a fist with his left hand and held it out. Rebel let go of Gypsy and touched his fist to his brother's. The men nodded to each other, Rebel took hold of Gypsy's hand again, and they left the room.

Guns drawn and ready, Blackie and Rebel led the way down the stairs of the small cabin followed closely by Gypsy, who was clinging to Reb's left hand and trying to keep the few links of chain still attached to her shackles from clanking together. When they reached the bottom, Blackie put a finger to his lips. He peeked around the corner and noticed that the guard whose neck he'd broken earlier was still on the floor. There was no sign that any one else had returned.

"The cabin's empty. Rebel, you and Gypsy go out first. If it's clear, send her ahead of you to start the truck." He turned to Gypsy. "Once you get it runnin', honey, slide into the middle. I'll drive."

Blackie twisted the knob on the front door, backed away, and kicked it open. There were no sounds outside. "On the count of three," he whispered, "you two take off." He put his left hand in the air, raised one finger, two, then put his hand on Rebel's shoulder and pushed him out the door.

All was quiet until Rebel and Gypsy were halfway to the truck. Someone fired a gun at them, the bullet hitting the side

of the cabin just above Rebel's head. "Go!" he yelled to Gypsy, pushing her toward the truck.

She took off running while Rebel and Blackie returned fire, the sound of their guns deafening.

Rebel's pickup truck was right where Blackie said it would be. Gypsy opened the door and jumped into the driver's seat. She grabbed onto the key and turned the ignition but nothing happened. Again and again she tried, but the engine refused to turn over.

The sound of gunfire was getting closer as Rebel and Blackie made their way to the truck. "Oh, you stupid truck!" she yanked the keys from the ignition and tossed them to the floor. Left with no other choice, Gypsy reached under the steering column and pulled out the wires. She took the ignition wire in one hand, battery wire in the other and closed her eyes, praying she was doing everything right. "Please let this work." She brought the wires together and the engine roared to life. Gypsy slid into the middle seat just as the brothers reached the vehicle.

Rebel jumped into the passenger seat and leaned out the open window. He continued firing as Blackie got behind the wheel, slammed the truck into gear, and took off down the dirt road.

They were a good quarter mile away before Rebel stopped firing. He ducked back into the truck and turned his attention to Gypsy. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," she told him, then noticed the blood running down his right arm. "You're bleeding!" she cried, beginning to panic.

"It's just a flesh wound. See?" He leaned closer and showed her where the bullet had grazed his bicep. "I'm fine."

Gypsy took a deep breath and looked at Blackie, who was also bleeding. She started to touch the spot on his thigh where blood was seeping through his blue jeans, but his right hand left the wheel and caught her wrist in mid-air. "Uh-uh, honey. That ain't no flesh wound." He released her almost immediately and grabbed the steering wheel again. "It hurts like hell, so don't touch."

"Sorry." Her voice cracked, giving away exactly how unnerved she really was.

* * * *

Rebel took one look at Gypsy's face and knew she had to be close to tears. His young wife was tough, but in less than twenty-four hours, she'd been kidnapped, beaten, and caught in the middle of a gun battle. Now she was sitting in a truck between two bleeding men, one with a bullet in his thigh. "Come here, darlin'." Rebel lifted his left arm and she leaned into him, lying quietly until Blackie found his voice again.

"Who-wee, little brother, you ain't lost a thing!"

Rebel tried not to smile, but failed. He shot rifles all the time when he went deer hunting, but had only shot a .38 a handful of times since he was a teenager. It felt great to know his aim was still just as true. Out of the three men shooting at them, Rebel hit two, plus shot out all four tires on their truck; which was why no one was chasing them. "No, I guess I haven't."

* * * *

Gypsy sat silently as the brothers talked, amazed that neither one of them seemed the least bit affected by the fact that they'd just been in a gunfight. A gunfight! They didn't seem worried about the police, or that they were both in need of medical attention.

"How did you find me?" Gypsy finally asked.

Blackie pulled over to the side of the road, and the two men filled Gypsy in on everything they knew. By the end of Blackie's story, she was barely able to breathe.

"You followed my fa—" She started to say father, but Johnny Cooper had never been a father to her. "You followed Cooper around the prison just to find out if he planned to come after me?"

Wasn't that dangerous? Couldn't that have started some kind of trouble if Cooper had noticed he was being watched? Blackie had put himself in danger for her. Twice.

"Damn good thing I did, too. Otherwise, girl, you'd have been long dead before anyone knew where to look for you."

The truth of Blackie's statement hadn't escaped her. Neither did the fact that she'd yet to thank the man she knew was responsible for saving her life. She gently touched her brother-in-law's muscular forearm with her small hand.

"Thank you, Blackie."

"For what?"

"Saving my life. If you didn't love Reb so much, I'd still be chained to the bed in that cabin."

Apparently not a bit uncomfortable accepting thanks and praise from a woman, Blackie smiled and leaned down to kiss

Gypsy's cheek. "No worries, girl. You're a McCassey now. And we take care of our own. Plus," he added with a wink, "I think I'm gonna like havin' me a little sister. I ain't had no one to pick on since this one," Blackie motioned toward Rebel, "grew big enough to do some damage when he was fightin' back."

Gypsy smiled up at him and snuggled closer to Reb.

Comfortably settled, she was about to close her eyes when she caught the look Blackie threw Rebel. "What is it?"

"There's something else we have to tell you."

There was no mistaking the seriousness in her husband's voice, just like there was no mistaking the rising panic in hers when she asked what was wrong.

Rebel wrapped his arms tightly around his wife. "We still don't have any idea who's helping Cooper."

Instantly, her body went rigid. "There's someone else after me, too?" She tried to sit up, but Reb just tightened his hold. "We're not sure if this person is actually after you or if they were just helping Cooper get to you. But we think it's someone in town because whoever took you from the garage knew how well we kept the door to the fire escape locked up. They were prepared with all the right tools to break in."

"What do we do now?" she asked.

"We're heading up to Ten Acres. The rest of the boys are there waiting for us. We need to let them know what went on here and come up with a plan on what to do next."

"What about the police?" she asked. "Shouldn't we call them?"

Rebel and Blackie exchanged glances. "No," Reb told her, "we'll handle this on our own."

"But there are two dead men back there. Won't there be some kind of investigation or something when the police find their bodies?"

"Correction, girl," Blackie said. "There are two dead criminals back there. The police ain't never gonna find their bodies, 'cause their criminal friends are gonna sink them to the bottom of Antietam Creek as soon as they find them."

"Blackie's right, Gypsy," Rebel said. "And there's no need to worry about the cops. They tend to stay away from any problems they think may be family feuds. Not only that, I wouldn't give Sheriff Johnson the satisfaction of knowing we needed help. He'd enjoy it too much."

"So what about Cooper?" Blackie cut in. "Did he talk to you? Say anything about why he's so angry with you?"

She shrugged. "He didn't tell me anything I didn't already know. He threatened to kill me eleven years ago if I went to the police, which I did, so I just assumed that's why he had me kidnapped."

"But why would he kidnap you if all he wanted was to kill you?" Blackie asked. "Why not just hide behind a tree and shoot you or run you down with a car? Why go to all the trouble to involve at least six other people if there was nothin' in it for them? We're missin' somethin' here."

Then it dawned on her. "He wants the key."

"A key?"

"Yeah," she confirmed. "Some kind of safe deposit box key he said was going to make him a rich man. He's convinced I have it."

"Do you?"

"Of course not."

"Than why does he think you do?"

"How the hell should I know?" she snapped, annoyed that he didn't seem to believe her.

The corners of Blackie's mouth lifted into a grin at the brief show of Gypsy's temper.

Breaking his temporary silence, Rebel jumped in and said, "Don't even think about it," when he noticed his wife and brother eyeing each other. "I know what the both of you are made of, and we don't have time to sit here while you," he pointed to Gypsy, "spit your angry fire at him while he," Rebel pointed to Blackie, "talks us to death. If you two want to go a few rounds, save it for when we're not being hunted by killers."

Blackie winked at Gypsy, who responded by cocking an eyebrow, but they both remained silent.

"Now," Rebel said, turning his attention to Gypsy. "Didn't you tell me that your parents had a fight about a key the night your mother died?"

"Yeah, she'd stolen it from him and refused to give it back. That's part of the reason he was so mad at her."

"Okay." He loosened his hold on her and sat up straight. "Now we're getting somewhere. So far we know that Cooper's looking for the key to a safe deposit box holding something that's going to make him rich. The question is ... why would he think you have it?"

"Well, the police gave my social worker a small box of things they gathered from our apartment after my mom died,

things they thought might be of value. It could've been in there."

"Bingo," he said. "Where's the box now?"

She frowned. "I don't have it anymore. It was stolen from my apartment the same day my social worker gave it to me. I never even got to look inside."

Rebel leaned against the passenger side door.

"What are we going to do?" Gypsy asked in sudden desperation, the playful moment she'd just shared with Blackie forgotten. "We can't go to the police for help and Cooper won't give up until he gets that key. A key I don't have! And even then he won't leave me alone. He wants me dead because I turned him in to the police."

Rebel kissed the top of Gypsy's head and began stroking her hair. "I need time to figure out our next move, and we need to put some distance between us and Cooper's cabin. Let's get up to Ten Acres, Blackie." He motioned for his brother to start driving again. "We need to find out more about Cooper and whoever the hell's been helping him before they realize we escaped and took out their men. Once they know Gypsy's gone, we won't have much time before they come after her again."

Rebel watched Gypsy as she settled herself against him again and closed her eyes. She'd had a hell of a couple of days and had kept herself together much better than he'd expected. She deserved to fall apart, but to her credit, seemed to be handling everything pretty well ... so far.

Blackie put his hand on the ignition to start the truck and suddenly realized it was still running. "Where the hell are the keys?"

Gypsy opened her eyes, winked at Blackie, and closed them again.

Blackie turned to his brother, who was beaming with pride. "You taught her to hotwire the truck?"

Rebel grinned. "Just like you taught me."

"Damn, little brother," he said, pulling back out onto the dirt road. "You got yourself one hell of a woman."

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Chapter 15

Four men, their faces lined with worry, jumped to greet the battered trio as they entered the dark hunting cabin on Ten Acres.

Judd, Brady, and Kane began firing questions the second Frank struck a match and lit the wick on an oil lantern. But as the room brightened and the group got a good look at Blackie, Rebel, and Gypsy, who looked as if they had been through a war, each one became silent.

Following Rebel as he took her hand and led her past the curious gazes of his family, Gypsy looked around the rustic, one-room, dirt floor cabin, which was complete with a wood-burning stove. The lantern resting on the kitchen counter did more to light the room than the numerous, small windows, which were all open in an effort to get the thick, humid, August air to circulate.

To Gypsy's left, she noticed a red water pump aimed into a large tub mounted on the wall, and canned goods were neatly stacked on the custom made shelves above. All eight cots lining the middle of the far wall were neatly made, blankets folded into thick squares at the bottom of each, making them look as if they belonged in an army barrack. The line of beds was flanked on each side by large pine bookshelves filled with everything from bars of soap, clean towels, and first aid equipment, to sheets, boxes of ammunition, and an abundance of clean neatly folded clothes. In the center of the room was a long wooden table surrounded by eight chairs. It

was here that Rebel stopped and motioned for Gypsy to sit down.

Frank rushed to her when he noticed the shackles. "Good Lord, girl, what happened to you?"

"I'm okay, Frank." She waved him off. "Help Blackie first, he's been shot."

Frank moved over to his nephew, and the men embraced. "You really came through for your brother," he said to the man infamous for being reckless and irresponsible, "and for Gypsy, too. We're all really glad to see you."

Blackie smiled. "It's good to be seen, old man. Now dig this hunk of lead out of me, will ya?"

Five minutes later, Blackie was sitting on one of the cots drinking moonshine from a small flask. Brady and Kane were holding him, trying to stop his flinching as Frank dug the bullet out of his thigh.

Ten feet away, Rebel and Judd had removed the chain links from Gypsy's ankles with bolt cutters and were now working on the shackles with hacksaws. They stopped when she flinched.

"You okay?" Judd asked.

"I'm fine."

"Hang in there, darlin'," Rebel shouted over the noise of his saw. "We're almost done."

"Okay."

Her ankles were free within minutes. While Judd collected the shackles and began to inspect them, Rebel carefully brushed the metal shavings from Gypsy's legs onto the floor

and lifted her off the chair. He walked to the row of cots and deposited her petite body on one at the end of the row.

"Let's get you cleaned up."

She nodded and sat still while he drenched a cotton ball with peroxide and went to work cleaning the scratches on her face. They were swollen, dirty, and covered in dried blood. Rebel told himself to ignore the unshed tears that appeared in her eyes. He knew the antiseptic was probably making the cuts on her face sting like hell, but they needed to be cleaned.

"I'm almost done, darlin'," he kept saying. "I'm almost done."

Judd waited until Rebel was finished taking care of Gypsy before bringing him the bag their aunt had packed for her. "Blackie had Rose put a few things together for Gypsy," he said, handing the bag to his brother. "Me and the boys'll clear out so she can change."

Everyone, including Blackie, who was a little unsteady on his feet, stepped outside for a smoke to give Gypsy some privacy.

"Come on," Rebel said, helping Gypsy stand up. "Let's get you washed and into some clean clothes."

He unzipped the blue nylon bag from Rose and rummaged through it until he found what he was looking for; fresh undergarments, a T-shirt, and pair of shorts. There were socks and tennis shoes, too, but from the look of Gypsy's ankles, she wasn't going to be able to wear them.

"Do you have to use the bathroom before you change?"

Relieved, she said, "I thought you'd never ask."

"There's no indoor plumbing," he told her, "but there is a portable pot behind that curtain." Rebel pointed to the corner of the kitchen where a plastic shower curtain hung in a doorway. "Just do whatever you have to do and leave it there. I'll empty it later."

Red faced, Gypsy turned to him. "But..."

Rebel sighed. They'd made love a hundred times and knew every inch of each other's bodies. Why was she picking now to start being modest? "It's nothing I haven't seen before, Gypsy, darlin'. So please, just go take care of yourself, so we can get you into some clean clothes. Okay?"

Gypsy turned away and disappeared behind the curtain. She made quick work of what had to be done and reappeared just as Rebel took a fresh bar of soap, washcloth, and towel off one of the shelves and placed them on the table next to a metal basin filled with water.

"Feel better?" he asked as he strode to the table.

"Much."

He smiled and reached for her. "Good. Come on over here and have a seat."

Gypsy sat down and watched as he dipped the washcloth into the water and lathered it with soap. "It's not a shower," he told her, "and the water's ice cold. But it's the best I can do."

After helping Gypsy remove her shirt, Rebel gently but quickly washed her upper body with the cloth and dried it. Then he hooked her bra for her and pulled the clean shirt over her head. Because the water had been so cold, she was

shivering despite the heat as he unbuttoned her jean shorts. He slid them, along with her underwear, down her leg.

She stepped out of the clothes so Reb could pick them up and shove them into the bag. Then he washed the lower half of Gypsy's body.

When she was finally dry and dressed, Reb led her to the pump in the kitchen and washed her hair as quickly as he could. By the time they were done, she was shivering again. "You ought to bottle that stuff and sell it," she told him through chattering teeth. "It's freezing."

"That's because the well is down so deep," he explained. "Sometimes it comes in handy, though. When I was seventeen I sliced the palm of my hand open gutting a ten-point buck. Judd had taken the truck and run into town for more ammo and Frank and I were here alone. He couldn't take me to the hospital until my brother got back, so he filled the sink with water and made me put my hand in it. I was numb in less than a minute."

Rebel put clean sheets on one of the cots as Gypsy towel dried her hair. When she was done, she draped the wet towel over one of the chairs at the table and crawled onto the cot. Rebel knelt down and covered her with the top sheet as she rested her head on a soft feather pillow.

"Try and get some rest, okay?"

She grabbed onto his wrist before he could move. "Don't leave me here."

The look of fear on her face twisted his gut. But she needed rest and he needed a smoke. "I'm not leaving, darlin'. I'll be right outside the door, I promise."

He leaned in and kissed her lips, then went to the bookcase for a flashlight. After turning it on and off several times, he set it on the floor beside her. "This place was built over a hundred years ago and has no electricity," he told her. "It's so dark without the lantern because the trees block out most of the sunlight. I'm turning it out, so if you need to see, turn on the flashlight."

"But I thought you were just going out to smoke a cigarette."

"I am. But the guys and I need to come up with a plan and figure out our next move."

She tried to sit up. "I should be in on that. Don't you need some information from me or something?"

Rebel put a hand on her shoulder and forced her back down. "You already told us everything you know. And what I really need is for you to relax and take it easy for a while. This place has been in my family for over a century, and it's no secret that my cousins and I hang out here. You can bet your life someone knows where we are, and because of that, there's a chance we may have to move out fast. I want you rested and ready ... for anything. And I don't want something happening to the baby. So please do as I ask and lie down for a while."

Gypsy fixed her green eyes on his blue ones and took a deep breath. "Can I say something?"

Rebel knew the look in Gypsy's eyes. It was the same one he'd seen the day she shook the oily rag in his face. Not today, he pleaded silently. He may not always know what's

best for her, but today he did. He prayed she didn't intend to argue with him. "Go ahead."

"I don't want to stay in the cabin by myself. And I don't want to sleep while you and the rest of the guys try to figure out what to do. But I know you're worried about me and the baby, and I haven't forgotten the promise I made the night you broke up the fight at Digger's. This is a dangerous situation, and I'll listen and do whatever you tell me. The last thing I want is to give you anything else to worry about."

Relieved she didn't plan to put up a fight, he relaxed. "I'll be outside. And don't worry, you're safe."

He turned to go, but the quiet sound of her voice saying, "Promise me something first," stopped him. When he swung back around, every bit of defiance she'd shown the moment before was gone. She was now looking at him with sweet, trusting eyes that made him want to promise her the world. "Anything."

"Promise that whatever plan you come up with, I'll be included."

"Gypsy..."

"Rebel, please," she begged. "This is my problem more than it is any of yours. Cooper's my ... father. I'm the one he's trying to hurt—"

"Kill," Reb interrupted.

"Kill," she repeated. "So I should be involved in whatever you guys are going to do, and..."

"And what?"

She bowed her head to hide the tears in her eyes. "And I don't want to be away from you. I'm afraid you're going to

sneak me back into town and make me stay with Rose while you take care of everything."

The thought had crossed his mind numerous times.

Gypsy pleaded with her husband again. "Please don't send me away. Spending the night chained to the bed in that cabin away from you was torture. I was terrified we'd never see each other again, and I don't want to be separated from you even for a minute. Promise we'll stay together, Reb, please."

Even though he wanted to, he just couldn't say no. There was a huge fight coming their way, and the last thing Rebel wanted was his wife and their unborn baby smack in the middle of it. But he could see how scared she was, and he wanted to do everything he could to make her feel safe. "I promise."

She thanked him and lay back down.

"Get some rest," he told her. "I'll look in on you in a little while."

Gypsy closed her eyes and fell asleep before Rebel opened the front door.

* * * *

"Here he comes," Judd announced when Rebel exited the cabin. He tossed a pack of cigarettes to his younger brother as he joined the rest of the family under a lush maple tree.

When the rest of the men heard Judd ask Rebel if he had a plan yet, they all turned to him expectantly.

Taking a seat in the grass, Rebel leaned against the trunk of the tree and took a long drag on his Marlboro. "I'm working

on it." He exhaled and surveyed the faces staring back at him. "Where's Flynn?"

"At the garage with Jimmy," Frank told him. "We thought it'd look better if it was open for business as usual."

Rebel nodded in agreement. "Good thinking." He took another long drag and extinguished the butt on the bottom of his boot. "Anyone heard anything?"

"Nah. Blackie told us to meet you here today, but we all came up last night, just in case," Kane explained. "If there's any information floating around, Flynn'll know about it. He and Jimmy should be up in a few hours. They're closing the garage at noon."

Rebel nodded and let his gaze drift to Blackie. Eyes closed, his older brother was sitting on the ground leaning his back against an oak tree a few feet away. The flask of moonshine, which Rebel hoped Blackie had the good sense not to finish, was resting between his outstretched legs. Leaning forward, he kicked his brother's boot. "You awake?"

"Do that again, little brother, and you and I are gonna have problems," he halfheartedly warned, not bothering to open his eyes. "How's your wife?"

"Okay. She's inside sleeping. Your leg all right?"

"I'll live."

"Good. I'm going to need you."

"No worries, Rebel," he said, finally opening his eyes. "That's what I'm here for."

Rebel nodded, knowing no thanks were necessary. He'd literally put his life on the line for his older brother more times than he cared to remember, and knew without a doubt

that Blackie would do the same for him or Gypsy. Hell, he already had ... and gotten shot for his trouble.

The six men sat outside for the better part of the morning rehashing the events of the past two days. Off to the side by himself, Rebel said little, taking advantage of the time to form what he hoped was a rock solid plan to end Gypsy's nightmare, once and for all. By the time the rest of his family showed up just after noon, he had almost every detail worked out.

Jimmy jumped from the cab of Flynn's truck carrying a large thermos. He pulled Rebel to the side and handed it to him. "How's Gypsy?"

"Beat up a little, but she'll be fine. What's this?"

"Rose's homemade chicken soup. She made me promise to watch Gypsy drink every last drop."

"Thanks."

"No problem." He hesitated before asking, "What about the baby?"

Trying not to think of the possibility that harm had come to the child his wife was carrying, Rebel shrugged. "It's okay, I think. Gypsy didn't say anything otherwise."

"Where is she?"

"Inside. She's been sleeping all morning."

"You come up with any kind of plan yet?"

"Yeah. Let's go talk to the others. I only want to have to say this once."

Rebel and Jimmy joined the six other McCassey men.

They approached Flynn first. "You hear anything?" Rebel asked.

"Plenty. Cooper's looking for the key to a safe deposit box. But you probably already know that."

"Yeah. You know what's in that box?"

"Jewelry."

Rebel made a face. "What kind of jewelry?"

"The kind that was stolen from Rockland's Jewelry Store down in Baltimore during a robbery back in 1963. Mostly diamonds. The thieves took about a million dollars worth of stuff; cleaned the place out."

"Jesus, that was twenty years ago. Was Cooper involved?" Rebel asked.

"Him and someone who apparently worked there. The cops thought it was an inside job from the beginning but were never able prove it. They also never found any of the stolen diamonds. Not one single carat."

Rebel nodded. "Because Cooper had them safely stored in a safe deposit box."

"You got it."

"So who was this partner of his?"

Flynn shrugged. "The way Cooper talks, there is no partner anymore."

"You think Cooper killed him?"

"Sure do. Taking out the partner meant he didn't have to share the loot. His only problem then was getting Gypsy away from us. But that was solved by hiring whoever it was that snatched Gypsy from the garage, and probably a couple of flunkies looking for beer money to get her to that old cabin."

Rebel didn't always know where Flynn got his information, and most of the time, didn't want to. But it had always been

one hundred percent reliable. Still, this was a life and death situation and he had to make sure it was from a good source.

"You're sure about all this?"

"As sure as I'm standing here, cousin."

"Shit."

"Yeah," Flynn said reluctantly, "they probably know where we are, too."

"I know that, Flynn," Rebel spat.

"So what do you want to do?"

Rebel lowered the tailgate of Flynn's pickup truck and sat down. Through clenched teeth, he said, "What I'd really like to do is walk into town and beat Cooper to death; torture him the way he threatened to do to Gypsy."

Always taking his brother's threats seriously, Judd cleared his throat. "That's not a good idea, bro."

"No shit."

"So what do we do then?"

"There's not much we can do, Judd. They're coming after Gypsy. And they're not going to wait a hell of a long time to do it. One million dollars is a lot of money. Cooper isn't going to give up as long as he thinks she's got that key."

"Maybe you could just take Gypsy away," Kane suggested. "Once he knows she's gone, they'll have to give up."

The mere suggestion that they run and hide sent bolts of white hot anger through Rebel's body. He slid off the tailgate, covered the distance between himself and his cousin in three long strides, and wrapped his hand around Kane's throat.

"You know better than to suggest I run from trouble."

At the sudden violent turn of Rebel's temper, Blackie and Judd each took a tentative step closer, ready to step in when Kane began to gasp for air as Rebel squeezed harder.

"Unless you've forgotten, the number of times I've bailed your ass out of trouble is probably higher than you can count, all because you couldn't think quick enough to do it yourself." Rebel loosened his grip, and Kane fell to the ground. "I don't run from anything, boy. You'd be wise to remember that."

Rebel reclaimed his seat on the tailgate while his seven family members, obviously afraid to upset the temporary reign he had on his temper, watched and waited. It was Frank who finally broke the silence. "Why don't you tell us what you have in mind, Rebel?"

"We're going to let Cooper and whoever's helping him come to us," Rebel explained confidently.

"Why don't we just go out after them?" Brady wanted to know.

"Because we'd never know exactly how many of them there are or if we got them all. Letting them come here is our best chance to end this thing once and for all. Let's just hope they all come at once."

"How can you be so sure we can take them all?" Brady questioned. "Cooper could've scraped together two dozen men by now."

"He won't have many more men now than he did yesterday. Cooper's greedy. The less people he has to share his money with, the better."

Brady nodded in agreement.

"This isn't going to be easy, boys. But it will be plenty bloody. You can count on that."

A wide grin crossed Blackie's face and he clapped his hands together. "Hoo-wee, little brother, count me in!"

Rebel lit another cigarette. "This isn't a game, goddammit! My wife's life is at stake here. All our lives are. And what the hell are you getting so excited about, anyway? You get caught with a firearm and your ass goes straight back to prison."

"Yup," he said with a wink. Then he turned away and yelled, "If I get caught," as he disappeared behind the cabin.

Rebel rolled his eyes and closed the tailgate of Flynn's truck. "I need to load my guns. Something tells me we're not going to be alone up here much longer." Then he, too, disappeared, leaving Frank, Jimmy, Judd, Brady, Kane, and Flynn sitting in the grass without instruction.

* * * *

"So what do we do now?" Flynn voiced the question that was on everyone's mind.

"I know what I'm doing," Kane said, rubbing his throat, "staying the hell out of Rebel's way. I forgot how dangerous he is when he's angry."

Judd jumped to his brother's defense. "Well, you should've known better than to suggest he run, you moron. What the hell were you thinking?"

"I was thinking of a way to keep Gypsy safe. And don't call me a moron. Rebel's come to your rescue just as much as he's come to mine."

"Which should tell you that he doesn't back down from a fight," Judd yelled, "with anyone!" Then he stepped forward until he and Kane were standing nose to nose.

At the moment when Judd would've punched Kane, Frank stepped between his nephews. "Cut it out you two," Frank hissed. "We've got enough trouble without you boys causing more. And speaking of trouble, all hell's going to break loose up here once Cooper rallies his troops. I don't know about you, but I'd rather not be taken by surprise. Let's go inside and help Rebel get ready."

Frank's statement was met with murmurs of agreement. One by one, the rest of the McCassey's followed him to the cabin. Just before he opened the door, Flynn pulled his uncle aside. "I'm going to slip back into town and see what else I can find out. I'll be back before nightfall."

"Be careful, son."

Flynn saluted his uncle and took off, hoping he'd get back before the war started. He didn't want to miss all the excitement.

* * * *

Rebel heard the cabin's front door slam but didn't look up from cleaning his rifle, even when Blackie sat in the chair across from him.

"That was some show you put on out there, little brother."

"Kane's an idiot."

Blackie gave a slight nod. "Maybe. But don't you think you were a little hard on him?"

"He knows better."

"He's also on our side, Rebel. Don't chase away your allies."

"I don't need him."

"You're damn intimidatin' when you're angry, Rebel," Blackie admitted, "and as worked up as you are right now, I believe you could take on an army and win." When he got no response, he added, "Those boys out there were hangin' on your every word, you know. And until I saw that, I'd never understood the effect you have on people. You're a born leader. Hell, even I was waitin' to hear what you was gonna say next."

It wasn't like Blackie to offer compliments, and Rebel felt uncomfortable accepting one for doing nothing more than trying to protect the woman he loved. "I don't need your praise, Blackie, just your support."

Blackie chuckled and shook his head. "You really ain't afraid of a fuckin' thing, are you?"

Rebel's head snapped up. "Yes, goddammit," he was trying to come across angry, but was grinning by the time he said, "I'm afraid you'll never shut up."

Blackie grinned in return and picked up a .30-06 hunting rifle. He managed to stay quiet for a full minute while cleaning it, before opening his mouth again. "You know, there were guys in prison who woulda broke down and cried like babies if you'd done to them what you did to Kane. What happened out there?"

"He pissed me off."

"No kiddin'. Why?"

"He always takes the easy way out."

"He may have a point this time."

Rebel finally brought his head up again, flashing Blackie a lethal look.

Blackie gave his head a slight shake. "Uh-uh, little brother. Touch my neck and I'll put you through a wall."

"Shut the hell up, I'm not going to touch you."

"Then what's your fuckin' problem? Why not hide her somewhere safe until this is all over?"

"Gypsy stays with me."

"Why, Rebel?" Blackie pressed him for an answer. "You know what kinda trouble's headed this way. Why's it so damn important she stays with you?"

Rebel backed his chair away from the table. He picked up a box of ammo and tossed it to his brother. "Because I said so. Now, make yourself useful and load that gun."

As Rebel spun away from Blackie, he looked in Gypsy's direction and noticed she was awake. Hoping it was the clicking and clacking of parts as he assembled and loaded his guns that caused Gypsy to stir, and not the discussion he'd had with Blackie, he went and sat on the edge of her cot.

"Sorry I woke you, darlin'."

The front door opened and the rest of the guys walked in, but Rebel ignored them and gathered Gypsy into his arms.

"How long was I asleep?" she asked.

"A few hours. You feel all right?"

"I'm okay. What went on outside?"

"It's nothing you need to worry about. Kane and I just got into it a little."

"I heard. What happened?"

He hadn't planned on telling her, but hadn't known she was awake when he was talking to Blackie. He didn't want to tell her that part of the reason he got so angry was that he agreed with his cousin. Gypsy would be much safer far away from the cabin. But he made her a promise and wouldn't break it, so he kept his explanation simple. "Kane suggested I stash you someplace safe, I got angry, end of story."

"From what I heard, that's far from the end of the story, Rebel McCassey. What did you do to him that would have made men in prison cry like babies?"

He winced. It hadn't sounded so bad coming from Blackie, but hearing Gypsy say it made him feel like a tyrant. "You heard that?"

"Uh-huh."

Rebel reluctantly told her the rest of the story. "I just overreacted, that's all."

She backed out of his embrace and looked up at him. "I don't want you fighting with your cousin because of me."

"We're not fighting, darlin'." He smiled and brushed back her curly hair, which was now dry and very full. "Everything's fine."

As she momentarily forgot Kane, Gypsy's hand flew to her hair. "It's bad, isn't it?"

The smile that hadn't left his face, widened. "Let's just say it has a lot of body. I'll see if I can find something so you can tie it back in a ponytail."

Gypsy let go of Reb's hand and tilted her head to peek at Kane. He was sitting at the table scowling in Reb's direction,

but when he spotted Gypsy staring at him, his expression softened and he winked at her.

"See," Rebel said, handing Gypsy a rubber band, "I told you everything was fine. Go ahead and fix your hair. When you're done, you're getting a shooting lesson."

Gypsy's eyes widened, and so did her smile. "All right, a shooting lesson!"

He should've known she'd react that way. "Don't get too excited, it's just a precaution."

"But I could help you," she insisted, excitedly. "You can use as many guns as you can get, right?"

Rebel eyed his wife carefully. If she'd been anyone else, he would've thought she was kidding. But Gypsy had proven that she would do or try just about anything, and he knew she was serious. "Don't even think you're going to be invited to participate in a gun battle, you little vixen. But I do want you to know how to shoot ... just in case."

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Chapter 16

Sheriff Ben Johnson finished giving instructions to the last of his deputies and turned off the CB radio. Pleased with himself, he sat in the chair behind his desk with a contented smile. It hadn't been easy, but all eight of his deputies were now otherwise occupied; each one of them off on their own personal wild goose chase that would keep them tied up for hours.

"You promised me this would be easy, Johnson," Johnny Cooper yelled at the sheriff. "And so far it's been anything but. I should've been in and out of this deadbeat town in less than a day. Instead, I'm sitting on my ass in your office while you play hide-and-go-seek with your deputies."

"Take it easy, Cooper," Johnson tried to reassure the overly excitable man. "It's all part of the plan."

"What plan?" Cooper stood and began pacing. "I had a plan, you idiot. A plan that was working fine until those two drunken, shriveled up prunes you said would make good guards got themselves killed. You also said the McCassey's would never find Gypsy. But they did. Now she's gone, and so is any chance I had to get that key."

Johnson had been just as surprised as Cooper when they showed up at the cabin and found the bodies of the two men guarding Gypsy, as well as the three of their other men suffering from gunshot wounds. Johnson didn't need to hear the descriptions of who stormed into the cabin and freed Gypsy to know it was Rebel and Blackie McCassey.

They were the only two men on Earth with enough balls to attempt breaking into a building without knowing what they were up against, kill two people, and not worry about disposing of the bodies. Not only that, the bullets from the four perfect shots that blasted Gypsy's chains free of the bedrail were from a .38 Special; the same caliber gun that everyone in town knew Rebel kept in his tow truck.

He didn't mind that the brothers were packing guns. Although Rebel had every right to arm himself, Blackie was on parole, which made it illegal for him to touch a firearm. That, along with the fact that the McCassey's had no idea he was the one helping Cooper, was going to work to his advantage.

Just the thought of finally getting a chance to stick it to the McCassey's made Johnson smile.

Cooper stopped pacing and slammed his hands on Johnson's desk. "This is your fault, Johnson."

"The hell it is," Johnson remarked. "I didn't have anything to do with Rebel and Blackie busting Gypsy out of the cabin. I don't even know how they found out she was there. Now, do you want to hear my plan or not?"

"Goddammit!" Johnny Cooper swore. "My plan had been working perfectly until now! First, after reading the newspaper in prison everyday for almost eleven miserable years hoping by chance my stupid bitch of a daughter would someday be newsworthy, she practically fell into my lap. Then I struck gold by discovering you're the sheriff of the town she lives in. Now, in less than half a day, my whole plan has been shot to hell by a bunch of damn rednecks; and I blame you,

Johnson. You better have a quick and easy way to fix this. You owe me.

"You had quite a reaction when I called you last month, thirty-six years after the last time we saw each other. Do I need to refresh your memory of how important it is to both of us that this mess gets worked out?"

Despite his act of bravado, a chill ran up Ben Johnson's spine as he recalled the phone call he'd gotten from Johnny Cooper the month before.

* * * *

"Hello, Ben. This is the voice of your conscience. Remember me?"

"Who the hell is this?"

"I'll give you a hint," Cooper said. "It was dusk on a hot summer night in 1946. You and your girlfriend were visiting your grandparents. Ring a bell?"

It rang a bell all right.

Ben Johnson remembered the night like it was yesterday. He was sixteen. He and his girlfriend had gone to his grandparent's cabin for dinner. They went down to sit on the dock at the pond afterward, where his girlfriend announced she didn't want to see him anymore.

He'd been furious and only meant to scare her. But he couldn't control his rage and pushed her into the water. Before he could stop himself, his hands grabbed her shoulders, dunked her under water and held her there until she stopped struggling.

She was dead in less than a minute, and he was in a state of panic.

With a murder conviction he'd never be able to become a lawman. What was he going to do? Taking deep breaths, he was trying to get a hold of himself when his grandparent's fourteen-year-old neighbor, Johnny Cooper, walked out from behind a tree.

"Why'd you kill her, Ben?"

Johnson didn't answer.

"Come on," Cooper said with an evil grin. "I heard the two of you arguing about something, and I saw you hold her head under the water. What'd she do, dump you?"

No answer.

"Aw, don't worry about it, Johnson. All you have to do is tell the police that the two of you changed into your swimsuits after dinner and decided to go for a swim. She got a cramp, you couldn't find her right away because it was too dark, and by the time you did, she had drown"

It made sense to Johnson. But he'd known Johnny Cooper since he started visiting his grandparents at their cabin on the outskirts of Frederick when he was a kid. In Johnson's opinion, the boy had a few screws loose. And Johnson wasn't at all happy about him witnessing the crime. "Okay, Cooper, what do you want from me?" Johnson asked, anxiously.

Johnny Cooper was quiet for a minute, making Ben Johnson very nervous. "Nothing ... now. But I know you're going to be a lawman someday. And a friend on a police force is good to have. Just remember you owe me one, Johnson,"

he said, as he turned to walk away. "When it's time to pay up, I'll be in touch."

Ben Johnson got away with murder by telling everyone the story Cooper had come up with. The police investigated and wound up ruling his girlfriend's death a simple drowning. Because the incident didn't even make the newspaper, not many people found out about it and Johnson was left free to go on with his life.

That night was also the last time he'd seen Johnny Cooper. But for years after he became sheriff, Ben Johnson kept track of his grandparent's former neighbor. And when the man went to prison for murder in 1972, Johnson was terrified he'd get a call from Cooper asking for help.

But it never came.

As more and more time passed without word from Cooper, Johnson became more confident, assuming he'd never again hear from the only witness to his crime.

"What do you want, Cooper?" Johnson asked the man on the other end of the phone.

"It's time to pay up, Johnson. I've got a business proposition for you. Meet me in the woods at that old cabin in two hours."

Before Johnson could protest, the line went dead.

The meeting between the two childhood acquaintances was brief. Cooper told Johnson that his daughter, Gypsy Lance, had a key that belonged to him. All Johnson had to do was let Cooper use his grandparent's cabin, help get Gypsy away from the McCassey's, and tell him where he could hire some men to help guard his daughter.

"I'll pay you two hundred thousand dollars, Johnson."

"Do you really expect me to believe that? Where would you get that kind of money?" Johnson asked skeptically.

"I was the one who robbed Rockland's Jewelry Store, you small town fool. I've got a million dollars in diamonds stashed in a safe deposit box at the Federal Savings and Loan on Fayette Street in Baltimore City. Gypsy's got the key. We'll nab her, bring her here to the cabin, and hold her while I go get the key. Then you can look the other way when I drown her in the pond."

A chill ran down Johnson's spine as he considered Cooper's offer. If he refused to help, Cooper would undoubtedly start making noise about the drowning all those years ago. Even if no one believed him, the rumors alone would probably keep Johnson from being elected sheriff again. He couldn't afford to let that happen.

Then Johnson thought about the upside to the situation. He knew the perfect way to distract the McCassey's and take Gypsy from the garage, so that would be a breeze. He also knew plenty of drunks who'd work for Cooper for beer money, so that part would be easy, too. Johnson didn't give a shit what Cooper did with Gypsy. In fact, getting to be the one to tell Rebel McCassey that his girl had been murdered was going to be worth risking his career to help Cooper.

After working everything out in his head, Ben Johnson was a very happy man. He'd finally be rid of the burden of owing Cooper a favor, was going to get to ruin Rebel McCassey's life, and would be two hundred thousand dollars richer to boot.

* * * *

Ben Johnson cleared his throat to get Johnny Cooper's attention. "I asked if you wanted to hear my plan, or not."

"I don't have much of a choice, do I? What is it, Johnson? And it better be worth hearing."

Johnson leaned back in his chair, put his feet on the desk, and crossed his legs. "Oh, it's worth it all right. And there's nothing to it, really. They're all up at that cabin in the woods. The one they call Ten Acres. All we have to do is take those men you hired, go up, and get your daughter."

"Just like that? You think they're gonna just let us stroll onto their private property, no questions asked?"

"Of course not. They're probably going to shoot at us on sight. In fact, I'm counting on it."

"What the hell kind of a plan is that?"

"The kind that's going to get you your daughter and me, three, maybe four McCassey's violating probation to toss in my jail."

"And how are we supposed to do this with them shooting at us?"

"We shoot back, Cooper. You're a criminal. I assume you know how to handle a gun."

"Not only are you stupid, Johnson, you're crazy."

"I can't believe your plan is nothing more than walking onto private property owned by a bunch of rednecks and shooting as many of them as we can until they give up my daughter."

Actually, Johnson thought to himself, his plan was for Cooper and his men to fight it out with the McCassey's. He intended to hang back until the thick of the battle was over and seek out Blackie, Judd, Kane, and Brady; the boys he knew for a fact that weren't supposed to be handling firearms. If any of them were still standing, he'd arrest them for violation of probation. He'd been waiting a long time to ruin the lives of the McCassey's. Finally he was going to get the chance.

His plan was perfect.

Still patting himself on the back for being so brilliant, he shrugged. "That's the plan, Cooper. Take it or leave it."

"I don't like it," Cooper shouted, snarling. "But if there's an easier way to do what we have to without taking the chance of being pumped full of buckshot by some backwoods rednecks, I don't know what it is. So I'll take it. When do we leave?"

Johnson looked at the clock. It was just after four in the afternoon. "How many men do you have?"

"Eight. They're over at that local bar, Digger's, waiting for orders."

"Fine," Johnson said. "Go get them. Meet me under the big oak tree at the edge of town in two hours. That'll give us the advantage of sneaking up on them at dusk, as well as the cover of darkness for escape."

"The big oak tree at the edge of town," Cooper muttered. "I can't wait to get the hell out of this damn hick town. A few hours, in just a few more hours, I'll have the key to my future and the pleasure of silencing my past."

* * * *

Flynn McCassey had been roaming around town all afternoon hoping to gather information on what Johnny Cooper was up to, but so far, he'd come up empty-handed. The last place he decided to try, which normally would've been the first, except that it wasn't somewhere McCassey's went without someone to watch their back, was Digger's Bar. It was getting late, so Flynn decided to hang around for an hour, and if he didn't come up with anything, head back to Ten Acres.

For fifteen minutes, Flynn sat on a barstool nursing a beer that the bartender, Digger's sister, Angel, had served him. He watched the night shift of barmaids, as well as a handful of men, all of whom he recognized, come and go. But what interested him most was the group of eight men that walked in and sat in two booths across from the bar. Strangers weren't too common in Hagerstown. And although one or two may go unnoticed, a group that size stuck out like a sore thumb.

Flynn took a chance that the men were part of the bunch helping Cooper and figured that if he was going to get any information to help Rebel, they'd be the ones to watch.

When a dirty, disheveled man with red hair walked into the bar half an hour later and headed directly to the men in the booths, Flynn knew he'd found what he was looking for. Still nursing his beer, he pivoted on the stool. Pretending to be interested in the television on the other side of the room, he took in every word they said.

"Where the hell you been, Cooper?" one of the men in the group asked. "We been waitin' here almost an hour."

"I had a meeting," Cooper snapped, then suddenly lowered his voice. "I've got orders for you so you better listen good. Any of you screw this up for me, you're dead."

Flynn listened as Johnny Cooper told the men to meet him at the large oak on the edge of town at four o'clock.

"We're going to head up to a place those McCasseys call Ten Acres. Any of you know where that is?"

Every man shook his head. Obviously, none of them were from the area.

"Well, that doesn't matter. We've got someone to show us. So meet up at four and bring plenty of ammo. From what I understand about the McCassey family, they'll be well armed, and this could be a long night."

The men murmured among themselves a moment before Cooper added, "Kill any man you have to. And don't forget, I'm giving an extra thousand dollars to the person that brings my daughter to me alive."

Flynn waited until a few minutes after Cooper left the bar then raced back to Ten Acres.

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Chapter 17

Flynn entered the cabin on Ten Acres just in time to witness Gypsy being given a lesson on how to use a pistol.

When Rebel noticed his cousin had returned, he took the gun from his wife and handed it to Judd. "Show her how to load it. I'll be right back."

Flynn was grinning when Rebel approached him. "Boy, does she have bad aim," he said, stifling a laugh. "I hope you're gonna think twice before putting a loaded gun back in her hand."

"I'm only giving her the .22," Rebel whispered to Flynn, "so even if she winds up shooting one of us by mistake, it won't do much damage."

Flynn got an are-you-sure-you-want-to-do-that look on his face, but Rebel ignored it and got to the point. "What'd you find out?"

Flynn talked slowly and repeated everything he'd heard. "You were right about someone from town helping him. None of his men know how to get up here, but Cooper said he had someone to show them. He didn't mention who it was, but I do know they had a meeting together right before Cooper showed up at Digger's."

Flynn also added that Kane's earlier suggestion of hiding Gypsy might not be a bad idea. "I know you don't want to make it seem like you're running away, but you didn't hear Cooper talking. He's crazy, Rebel. He gave his men orders to kill as many of us they had to. He even offered an extra

thousand bucks to the man who brings Gypsy to him alive. He's gonna kill her if he gets his hands on her, man. Especially when he finds out she doesn't have that key."

His eyes fixed on Rebel; Flynn took a cautious step back. Rebel knew he was waiting for some kind of reaction, even if it was only for the expression on his face to change, but Flynn should've known from experience that it wouldn't. Very rarely did Rebel give away his emotions.

"Let's tell the others what you found out. We have some planning to do."

Silence had filled the cabin by the time Flynn finished his story, and all eyes were on Rebel, waiting for orders.

"We're going to spread out," he began. "Jimmy, you and Flynn take the south side of the cabin. Kane, you and Brady guard the north. Take the M16's and climb up the oak tree where our fort was when we were kids. You'll be able to pick off anybody you can see coming, but the trees are full of leaves so the chances of anyone seeing you from the ground are slim.

"Judd, I want you and Frank on the west side. Since the sun will be setting in the eyes of whoever approaches from that direction, you two will have the biggest advantage. Keep your eyes open. We can't afford to have anyone get past you. Blackie and I will stay on the east side, and I'm going to position Gypsy behind the boulder that sits in the brush at the edge of the woods. It's large enough to hide her, but narrow enough to let her see and get a shot off if she needs to."

Brady and Kane were too late trying to hide their sudden chuckles. Upon hearing them, Gypsy's temper flared. "I know

I'm a bad shot, but I haven't had an entire lifetime to practice like you two." Grabbing the loaded pistol from Judd, she kept it pointed toward the floor as she glared at the guys. "You wouldn't think it was so damn funny if I shot you."

Brady and Kane shut up immediately, and Rebel figured it was because they were more stunned that Gypsy had almost cussed at them, than the fact that she'd threatened to shoot them. Wordlessly, he took a step toward his wife and loosened the pistol from her grip. Before handing it back to Judd, he stared at Gypsy, silently telling her this was not a good time to get Brady and Kane riled up.

"Anyway," Rebel continued, "Flynn said Cooper's got eight men not including himself. Plus whoever it is that's been helping him. That makes the odds pretty much even, because we know the area and they don't. And don't be afraid to take the first shot. If one of Cooper's men is in front of you, take him out.

"This is just like hunting," he reminded them. "Wait until you have a clear shot before firing, so you don't waste your ammo. A misfire won't do anything but give your prey a chance to get away, so make every shot count."

Rebel scanned the room. Any questions?"

"How will we know when it's over?" Flynn asked.

"Meet down at the mouth of the creek thirty minutes after the last shot is fired," Rebel told them. "Keep track of how many men you take down, and we'll add them up when we're all together. If we miss any, we can leave from the creek and hunt them down together. It should be dark by then, so any

stragglers won't be hard to find; they'll probably be lost and walking in circles at that point."

When there were no more questions, Rebel took a deep, cleansing breath. "All right then, does everyone know what to do?"

They all nodded and he added one last thing. "Remember, this is private property and they're trespassing, so don't aim to wound, shoot to kill. It'll stand up in court, and I'll take the blame since it's my wife they're trying to hurt, and most of you aren't supposed to be handling guns. Watch each other's backs, too. Am I clear?"

More nods.

"Pick up your weapons and let's move out. And," he said before everyone left the room, "thanks."

Rebel's uncharacteristic show of emotion seemed to make his uncles and cousins uncomfortable, so each one just touched his shoulder as they armed themselves and left the cabin. Before Rebel could stop her, Gypsy followed.

Alone with his brothers, Rebel sat quietly on a cot and lit a cigarette.

"Second thoughts?" Judd asked.

Rebel took a long drag on his cigarette and released the smoke in rings. "Nope."

"We're doing the right thing, bro. Gypsy doesn't have a chance if we don't take out Cooper."

"I know, Judd. That bastard deserves to die. And I hope I'm the one that gets the chance to take him out. But I sure as hell don't want to waste him in front of Gypsy. She's

strong, but I'm afraid seeing something like that would put her over the edge."

"You leave him to me, little brother," Blackie said, as he, too, lit a cigarette. "I'll take care of it."

"I'm not going to let you do something that's my responsibility. I should be the one to—" Rebel stopped because Blackie raised his hand to cut him off.

"What I do ain't up to you, Rebel," Blackie told him. "Gypsy's your wife and it's your job to protect her, but if I get a clean shot at Cooper, I'll be damned if I ain't takin' it. That son of a bitch messed with the wrong fuckin' family."

Blackie took a drag on his cigarette while Rebel and Judd exchanged worried glances.

"Fine," Rebel said, rising from the cot. He didn't have time to argue. They had a job to do. "Let's do it."

All three brothers made fists with their right hands and held them out to each other, murmuring, "no worries". After staring at each other in silence for a moment, they dropped their fists when there was a light knock at the door.

Gypsy poked her head in the room. "Sorry to interrupt, but Frank's getting a little restless."

Rebel took her hand and led her into the cabin. Then he turned to Judd. "You better get going."

Judd picked up a .38 Special, shoved it into his waistband and covered it with his T-shirt. He walked to the door and stopped with his hand on the knob. "We'll take care of everything," he told Gypsy. "But be careful anyway."

She nodded. "You too, Judd."

"We should go too, Rebel," Blackie suggested. "We need time to make sure Gypsy's well hidden."

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Rebel asked, lightly caressing Gypsy's face. "It's not too late to change your mind."

Gypsy grabbed onto his forearm with both hands. "You promised I could stay," she said, frantically. "I'm not leaving you, Rebel. I'm not!"

Without warning, Blackie butted into their conversation. "Are you tellin' me that you refused to hide your wife just because you gave her your word she could stay?"

"I'm not telling you anything," Rebel snapped. "Butt out, Blackie."

Blackie gave his head a slight shake. "You must be kickin' yourself right about now for makin' such a stupid promise." Turning to Gypsy, he said, "You got a lot to learn, girl. Now, not only does Rebel have to worry about Cooper, he has to worry about you, too."

Gypsy opened her mouth to say something, but Rebel silenced her by pulling her close and kissing her hard on the mouth. Then he handed her his old .22, and in a deep monotone voice, said, "Let's go."

The trio walked outside and headed to the rock at the edge of the woods. Still barefoot because of her bruised and swollen ankles, Gypsy carefully climbed behind it and sat still while the guys covered her with brush. When she was well hidden, Rebel knelt in front of her. "Stay put, darlin', this'll all be over soon. Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine."

Rebel didn't believe for a second that she was okay, but admired the front she was trying to put up. "Keep that gun handy," he reminded her. "It won't do much damage, but it'll keep anyone who doesn't want to get shot from touching you. And stay put until someone comes to take you to the creek. If it isn't me, it'll be one of my brothers. I love you."

Before she could tell him she loved him too, he was gone.

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Chapter 18

The sun had just begun to set when the first sounds of footsteps and muffled voices came from the direction of the main road. It sounded as though Cooper and his men were all bunched together in a group, which was good for the McCassey's. The unsuspecting men were heading right into Rebel and Blackie's line of fire.

"Here they come," Reb mouthed to his oldest brother. The dusk did nothing to hide Blackie's reckless grin. He looked like he was planning on enjoying himself.

The crack of the first shot nearly caused Gypsy to jump out of her skin. It had been so quiet that she'd almost convinced herself there wouldn't be a gunfight. Then a shot echoed through the woods, someone yelped in pain, and all hell broke loose.

* * * *

Johnny Cooper ran through the thick woods dodging bullets and cursing the sheriff with every step. He should've known this plan was too good to be true. According to Sheriff Johnson, the McCassey's were supposed to be holed up in their cabin trying to think of a way to hide Gypsy. Instead, they were hiding outside waiting to ambush Cooper and his men. The firestorm of bullets flying through the trees had been completely unexpected.

Narrowly avoiding another shot, Cooper watched the man next to him go down then took a quick look around. That

damn sheriff had been right behind him when he and his men entered the woods. Now, of course, the double-crossing coward was nowhere to be seen.

Cooper wasn't about to fool himself into thinking he'd be able to avoid the McCassey's for long. He was already lost and running in circles. This was their home turf, and they knew it like the backs of their hands. He needed to find somewhere to take cover. Fast. And he had to find Gypsy.

He had to get that key.

* * * *

The deafening booms from the .357 Magnums Rebel and Blackie were firing together sounded like dueling cannons. Rebel watched as Blackie peeked around the trunk of a tree, caught sight of the man Flynn described as Johnny Cooper, who was scrambling for cover, and fired. Cooper managed to avoid the shot, but the man next to him wasn't so lucky.

Rebel had positioned himself far enough from the cabin that he'd be able to spot anyone long before they got to it, but close enough that he could see the rock where Gypsy was hiding. He'd cursed himself up one side and down the other a thousand times in the past hour for allowing her to be a part of this. The reaction Blackie had when he found out what was going on only confirmed that Rebel had been thinking with his heart instead of his head.

He and Blackie were the closest ones to the front of the cabin, and so far, no one had gotten past them. Gypsy was safe ... for the moment. Keeping one eye in the general direction of his wife, Rebel turned his attention to the north

side of the cabin. There was heavy firing coming from the direction of the oak tree where Brady and Kane were perched twenty feet in the air. That tree was lush and full of leaves this time of year, and he almost laughed at the thought of the confusion among Cooper's men when the gunfire had come from above.

Rebel dove for cover behind the nearest tree when he heard rustling in the brush behind him. He landed on the ground as a bullet split the bark just above his head. Catching sight of someone running, Rebel aimed his gun in the direction of the retreating man and fired. The moment the guy went down, Rebel turned and crawled on his belly over to Blackie.

"How many did you get?"

"Three," Blackie whispered. "You?"

"Two. Any more signs of Cooper?"

"Not since I fired at him a few minutes ago."

"Shit. Where the hell is he?"

"I don't know. But you and I got five, and I saw Judd a minute ago. He held up two fingers. So that's seven. Brady and Kane had to have gotten someone with all that firin' they were doin'."

"What about Jimmy and Flynn?" Rebel asked.

"I don't know. I ain't heard much from the south side."

Rebel swore. "Me either. I'm going around to check on them. Keep an eye on Gypsy for me."

Blackie nodded and turned to give his brother cover as he made his way around to the south side of the cabin.

Rebel found Jimmy crouched behind a tree holding onto Flynn, who was unconscious. Alarm raced through Rebel as he lowered himself to his knees and touched his cousin's forehead. "Is he alive?"

"Yeah. A bullet just grazed his head. He's out of it because he knocked himself out when he fell against a rock. He'll be fine."

Had the situation not been so serious, Rebel would've laughed. Leave it to Flynn to survive a gunshot wound to the head then knock himself unconscious.

"You see who shot him?" Rebel asked his uncle.

"I saw him but didn't recognize him."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure."

"Damn! Who in the hell could be the one helping Cooper?"

"I don't know, Rebel, I haven't seen anyone I recognize."

"What about Flynn? Did he see anyone you didn't?"

"I don't even think he saw who shot him. I yelled to warn him, but with all the noise coming from those pieces you and Blackie were firing, he didn't hear me."

Gunfire from the west side of the cabin had Rebel scrambling to his feet. "I have to get back. Will you two be okay here for a while?"

"We'll be fine," Jimmy assured him. "Go."

Rebel wasted no time racing back to where he'd left his brother. "Who'd you see?"

"It was Cooper again. He was pretty far away, but I took a shot anyway. I know he's hit because he went down, but it ain't bad. He got up again."

"Gypsy?"

"She's fine."

Rebel breathed a sigh of relief. "Flynn's hit. Jimmy has him behind a tree."

Blackie cursed under his breath just as Brady and Kane stepped out from behind the cabin. "We only got one," Kane reported.

"Well that's eight," Rebel announced. "Cooper's still out there. Blackie just hit him, but he took off running. Whoever's helping him is out there, too."

"What do we do now?" Brady asked.

Rebel looked to the west. Dusk was upon them. "It'll be completely dark in another thirty minutes. If Cooper was hit by Blackie's .357, he can't be moving very fast. I'd like to get him before we lose the rest of this light."

"You take the boys and go after him," Blackie ordered. "I'm gonna take a look around and see if I can't find the bastard feedin' Cooper his information. He led them here, so he's bound to be hidin' close by."

Rebel knew his brother had a tendency to carry things too far, and didn't like the idea of Blackie taking off without someone there to calm him down. But this might be his only chance to get to Gypsy's father, and he had to take it. "All right, but take it easy. You're going to be an uncle, you know."

"That's why I'm doin' this, little brother. Ain't no niece or nephew of mine gonna have to live in fear of nothin'; not if I can help it. I'll catch up to you all later."

Rebel watched Blackie disappear into the darkening woods and hoped that wouldn't be the last time he'd see his brother alive.

"What now, Rebel?" Frank asked.

"Now, we find Cooper."

"What about Gypsy? Are we taking her with us?"

"Well, I'm not leaving her here alone!"

"You want me to run her over to Jimmy and Flynn?" Judd offered. "They're well hidden. She should be fine with them."

Rebel took a deep breath and brushed back his long, dark, sweat-soaked hair. His brother was a damn good shot and Reb needed him close by. "No, Judd, I need you here. Kane?"

"Yeah?"

"Climb behind that rock and keep an eye on Gypsy. I don't want either one of you to move until I get back. Understand?"

* * * *

Kane liked to think that when push came to shove, he was just as tough and fearless as Rebel. But the minute he was ordered to watch out for Gypsy, Kane knew he was kidding himself. Being responsible for taking care of her scared the shit out of him.

But he owed Rebel. Not just for all the times Rebel had bailed him out of trouble, but for feeling like he was one of the reasons Gypsy had been kidnapped. He still felt so guilty that he'd stand alone in the clearing for Cooper to use as a target if his cousin asked him to.

"Kane?" Rebel said, impatiently.

He gave a thumb's up. "Yeah, yeah, I understand."

Rebel reached over and gave his cousin a slight shove.

"Well, get going then. We're losing daylight."

Once Kane had reached the rock, Rebel, Judd, Brady, and Frank took off into the woods after Johnny Cooper.

Gypsy acted more than a little surprised when Kane snuck up on her from behind the rock. "Sorry I scared you," he said, then grinned at her. "And thanks for not shooting me. Rebel wants me to stay here until he gets back."

"Where is he?"

Kane took a few minutes to explain what was going on, where Blackie went, and what happened to Flynn. "He wants to find Cooper before it gets dark. Don't worry, it shouldn't take too long."

The words had no sooner left his mouth when the first of a barrage of gunshots came from the woods. "See?"

As the gunfire continued, it began to sound as though it was getting closer to the cabin. "That's getting awfully loud, Kane. It sounds like they're coming this way."

That's exactly what it sounded like.

Why would Rebel lead the battle in the direction of the person he was trying to keep safe? Unless it wasn't him. Maybe it was Cooper. Or maybe Cooper had reinforcements waiting by the main road, and it was their gunfire he and Gypsy were hearing. Why hadn't he just told Rebel he didn't want to take care of Gypsy? Because he owed him, that's why. If Kane was a cat, he'd owe at least seven of his nine lives to Rebel.

The gunfire was once again deafening.

When the sound of a bullet ricocheting off their rock made them both jump, Kane made a drastic decision. He grabbed Gypsy's hand. "Let's go."

Gypsy's eyes grew wide. "Go where?"

"We can't stay here! Another shot as close as that one and we're in big trouble."

She quickly reminded Kane of their instructions. "I promised I'd listen when Rebel told me what to do in situations like this, and we're supposed to stay here."

Kane pulled Gypsy to her feet. "He also told me to take care of you. And to me, that means keeping you out of the line of fire."

Kane rose from behind the rock and took a quick look around. The coast was clear. "When I say so, we're going to make a break for the cluster of oak trees where Brady and I were hiding. It's about fifty yards from here. Can you make it?"

Gypsy grasped Kane's hand tighter. "I don't even want to think about what's going to happen if I can't. Let's just do it."

She had true grit. He admired that.

The sound of another bullet striking their rock cut off what Kane was about to say, and he muffled Gypsy's scream by putting his right arm around her neck and pulling her to his chest. The next bullet tore into his left shoulder, but he managed to hold on to Gypsy as they both fell to the ground. "Ahh! Son of a bitch!" he yelled.

"Kane! Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, goddammit!" Ignoring the burning pain in his shoulder, Kane put his hand on the back of her head and forced it to the ground. "Get the hell down!"

"Oh, Kane..."

Kane was pretty sure she was crying, but he was too worried about making sure they didn't get killed to care. He let go of her and touched his wound. It was small, probably from a .22, but the bullet was lodged in his shoulder. "Calm down, Gypsy, I'm fine," he said, trying to be cheerful. "Rebel shot me in the ass once with a BB gun when we were kids and that hurt worse."

She wiped her eyes and looked at him skeptically.

"It's a true story, honest. Remind me to tell it to you sometime when we're not being used as target practice. Right now, we need to get to those oak trees. Ready?"

She took a deep breath. "Ready."

Kane took hold of her hand again, and she held on as if her life depended on it. "I don't see anyone around," he told her, "but that doesn't mean there isn't someone ten feet away waiting to shoot at anything that moves. So when we go, run like your ass is on fire."

Gypsy nodded.

"Now!" Kane yelled, and they dashed across the clearing toward the cluster of oaks. A few feet from their destination, someone began firing at them. Kane sped up, pulling Gypsy behind him. When they reached the trees and dove to the ground, the firing ceased.

"Whoever's out there is definitely aiming for us."

"How many are there?"

"There are two weapons being fired, but it's probably only one person with two guns."

"It's Cooper, isn't it?" Gypsy asked.

Kane knew it was probably Cooper. He was one of the only two men he and his cousins hadn't taken out yet. "I'm sorry, Gypsy. It's probably him."

Kane gave her shoulder a squeeze. "Keep it together, girl. Rebel will be back soon." He knew she didn't want to confront Cooper without Rebel by her side, and that was the best reassurance he could've given her at that moment.

More gunfire erupted in their direction, and Kane pushed Gypsy's head onto the ground again and covered it with his arms. "Goddammit!"

"What?"

"What do you mean what? He's getting closer, Gypsy. We have to get out of here."

"Where to now?"

Kane had no idea where to go. If they moved farther into the woods, Rebel and the others might mistake them for Cooper and shoot them. If they stayed where they were, Cooper would be upon them in a matter of minutes.

Kane sighed. "All right, I have an idea."

"I have a feeling I'm not going to like whatever it is you're about to suggest."

"You're not, Gypsy. But listen, I think the reason we're only hearing one gunman now is because Rebel and the others know Cooper's close to us. They're probably not firing because they don't want to hit us. I figure our best bet is to let Cooper know exactly where we are by having you yell at

him. That way Rebel can follow the sound of your voice and get in here to help us. What do you think?"

With tears flowing, Gypsy said, "I think I'd do anything to have Rebel here now. I need him, Kane. I'm scared."

In an effort to comfort her, Kane pulled her against his chest again. Every girl he knew would have fallen apart long before now, but not Gypsy. She'd been brave through this whole mess, which is why he didn't really mind the tears. He just wished she'd waited until Rebel was back to start crying. "Hang in there, Gypsy girl," he crooned, stroking her hair. "It'll all be over soon."

She pulled away from him and tried to get control of herself. "I'm sorry, Kane. I just wish he was here."

"No more than I do, girl," Kane bent his head to the right and used the sleeve of his T-shirt to wipe the sweat from his brow. "No more than I do." He gave her a few seconds to collect herself before asking if she was ready.

"I'm ready. What should I do?"

"Just start yelling at him. But try not to say anything that'll really piss him off. We don't want him getting too excited with those guns. Just do what you can to keep him talking."

Gypsy crouched next to Kane behind the trunk of a tree and began yelling loudly to get Cooper's attention.

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Chapter 19

Johnny Cooper was bleeding badly from his left side by the time he reached the tree where he was attempting to take cover. He had no idea what kind of gun the bullet that grazed him came from, but had a feeling if it had been a direct hit, he would've been dead where he stood ten minutes ago.

While leaning against the tree, he saw one of the McCasseys crawl behind a rock. Cooper fired a few shots at it then saw two people run across the clearing toward a tree. He could tell that one of them was Gypsy, and was about to call out to her when she began calling him.

"Are you out there?" she asked.

What a stroke of luck! That stupid girl was actually trying to get his attention. "I'm here!" he yelled back.

"What do you want from me?"

"I want my goddamn key!"

"I don't have it!"

"Well, I don't believe you. And you'll be sorry if you don't hand it over!"

"I'm already sorry!" she spat.

Cooper cursed. Damn! Nothing ever worked out the way he planned. "All right, girl. You want to play that way? Fine. I know you're hiding behind that big oak tree. And I know I shot the guy you're hiding with. Neither one of you can move too fast, so you can't get away from me. Tell me where that key is, and I might think about letting you go."

* * * *

Rebel, Judd, Brady, and Frank stopped short when they heard Gypsy's voice.

"Who's she talking to?" Judd asked.

Rebel turned and grabbed a handful of his brother's T-shirt. "Shut the hell up, so I can hear!"

The four men stood in silence.

"It sounds like she's talking to Cooper," Rebel announced.

The look of surprise on Judd's face mirrored the ones on Frank and Brady's. "What the hell for?"

"Probably to keep him from killing her!" Rebel snapped.

"Well, where the hell's Kane? Isn't he supposed to be watching her?"

Rebel reached out and shoved his brother. "Shut up and stop asking stupid questions. I heard her mention the key so she must be trying to stall him. It sounds like she's over toward the north side of the cabin, probably by the big oaks. We have to get over there fast."

Following Gypsy's voice, they raced through the woods as quickly and quietly as possible. Twenty yards from the cluster of oak trees, they saw her standing up, pressed tightly against the trunk of a tree. They arrived just in time to hear Cooper tell Gypsy he might let them live if she handed over the safe deposit box key. The men dropped to their knees and crawled the rest of the way to Gypsy to avoid being spotted. Only when they were within a few feet of her, did they notice Kane crouched at her feet.

The second Gypsy saw Rebel moving toward her, she crouched down and dove into his arms with a force that sent them tumbling backward.

He broke her fall with his body. "It's okay darlin'," he said when he realized she was crying, "it's okay. I'm here now."

"Oh, Reb," she cried, clinging to him. "The gunfire came so close, and Kane got shot, and he said we couldn't stay there, that's why we're here. Then we realized it was Cooper shooting at us, so I had to talk to him so you'd find us..."

She was talking so fast that Rebel was afraid she was going to hyperventilate. "Easy, darlin'," he said in a low, soothing voice. "Calm down."

When Kane crawled over and offered his cousin an apology, Rebel noticed the crimson stain of blood covering Kane's upper arm. "I'm sorry, Rebel. I kept her as safe as I could. But we got caught in your crossfire, and I had to get her out of there."

"You did the right thing, Kane. Where exactly are you hit?"

"There's a .22 slug in my shoulder, but it won't kill me."

"That was smart of you to have her talk to Cooper. We never would've found the two of you if it weren't for the sound of her voice."

It wasn't often that Rebel offered praise, and he could tell by Kane's slight smile that he appreciated it.

"Hey Gypsy, you little bitch, you still there?"

At the sound of Cooper's voice, Gypsy whimpered and did her best to curl into a ball in Rebel's lap.

"Tell him you're here, darlin'."

Gypsy grabbed onto Rebel's shirt and looked into his eyes.

"Answer me, dammit!" Cooper yelled.

"You have to tell him you're still here, Gypsy."

She shook her head. "I c-c-can't. I can't talk to him anymore. Please."

Her plea tore at his heart, but he needed her to distract Cooper. He could tell the man was getting nervous, and nervous men with loaded guns tended to get trigger happy. If Cooper started firing into the open, Rebel and his cousins would never be able to get to him.

"You have to," he ordered. The soft, soothing voice he'd used to calm her down was gone. In its place was a stern, authoritative one. "Just one more time. Tell him you're still here. We need to stall him until Judd and I can get close enough to bring him down. Do it now."

Fighting to keep her voice steady, Gypsy yelled to Cooper that she heard him and she was still there.

"Good girl," Rebel told her.

Before Gypsy could dissolve into tears again, Rebel was issuing orders.

"I want you to stay here with the guys. Judd and I are going to circle around the cabin and see if we can sneak up on Cooper from behind."

"You're leaving me again?"

"I have to, but I'll be back. I promise." He kissed her forehead and slid her off his lap. "Stay low," he whispered to Judd as they crawled away toward the cabin.

Frank moved over and put his arm around Gypsy, and she rested her head on the older man's shoulder. "I don't think I

could've gotten through the past two days without the love of all of you."

"We love you, too, Gypsy. Hang in there."

Several silent minutes passed before Gypsy and the others heard the scuffle. She knew it was her husband and his brother attacking Cooper and prayed it would be over soon.

Gypsy covered her ears at the sound of a gunshot, but jumped to her feet when she heard Judd yell, "Rebel!"

Frank and Brady grabbed at her, but she brushed them off. Peeking around the tree trunk, she saw nothing but shadows. Why had Judd yelled Rebel's name? Was her husband hurt? Did he need help?

Apparently having figured out what Gypsy was thinking, Kane whispered, "Gypsy, don't..." and reached out to grab her. But it was too late. The words were barely out of his mouth when she took off running.

Kane, Frank, and Brady chased Gypsy to the other side of the cabin where she skidded to a halt when the only person she saw standing in the clearing was Cooper. Knowing they'd be no help to Gypsy if Cooper knew they were there, the three men stopped just short of where they could be seen.

* * * *

Johnny Cooper was in pain from his bullet wound and frustrated because nothing was going as planned. Then he heard rustling in the bushes to his left. Damn! The McCassey's had snuck up on him.

Cooper knew any hope he had of getting that key from Gypsy was gone. He'd never get the diamonds now, but

neither would anyone else. He knew he was going to die here and planned to take as many people with him as he could. Pointing his gun into the bushes, he fired until the chamber was empty. No one fired in return, so he assumed he'd hit whoever was back there. Then he heard one of the McCassey's yell for Rebel, and seconds later, Gypsy ran into the clearing.

"I knew all I had to do was wait and you'd eventually show up." Cooper, only ten feet from Gypsy, tossed his empty gun to the ground and pulled a second one from behind his back. He took a step closer to his daughter. "This isn't exactly how I planned on killing you, but it'll do."

Gypsy tried to take a step back, but Cooper reached out and caught hold of her arm. "No way, girl, you're not going anywhere."

In a motion so fast it took Cooper by surprise, Gypsy reached around and pulled her own gun. Aiming for any part of his body, she shook herself free and pulled the trigger at the same time. Unfortunately, she only hit him in the leg.

"Ahh! You goddamm bitch!" He backhanded her, causing her to drop the gun and fall, then kicked her in her side and grabbed a handful of her hair, yanking her to her feet. He wrapped his left arm around her neck and pulled her body against his. With his right hand, he fired his gun into the air then placed it against Gypsy's temple. "If you're not dead in that brush, McCassey, then you'd better get over here. I've got your wife. Come on out and take a good long look because this is the last time you'll see her alive."

* * * *

Rebel couldn't believe his eyes when he saw Gypsy run into the clearing, and again when she pulled the gun and tried to shoot Cooper. Rebel was actually glad she hadn't killed her father. He wasn't sure she'd be able to deal with taking someone's life, even if it was the man who had killed her mother. Too bad for Cooper that killing a man wasn't something Rebel had a problem with.

But first thing's first.

It took every ounce of restraint Rebel possessed not to charge Cooper when he struck Gypsy. He was too far away to be of any immediate help to her, and his sudden action would've most likely caused Cooper to panic and shoot her. The problem he had now was that Cooper was holding Gypsy so close to his body that Rebel wasn't sure he could shoot him without hurting Gypsy, too.

Rebel motioned to Brady, who quietly made his way over. "I have to get them separated long enough to get off a shot," he said. "Cover me."

"Wait!" Brady said, grabbing his arm. "You can't just run out there."

Rebel yanked his arm loose from his cousin's grasp. "Well, I don't have time to come up with a plan this time."

"You hear me, McCassey?" Cooper shouted, "Come on out here and say goodbye to your wife."

Brady blinked and Rebel was gone. He'd jumped up and burst into the clearing with his hands up. "Let her go, Cooper."

"You got a lot of nerve stepping in front of me unarmed, McCassey. You want to die with your wife?"

Remaining calm, as calm as he'd ever been, Rebel kept his voice at an even, non-threatening level. "I said ... let her go."

"Not a chance. This little bitch ruined my life, so now I'm ending hers. And there's nothing an unarmed man can do about it."

It happened so fast, that Rebel didn't think Johnny Cooper ever knew what hit him. As he went to pull the trigger of his .22, Rebel's hand flew behind his back and drew the .357 from his waistband. With the smell of sweat and anticipation burning his nostrils, Rebel focused on the right side of Cooper's head, squinted, and fired into the fading moments of dusk. The bullet hit its mark, causing both Cooper and Gypsy to drop to the ground.

Rebel threw down his gun and ran to his wife, who was pinned under the weight of her father's body. By the time he got there, Frank, Brady, Kane, and Judd were beside him. "Roll him off of her," Rebel instructed. "Easy, now." He placed his hands on Gypsy's upper body and pulled her free.

She was unconscious.

Rebel knew he hadn't shot her, but he wanted to make sure she hadn't cracked her head when she fell. The first thing he did was check Gypsy for injuries. Relieved to find nothing other than a small cut where Cooper had backhanded her, he cradled her in his lap and gently tapped the side of her face. "Gypsy? Gypsy, darlin' wake up."

The five men holding their breath let out a collective sigh of relief when she finally opened her eyes. After blinking a

few times, Gypsy turned her head to the side. When she caught sight of Cooper's body and the giant, bloody hole in his head, she jumped from Rebel's lap, ran to the edge of the woods, and threw up.

Brady and Kane turned away.

Frank and Judd each ran and grabbed onto one of her arms to keep her from falling; Rebel reached her just in time to gather the hair that had escaped her ponytail and hold it away from her face.

"I'm sorry," she said, when she finished and wiped her face on the shirt Rebel had taken off and handed her.

"You've just been through hell, Gypsy. You've got a right to be sick about it."

"Thanks, Judd." She turned to her husband. "Is it over?"

He pulled her close and kissed the top of her head.

"Almost. There's one man left, the one who was helping Cooper. But none of us know who it is. Blackie went to look for him a while ago. I have to go help him."

Gypsy closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "I know, and even though I don't want you to go, I would never ask you to turn your back on your brother. So go find him, and come back safe."

Rebel nodded, marveling at her strength and the love she had for his family. "Frank's going to take you up the hill next to my granddaddy's house and leave you with Rose. They have a small cabin on the outskirts of his property. You'll be safe there." He cupped Gypsy's face and caressed her cheek with his rough and calloused thumb. "I'll come for you as soon as I can."

Gypsy glanced at Cooper's body one more time. "What about...?"

"Let the turkey vultures have him."

"It's better than he deserves," Gypsy commented, and wrapped her arms around Rebel. "Be careful," she said, and looked at each one of his relatives. "All of you."

* * * *

Ben Johnson watched the scene in the clearing from high atop his perch in the oak tree. He'd been hiding up there for close to an hour, discovering the secret spot when he stumbled upon Brady and Kane vacating it.

Johnson knew Blackie was after the person who'd been helping Johnny Cooper, but that's not why he decided to stay hidden. His original plan had been to catch those McCassey's who were on probation with firearms in their hands and haul them off to jail for violations.

It'd been his dream to ruin as many of their lives as possible for as long as he could remember. But up until now, he'd been miserably unsuccessful. Busting three or four of them today would've been the highlight of his career.

That was before Rebel killed Johnny Cooper.

Now, Johnson was the only person alive who knew where to find the safe deposit box that Gypsy held the key to. And one million dollars was a hell of a lot more appealing than risking his hide to haul in a few McCassey's for probation violations.

He'd been wondering how he was going to get his hands on that key, and now he knew. Since the McCassey men

assumed the man they were hunting was headed back to town, Johnson decided to stay right where he was until they were long gone. When he felt it was safe, he'd head up to the remote cabin, snatch Gypsy, and force her to give him the key. He'd heard her tell Cooper she didn't have it, but she had to be lying. Johnson was sure she just wanted the loot for herself. They'd probably have to go back to the garage to get the key, but that was okay. Since the McCassey's knew it wasn't one of their own that had betrayed them, they'd never think to stake out their own garage.

When Gypsy finally handed the key over, he'd take her with him to the bank in Baltimore as a little insurance policy. Once the diamonds were safely in his possession, he'd abandon her and catch the first flight out of Friendship Airport for Mexico.

The plan was perfect.

All he had to do now was wait.

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Chapter 20

It felt good to be clean.

The first thing Gypsy did when Frank dropped her off at the cabin was take a long, hot shower. The first thing, that is, after helping him drag Flynn out of the truck and into the living room.

Before they left Ten Acres, Frank had taken a look at the younger McCassey's head wound and decided he was bleeding too badly to go running around in the dark hunting bad guys. Amid Flynn's rumbles of protest, Rebel finally convinced him to stay with Gypsy and Rose ... as protection. From the passenger seat of his own pickup truck, Flynn stuck his tongue out at Kane and told his cousin he'd do a much better job of guarding Rebel's wife. Less than a mile down the road, he rested his head on Gypsy's shoulder and passed out.

Gypsy lingered in the bathroom until a knock on the door had her scrambling to wrap herself in the fluffy white body towel Rose had left on the vanity. "It's Rose, honey, may I come in?"

Gypsy unlocked and opened the door.

She loved Rose. Strong, supportive, and nurturing, the older woman was everything Gypsy liked to imagine her mother would've been, had she lived.

"How's Flynn?"

Rose smiled. "Out like a light. Frank got the bleeding on his head to stop before he left. I think poor Flynn's just plain worn out."

Gypsy smiled back. "Well, I hope nothing happens here before morning. He'll be mad that he slept through it."

"That's the truth. How are you feeling?"

Sore, tired, scared. "I'm okay. I just need to rest. It's been a long two days."

"Well, why don't you come into the kitchen and let me fix you a bowl of chicken soup."

"Thanks, Rose, but I can't impose on you anymore. I'm not that hungry, anyway. I think I'll just go to bed."

Rose reached out to Gypsy. "You might be tired, but you've got to think about that baby you're carrying. He needs nourishment."

"He?"

Rose smiled again and gave Gypsy a wink. "I've got a feeling."

Gypsy relented. "Give me a minute to get dressed," she said, gathering the fresh nightgown Rose gave her. "I'll meet you at the table."

After polishing off two bowls of soup and three slices of fresh bread, Gypsy finished the glass of milk Rose had given her. "I guess I was hungrier than I thought."

"Well, you go on to bed now. Rebel will come in and wake you when he gets here."

"If he gets here." Gypsy was terrified something was going to happen to her husband. And as tired as she was, she didn't think she'd be able to sleep a wink until he was lying beside her.

Rose wrapped her arms around the younger woman and led her to the bedroom. "Oh, honey, if there's one thing I

know about Rebel Raider McCassey, it's that he always does what he sets out to do. That boy's tough and smart. He can do anything, Gypsy. He'll make everything all right."

* * * *

Exhausted yet restless, it was thoughts of her husband's strong arms wrapped around her that finally helped Gypsy fall asleep.

Just before dawn, Gypsy woke with a start; the eerie feeling that someone was watching her made the hair on the back of her neck stand straight up. When she reached across the nightstand to turn on the light, a deep voice cut into her thoughts, "Touch that lamp and you're dead where you lay."

Gypsy froze. The voice was familiar, but she couldn't quite place who it belonged to.

"Now," the man whispered, "I want you to get out of that bed slowly, no sudden moves. And be quiet. You wake those two sleeping in the other room and I'll be forced to kill all three of you."

As soon as he said the last few words, Gypsy knew who had invaded into her room. She broke out into a sweat and her heart began racing as she tried to think. What was Sheriff Johnson doing here? What should she do? Panic threatened to take over, but thoughts of her husband and unborn baby forced her to stay calm.

Gypsy let go of the .22 she was holding and slid her right hand out from underneath the pillow. In order to protect Rose and Flynn, she wouldn't take a shot at the sheriff. It was too dark and her aim was terrible, anyway. So in all likelihood,

the only thing she'd wind up doing is angering the sheriff and putting two other people's lives at risk.

She threw back the covers, got out of bed and stood still, waiting for him to tell her what to do.

"Put some more clothes on," he ordered. "I'm not looking to draw any unwanted attention."

She knew he had a gun on her, she could see its slight shadow against the wall. Quickly but quietly, she removed the nightgown and put on her filthy jeans and T-shirt.

"The window," he directed with a wave of his gun. "Climb through the window."

Thoughts of ways to escape cluttered Gypsy's mind as she climbed through the open window and waited for the sheriff on the other side. Now wasn't the time to run, though. It was too risky to flee in the dark when she was barefoot and didn't know the area, and too dangerous to defy the sheriff so close to the cabin where he could easily shoot Rose and Flynn.

When Johnson emerged, he waved his gun wordlessly again, motioning for her to start walking. A few hundred yards down the dirt road was a beat up old sedan.

"Get in," he commanded.

She opened the door and slid into the passenger seat. He holstered his gun and turned to her. "I want the key."

A light went on in Gypsy's head.

So, the sheriff had been the one helping Cooper. It all made sense now. Ben Johnson hated the McCassey's and Johnny Cooper wanted Gypsy dead. The sheriff had probably been more than happy to feed Cooper all the information he wanted to know. And she was sure he was looking forward to

seeing the look on Rebel's face when he found out Gypsy was dead.

Gypsy's first instinct was to tell Johnson she didn't have the key. But it was, after all, one million dollars in diamonds, and he'd only think she was lying in order to claim the jewelry herself. Instead, she came up with an idea that would at least get her into town; a place she might be spotted by someone she could trust. "It's with my stuff at the garage," she told him, hoping maybe one of the guys might be staking out the building.

* * * *

Damn. He knew it. Going to the garage wouldn't have been a problem if he'd been able to get to Gypsy five hours ago. But he had a more difficult time avoiding the McCassey's than he thought he would, almost being spotted by Blackie and Rebel twice.

He was the sheriff, after all. So in reality, he could've approached them and pretended he was just out patrolling the town. But he'd been Hagerstown's sheriff for almost twenty years, and everyone knew that not once in all that time had he worked a graveyard shift. Rebel and Blackie would have known immediately that he was lying.

Now, it was almost dawn and the town would be stirring before too long. Not only that, three of his deputies would be coming on duty in another hour. He had to get that key and get out of town before anyone saw him.

Johnson parked on the side of the garage and cut the engine. "You got a key to get in?" he asked.

* * * *

Gypsy mentally patted herself on the back for being able to think on her feet. "There's one under the rain barrel," she lied. The barrel was full of water and he was going to have to try and knock it over. That would take time and make a lot of noise.

Lucky for Gypsy the barrel wasn't just full, it was overflowing.

"Damn!" Johnson cursed. "How the hell are we going to empty this thing?"

"You could try and tip it over," she innocently suggested.

"Get over here and help me."

To stall him, she said she could get a better grip if she had something to cover her hands with. "There's usually a pile of rags on the other side of the soda machine by the middle bay door," she told him. "I'm just going to grab a couple."

Johnson didn't even look at her when he mumbled, "Hurry up."

Gypsy knew what she had to do, and knew she had less than a few seconds to do it. Rebel never locked the middle bay door, so all she had to do was get a good grip on the handle and lift it enough for Outlaw to crawl under. The only problem with her plan was whether or not the dog could get out before the sheriff reacted to the noise.

She took a deep breath, and with trembling hands, grabbed the door handle and pulled with every ounce of strength she had. The first creak of the door, which occurred

at the exact moment the barrel crashed to the ground, had Outlaw barking.

Cold rainwater rushed over Gypsy's bare feet as she gave one final pull, forcing the oversized door to fly open. The momentum knocked her down and she narrowly escaped being run down by Outlaw. The dog had burst from the garage and was growling ferociously at the sheriff, who was on his knees and desperately trying to remove his gun from its holster.

Finally getting a good grip on the nine millimeter, he aimed it at Outlaw. "I'm going to kill this mangy mutt once and for all."

"No!" Gypsy screamed. Unwilling to see harm come to her husband's beloved dog, she threw herself at the sheriff causing him to lose his balance. The gun flew from his hand and slid across the wet parking lot as he and Gypsy toppled over.

* * * *

Rebel and Blackie watched closely from across the street as the old sedan pulled up next to the garage. "You expectin' a delivery today, Rebel?"

"I get deliveries everyday," he said, taking what details he could see on the car in the darkness, "but never before dawn, and not from guys driving beat up sedans."

"You think it's a break-in?"

Rebel shrugged with interest. "We'll know in a minute."

The brothers watched the car closely. It was a good thirty seconds before anyone attempted to get out, but when the

passenger door opened, they were shocked by what they saw.

"That looks like Gypsy."

Rebel blinked. It sure as hell did look like Gypsy. What was she doing there? And who was she with? He started to walk out from behind the pile of rubble where they were hiding, but Blackie reached out to stop him. "Hold on, little brother. Let's see who she's with."

Rebel shrugged his brother off, but did as he suggested. A few seconds later, the driver's side door opened, and the sheriff stepped out. "Jesus," he said, in a ragged breath, "it's Johnson. Goddammit! I should've known!"

Rebel quickly filled Blackie in on what happened five days before with the Jenkins family at Digger's Bar. He told him that Gypsy had protected Judd by hiding the gun, and that when the sheriff wanted to search her, she put him in his place by requesting a female officer.

"Then, after spitting the law in his face, she turned her back on him and walked away. That's when he warned me to keep an eye on her. I should've known then that he was up to something!"

Trying to calm his brother's rage, Blackie spoke as if he was talking to a child. "Take it easy, Rebel. Let's watch a minute."

"What the hell for? That bastard was obviously the one Cooper was getting his information from, Blackie. And now he's got my wife. I'm going to get her."

Blackie's hands shot out and closed tightly around Rebel's shoulders. "Calm down and use your fuckin' head a minute,"

he roughly ordered his younger brother. "If Johnson knew where to find Gypsy, then he was probably lurkin' around up at Ten Acres and overheard you talkin'. That means he also knows we're out lookin' for someone. He don't usually go out at night, Rebel. Everyone knows that. So why would he kidnap your wife and take a chance showin' up at the garage?"

When he didn't answer, Blackie tightened his grip. "Why, Rebel?"

He knew why. "Because he thinks Gypsy has the key to the safe deposit box holding the diamonds."

"Right. Now, what does him showin' up in town, even though he knows he's bein' hunted, tell you?"

Rebel knew Blackie was trying to make him think rationally; something he hadn't been doing since he saw Gypsy get out of that car. Still, he was getting tired of his brother's game. "It tells me he's desperate."

"And we both know that desperate men don't think clearly or rationally."

"So?"

"So, if we storm over there with our guns blazin', Johnson's gonna panic and probably shoot your wife. You know that, you told me yourself it's what you sensed when Cooper was holdin' that gun to Gypsy's head. Right now, Johnson's bein' careless. He's so intent on gettin' the key that it ain't even occurred to him he's standin' out in the open for everyone to see.

"We all know Outlaw's bark is loud enough to wake the whole damn town. And Gypsy's smart. You can bet your ass

that the only thing on her mind right now is makin' enough noise to get him goin'. The good citizens of Hagerstown are nosey, and they'll be out in force once they hear all the commotion. I guarantee there'll be plenty of witnesses to testify to what the sheriff was doin' here tonight. Kidnappin' and attempted murder should get him put away for a good long time, and keep him far away from law enforcement when he gets out."

Rebel knew everything his brother said was true, and was grateful to Blackie for stopping him before he went off half-cocked and did something to get Gypsy hurt. "Thanks."

Blackie didn't get a chance to respond because the sound of the metal bay door at the garage being opened, along with Outlaw's barking, split the air. The brothers watched in horror at the unfolding scene; the sheriff pulling a gun on Outlaw, Gypsy trying to protect the dog by throwing herself into Johnson, and the two of them falling backward onto the wet parking lot.

"Now!" Rebel yelled to Blackie.

The brothers drew their guns and charged across the street.

* * * *

Shit! Ben Johnson wondered how he could've been so stupid. He got so wrapped up in those diamonds that not only did he forget about the McCassey's, he also gave Gypsy an opportunity to draw attention to them. Rebel's damn dog was making so much noise the entire town would be at the garage within minutes.

How could his plan have gone wrong? It had been so perfect. For two hundred thousand dollars, all he had to do was help Cooper get to his daughter. As a bonus, he'd be able to send a handful of McCassey's to jail.

Or so he thought.

He knew what went wrong ... he'd gotten greedy.

And he was about to pay for it.

They're here, Johnson thought. He couldn't see them yet, but he knew there were McCassey's lurking in the shadows, waiting for the perfect opportunity to take a shot at him. This was a hell of a mess he'd gotten himself into. "As long as I'm going down, McCassey's, I'm taking as many of you bastards with me as possible!" Drawing his gun, he pushed Gypsy to the side and came up firing.

The few curious onlookers that had gathered in front of the garage scrambled for cover. Gypsy grabbed Outlaw's collar and crawled toward the side of the building, dragging the dog with her.

* * * *

The first shots from the sheriff's gun had Rebel and Blackie diving for cover behind a few of the cars in the garage parking lot. "Where's Gypsy?" Blackie asked.

"I saw her crawling away from the sheriff," Rebel whispered, aiming his .357 at Johnson. "Hopefully, she's hiding in the woods."

"Can you get a clean shot?"

"I'm trying, but that damn son of a bitch is moving around too much."

Footsteps behind them had Blackie turning and pointing his gun. Jimmy, Brady, Kane, and Frank skidded to a halt and put their hands up. "Whoa, Blackie. It's us."

"Sorry, Jimmy ... guys."

"What the hell's going on?" Judd asked. "We heard Outlaw barking all the way down by the convenience store."

Blackie filled the rest of his family in on what was going on while Rebel kept an eye on Johnson, who was now yelling obscenities and challenging every McCassey in town to face him.

"I can't get a shot off from over here," Rebel announced. "I'm going in."

Judd stepped forward. "That's crazy."

"You got a better idea?"

"I'll go."

Angry, Rebel turned to look at him. "Forget it. You hear those sirens? Two dozen people have probably already called the cops, and you can bet those aren't Hagerstown's finest on the way. That's the Maryland State Police, boys. So you, you, you, and you," he said, pointing to Blackie, Judd, Brady, and Kane. "Ditch your guns and get the hell out of here. Go!"

None of them moved.

"Jesus Christ." Rebel swore in exasperation. Blackie's defiance, he could understand. But why now, after years of hanging on his every word, did Judd, Brady, and Kane decide to ignore him? He didn't have time for explanations, so he was honest. "Look, I can't afford to lose the four of you. Business wise ... or otherwise. So please," he begged, "get the hell out of here. Go home, hide in the woods, check in

with your parole or probation officers, whatever. Just be gone when those troopers get here."

The sirens were getting louder, and Kane's fidgeting gave away just how nervous he really was. "But what are you going to do about Johnson?"

"I'll handle him," Rebel said, "Jimmy and Frank can cover me," he turned back around and focused once again on the sheriff. "Beat it."

When Rebel turned around again, they were gone.

"What do you want us to do?" Frank asked.

"I'm going to sneak up on Johnson from behind." Rebel handed Jimmy his gun and unhooked the sheath on his belt that held his Bowie knife. "It'll look better when the law gets here if I'm unarmed."

Before they could protest, he was gone.

It wasn't hard to get the jump on Johnson. He was so pre-occupied with sending bullets flying through the air that he obviously didn't hear Rebel come up behind him.

"Johnson!"

The sheriff stopped firing immediately and turned to Rebel. "Well, if it isn't the fearless leader of the McCassey clan. Where're all your loyal subjects?"

"I don't need any help handling you."

Johnson laughed and lowered his gun. "Is that right?"

"That's right."

"Well, come on then, Rebel," he said, mockingly. "Let's see what you got."

Rebel's right hook struck hard and fast. It sent the sheriff's head whipping back, blood flying from his nose. The second

punch was an uppercut to the jaw that caused him to stagger backward and come to a stop against one of the garage's bay doors. Rebel finished Johnson by grabbing his shoulders, bending him forward and kneeling him in the gut.

Johnson fell to the ground just as five police cruisers skidded to a halt in front of the garage. "Maryland State Police!" one of the officers yelled through his megaphone, "get down on the ground and put your hands behind your head!"

Rebel did as he was told. Lying flat on his bare stomach in the wet parking lot, he was handcuffed and helped to his feet. After being searched, he was led into Rose's office and isolated from the others for questioning.

Jimmy, Frank, and Gypsy were all questioned separately. They each told exactly the same story, starting with what they knew about Johnny Cooper and ending with Rebel's fight with the sheriff. As far as the Maryland State Police was concerned, Blackie, Judd, Brady, and Kane McCassey hadn't been seen by their family for two days, and didn't know a thing about what had taken place.

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Chapter 21

Because Rebel was detained much longer than the other three, he and Gypsy weren't reunited until later that morning at Frank and Rose's cabin. Still shirtless, he pulled into the yard and stepped out of the tow truck at the same time Gypsy burst through the front door. She flew into his arms, and he caught her in a bear hug as she buried her face in the crook of his neck, taking in his scent and kissing his dirty, sweat-streaked skin.

Nothing in the world felt better than being close to Gypsy, and Rebel tightened his hold. "It's over now darlin'. It's finally over."

She unwrapped her arms from around his neck and looked into the royal blue eyes she'd come to love so much. "Thanks to you," she said, "and to Blackie and the rest of your family."

"Our family," he corrected. "You're a full-fledged member of the McCassey clan now."

Gypsy smiled. "Our family."

Still holding her, Rebel climbed the steps and walked onto the porch. Stopping just short of walking in the house, he set Gypsy on her feet and kissed her forehead.

"Let's go inside," he said, reaching for her slender hand. "I'm a mess and I need a shower. Bad."

The State Police had kept him at the garage so long that he'd flown out of there the minute they finished questioning him. He hadn't even bothered to put on another shirt.

The first thing Rebel did when he entered Frank and Rose's living room was approach Kane and Flynn. They each had a body part bandaged and were sitting on the couch drinking beer; at ten o'clock in the morning. "I appreciate everything you two did for Gypsy and me. You really came through."

They both blushed. "Jesus, Rebel, you don't have to get so sticky sweet on us," Kane told him. "You've done the same thing for us a hundred times."

Blackie strode over and pulled his younger brother aside. "So."

"Sooo?" Rebel drawled.

For a split second, Blackie looked uncomfortable. Then he broke into a grin and extended his hand. "Your wife's aces, little brother, I like her. You know I ain't never been a very big fan of women. Most of the ones I've come across have all been sneaky, vindictive, and untrustworthy. Rose is the only woman I ever met who was an exception to that rule. But after spendin' so much time with Gypsy, I realized she's a good woman, too. She really loves you, man. I'm proud to call her sister."

Rebel stared at Blackie in surprise as he shook his brother's hand. "Thanks. That means a lot coming from you."

Both men grinned, and Rebel held out his arm to Gypsy, who was making her way over to him from across the room.

"What are you two so happy about?" she asked.

The brothers exchanged knowing looks over Gypsy's head.

Blackie wrapped his arm around Gypsy's shoulders and attempted to pull her away from Rebel. Happy to see his older brother genuinely interested in something other than causing

trouble, he released her and watched happily as Blackie gave her a tender kiss on the cheek. Gypsy's green eyes lit up at the display of affection, showing just how much she loved her new family.

"So tell me, girl, when am I gonna be an uncle?"

* * * *

Gypsy smiled at her oversized brother-in-law. He'd risked going back to prison to help save her, and she knew that underneath his tough exterior, just like Judd, Blackie was also a good man. "Early spring. Are you going to be around?"

"That depends."

"On what?"

"On whether McCassey's Garage is doin' any hirin'. I've been thinkin' about goin' straight for a while," he said grinning, "just until I get bored."

Rebel laughed. "You can have your job back, man. You earned it."

"Yeah, well, a guy's got to protect his sister." He winked at Gypsy. "Ain't that right, girl?"

Hearing Blackie refer to her as his sister made her feel just as loved and accepted as it had when Judd said it. "Thanks again, Blackie. For helping Rebel save me, for watching out for me, and for wanting to be around when the baby comes. If it wasn't for you, this whole thing could've turned out very differently."

"Oh yeah? Well, in that case, remember me when your kid's born. Blackie's a good, honest name, you know."

Rebel chuckled. "Uh-huh. It's done real well by you."

"Behave yourself, little brother," Blackie said with a grin, "or I'll teach your kid everything I know."

"Then someone should warn the good people of Hagerstown to get out while they can."

Blackie laughed good-naturedly and let go of Gypsy. "I'm goin' outside for a smoke. I'll catch you two later."

When he was gone, Rebel draped his arm around Gypsy's shoulder and pulled her close again. "Are you happy?"

She tilted her head up and smiled at her husband. "I've never been this happy, Reb. The new life you've given me is so wonderful it almost feels like my old life never existed. I got lucky when I found you."

"As I recall, darlin', it was me who found you ... lost in my woods."

"You took good care of me that day, just like you have everyday since. I don't know what I'd do without you."

"You could always hook up with one of my brothers. They'd just pick up where I left off."

She playfully punched his shoulder. "That isn't very funny."

He cupped her face and stared into her eyes. "I'm here, Gypsy, and I'm not going anywhere for a long, long time. I'll always love and take care of you, this baby, and any other children we're lucky enough to have. You'll always be safe and protected." He leaned down and brushed her lips with his. "No worries."

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Epilogue

Four years later

Gypsy leaned against the side of the barn and laughed as Outlaw barked at her son, Chase, keeping the two-year-old from getting too close to the campfire. He was a handful, that one, just like his older brother. And according to all the pictures she'd seen, they were both the spitting image of Rebel at that age, right down to the royal blue eyes and jet black hair; which they refused to let her cut because they wanted to look just like their daddy.

Upon hearing his dog bark, Rebel bent down and scooped up his youngest son, bringing a protest from both Chase and six-month-old Jade, who'd been happily sleeping in the crook of her father's left arm. "Where's your brother?"

"I dunno, Daddy," Chace responded.

"Here I am." Rebel turned and found his three-year-old son, Raider, sitting in Blackie's lap eating a candy bar. "Uncle Blackie gave me chocolate, see?" The little boy held two candy-coated hands out to his father.

Rebel looked at his brother and laughed. "Uncle Blackie has a lot of cleaning up to do. You be good, now. I'll be back."

"Bye, Daddy."

Spotting his wife by the barn, Rebel made his way over to her with their two younger children.

"Looks like you've got your hands full." She reached out to take Jade, who was now happily playing with a fistful of her father's long hair, but he handed her Chase instead.

The boy wiggled to free himself from his mother's grasp, but Rebel reached out and swatted his behind softly. "Behave yourself."

Chase immediately stopped squirming and wrapped his arms around Gypsy. "Love you, Mommy."

Gypsy kissed the top of the boy's dark head and set him on his feet. "I love you, too. Go on and play," she told him, "and stay away from the fire."

"Okay!" He ran off with Outlaw following closely behind.

Rebel laughed and shook his head as he watched his youngest son. "We should've named him after Judd," he commented. "Their personalities are carbon copies of each other."

Gypsy rolled her eyes. "I guess we're in for big trouble, then."

Judd snuck up behind Gypsy and kissed her left cheek, then handed his brother a cold can of Budweiser. "Who's in trouble?"

"Us," Rebel said. "Chase is just like you."

The grin that broke out on Judd's face went from ear to ear. "And here you two thought all the hard times were behind you. Boy, were you wrong."

Blackie joined them, wiping what was left of Raider's chocolate disaster onto his jeans, and lifted Jade from her father's arms. Cuddling the baby girl against his broad chest, he smiled when she grabbed a fistful of his long dark brown locks and pulled. "Who's wrong?" he wanted to know.

"Rebel and Gypsy. They're in for it with Raider and Chase. Those two are McCassey's through and through."

Laughing, Blackie began planting kisses on top of Jade's tiny head. He loved everything about his niece. Her baby smell, the thin, curly, strawberry blonde hair that was just starting to come in, and her royal blue eyes that always looked at him with so much trust and love. "I don't know, little brother. Somethin' tells me those two are gonna be the least of your problems. This one's a heartbreaker already. You and your boys are gonna be beatin' the men off her with sticks."

"Man, that sure is gonna be a sight," Judd said, trying not to laugh, "Rebel trying to deal with boys being interested in his daughter." Judd unrolled a pack of Marlboro's from his shirt sleeve. He offered a cigarette to each of his brothers, who declined; Rebel because he was trying to quit, and Blackie because he was holding the baby.

When Judd spotted Dawn, a girl he'd had his eye on for the past few weeks, he kissed Gypsy and Jade's cheeks and walked off.

Blackie sighed and shook his head. "Lovesick fool."

"What about you?" Gypsy asked. "Don't you think it's time you picked out a woman for yourself?"

"Are you kiddin'?" He held Jade in the air over his head then brought her down and encircled her in his arms again. "I got my one and only woman right here." Blackie took the baby's bottle from Gypsy. "Come on, little darlin'," he put the nipple in Jade's mouth and turned away from her parents. "Let's get the hell outta here before your daddy tries to beat me off with a stick."

Gypsy rolled her eyes at Blackie's language.

"Hey," Rebel said, defending his brother, "he's trying. At least he didn't say any obscene four letter words this time."

Thinking about what a hard time Blackie had keeping his vocabulary clean around the kids, Gypsy laughed out loud as Rebel wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her to him.

"I know he's trying. But the first time Raider's preschool calls complaining that he told some kid not to touch his fucking toy, Blackie's going down there to explain why."

It was Rebel's turn to laugh. "Yeah, you're right. Maybe I should go over there and take Jade from him. He might be teaching her to spit."

"Oh stop it, Reb. Blackie couldn't love Jade more if she were his own daughter. He doesn't even mind emotional females anymore. And besides," Gypsy said wiping at a spot on her shirt, "she already knows how to spit."

He smiled. "You know, I never thought I'd see the day either one of my brothers would take an interest in anything that didn't have to do with trouble. Especially kids. Although Judd started changing when he met you, I never really expected Blackie to live past thirty-five. He was on the fast track to hell when he got out of prison three years ago. I like to think you had something to do with mellowing them."

That surprised her. "Why me?"

"Because you showed them up close and personal what it was like to be adored and loved. Sure, we were loved by our relatives growing up. But it wasn't the same as being in a house full of love. And that's exactly what you showed us all when the four of us lived together in my parent's old house

the first year we were married. It was the first time there'd ever been any love in that house."

"But we all cared about each other, Reb. I didn't do anything special."

"Of course you did; going to Judd for help when you needed something, curling up and falling asleep on Blackie's shoulder waiting for me to get home at night, asking the two of them to be in the delivery room with us when Raider was born. You needed them. You wanted them around—and not just when it was convenient, but all the time. They'd never experienced anything like that and it made them feel loved."

"You're more to Blackie and Judd than just my wife, you're their sister. And you know how the men in my family feel about sisters. They'd go through hell for you. You're the one that made us a real family for the first time. Maybe that's what made them see that there are actually things in life to enjoy, and that they could only be enjoyed from outside a prison cell."

Gypsy sniffed, which caught Rebel off guard. He turned her around and looked into her eyes. "What's wrong?"

"That was so nice of you to say."

He smiled and wiped at her tears with his thumbs. "Every word is true. We may have saved your life, Gypsy, but you made all of ours better."

"Oh Reb." She jumped into his arms and he held her tight. "I never knew I could be so happy."

"Me either, darlin'. Me either."

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About the Author

Lauren Sharman has been creating characters and writing short stories since she was a little girl, but it was her love of reading, as well as encouragement from her husband, Joey, that finally inspired her to write novels. At home in Maryland, she and Joey have two amazing kids who constantly keep them smiling, an incredibly cool John Deere tractor, and share a passion for muscle cars, music, and steamed crabs.

In addition to romantic suspense, Lauren is also published in mainstream fiction; her novel, *Growing Up Little* was released by Whiskey Creek Press in May 2006. Her other releases from Whiskey Creek Press include "Her Shadow", a short story in the *HATE Anthology* (August 2006), and the upcoming sequel to *No Worries*, titled, *The Devil's Candy* (May 2007).

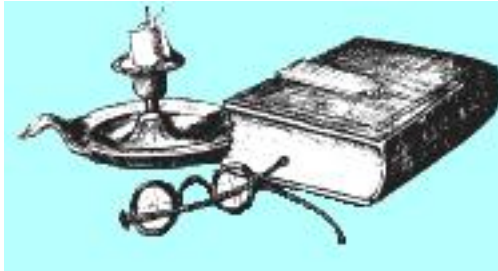
Lauren is an active member of both the Maryland Romance Writers, Romance Writer's of America, and is an RWA PRO. She loves talking about her books, so feel free to e-mail her at LaurenSharman@adelphia.net, or check out her website at www.LaurenSharman.com!

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Dedication

~~To Bobbi, my sister in spirit. You are beautiful, inspiring, and more than happy to laugh with me at things only you and I think are funny. You understand where I've been, where I am, and where I'm going. Our friendship means the world to me.~~

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Chapter 1

Most people in the small town of Hagerstown, Maryland said that Blackie McCassey's heart was as dark and cold as his name; if he even had a heart, that is.

Others claimed he was more dangerous than all the hell-raising McCassey cousins in Washington County put together, including his two younger brothers, Rebel and Judd.

Blackie knew there were even a few who thought the time he'd spent in prison would never be enough for all the havoc he'd wreaked throughout the county in his thirty-nine years.

He may not give a damn what anyone thought, but Blackie was smart enough to admit they were all right.

Aside from the years he'd been locked up, Blackie had spent his entire life in the small western Maryland town—much to the chagrin of most of its residents. Those who didn't know him steered clear of the six-foot-seven powerhouse who'd not only lived up to, but had surpassed his bad reputation.

Blackie didn't give a damn about that, either.

He didn't even mind being nicknamed 'The Devil'. The name that had been given to him a long time ago fit him well; better than most people knew. He enjoyed knowing no one wanted to come near him. The more people that avoided him, the happier he was.

And that included women.

Blackie never had a hard time getting a woman when he wanted one, preferring the kind who stayed in his bed just

long enough for him to find his release. Females of any other kind were nothing but trouble, so it made him happy that most of the ones he wasn't related to kept their distance.

"Hi, Blackie."

All except one.

Swiveling on his barstool, Blackie came face to face with Angel Shelby. As a kid, she'd been a rough and untamed tomboy, dogging the heels of her older brother, Digger. Now twenty-seven, she was the five-foot-five, fearless, walking invitation for trouble who worked the late afternoon and evening shift in Digger's bar.

"Hey, Angel Face."

Blackie liked Angel. She wasn't what he considered a 'typical' woman; one who caused a man more grief than she was worth. And she was hot. Hot enough to make a man imagine what it'd be like to take her to bed.

Angel received more than her share of attention from men. She wasn't skinny and didn't have a boyish figure like his sister-in-law, Gypsy. Angel had curves in all the right places, but probably didn't weigh more than a hundred and forty pounds. She didn't put on airs or act better than anyone, either, and she treated everyone she knew, blue collar or white, with the same amount of respect.

Sometimes, he almost forgot she was female.

Almost.

Angel set an ice-cold bottle of Budweiser on the long, rectangular, mahogany bar in front of him and smiled; her greenish-gray eyes, as always, exuded mischief. He smiled in return when she reached out and plucked the half-smoked

Marlboro from between his lips, took a long drag, and released the smoke in rings.

She returned the cigarette and winked. "It's last call, bad boy. How come you're just rolling in?"

Blackie used an oversized, rough, and weathered hand to brush away the few tresses of his wavy, thick, waist length dark brown hair that had fallen into his face. Absentmindedly, he stroked the equally dark Fu Manchu mustache, a trait that not only added to his menacing presence, but made him look every bit the part of an outlaw biker.

Turning his head to the left, Blackie glanced at the blue and red neon Miller Lite clock hanging on the far wall. Having no idea it was so late, he was surprised to see that it was one-thirty in the morning.

"The boys and I just got done paintin' the inside of the garage. My apartment above it smelled too much like fumes to sleep in tonight. I'm just in here lookin' for somethin' to do."

Collecting a few empty bottles from the area where Blackie sat, Angel turned and threw them into a large garbage can. Before coming to stand in front of him again, she reached under the bar and pulled out a cold longneck for herself. After removing the cap, Blackie watched as she pinched it between her thumb and middle finger just before raising it to ear level and snapping. The beer cap sailed across the room with amazing accuracy and landed in the same bin where she'd just tossed the bottles.

Apparently satisfied at having made her shot, she took a long swig from the bottle and set it next to his. "Your cousins,

Brady and Kane, were in earlier," she told him. "How'd they get out of painting?"

"Them two fool around too much to get any damn work done. Their job tonight is to hang around and keep an eye on things since we had to leave all three bay doors open."

Angel laughed. "Well, they were half lit when they left, fighting over who was going to drive. Oh! That reminds me..." She reached into the back pocket of her skintight blue jeans and pulled out a set of keys. How she was able to stuff them in there and not be uncomfortable, Blackie would never know. "You can take these with you when you go. I think they're Kane's."

The keychain sporting a picture of a naked woman revealed that they did, indeed, belong to Kane. Understanding now why Brady and Kane had shown up at the garage without Kane's truck, Blackie shook his head in disgust and shoved the keys into the pocket of his black leather jacket.

"You ain't usually here this late. Where's Digger?"

"We had some trouble earlier this afternoon," she said without elaborating. "He went down to the sheriff's office to press charges and I stayed to cover his shift."

Trouble was an everyday occurrence at Digger's, but it was odd that her brother would leave Angel alone to close the bar. He didn't even like her working late at night.

"He comin' back?"

Her gaze swept over the one waitress and handful of customers left in the bar, then at the clock. She shook her head. "Doesn't look like it."

Angel finished the last of her beer and threw the bottle into the trash. Then she unplugged the television and turned on the lights to let the stragglers know it was just about closing time. There were a few groans of disappointment, but no one gave her any trouble.

Fifteen minutes later, the only people left inside were the waitress, the dishwasher, Angel, and Blackie.

"You staying or going, Blackie?" she asked as she untied and removed her apron, setting it on the bar. "I need to lock up."

The question took Blackie by surprise. Just the fact that Angel didn't seem interested in throwing him out told him something wasn't right. She knew Digger had a strict policy that everyone except employees had to be out of the bar by two a.m., no matter who they were. If she was willing to let him stay, there had to be a damn good reason.

Digger was an old friend of his, the best friend he had outside his family, which made Angel his friend, too. He wasn't leaving until he found out what the hell was going on, and made sure she'd be okay alone.

Not wanting her to know he was suspicious, Blackie said, "I'm leavin'," and watched her reaction closely.

In typical Angel style, she shrugged like it was no big deal. "Suit yourself."

She swiped his nearly empty beer bottle and trashed it. Keys in hand, she walked to the front door and held it open. "Now get the hell out of here so I can close up."

Blackie didn't miss the slight quiver in her voice, and he knew her mind was on other things when she stopped paying

attention to him. He took off his jacket, revealing his only two tattoos. A red and black devil the size of a grapefruit on his left bicep and a golden handled black dagger on the inside of his right forearm, stretching the eighteen inches from his elbow to his wrist.

Setting the jacket next to her apron, he leaned behind the bar, grabbed the closest fifth of whiskey he could reach, and walked toward the door. "I'll catch you later."

Staring past him into the parking lot, Angel didn't say anything about the bottle in his hand, or that he was wearing nothing but a sleeveless white undershirt; two things she surely would've made smartass comments about had she not been distracted.

"Yeah, see ya," was all she said as he left.

Out in the parking lot, Blackie waited until he heard the deadbolt on the door being turned before he walked around to investigate. He knew there had to be someone, or something, out here. The Angel Shelby he knew didn't spook easily. She had the balls to back up every comment that came out of her big mouth, and was brave enough to face anyone or anything that got in her way.

Wondering if all this had something to do with the trouble Angel said they'd had earlier, Blackie headed around to the side of the building, his steel toe work boots making very little sound as he walked across the gravel.

Away from the shadows cast by the tall streetlights illuminating the bar, Blackie leaned his back against the concrete block wall. Lifting his right leg, he bent it at the knee, pressing his foot flat against the building.

After uncapping the whiskey bottle and taking a long, slow drink, he closed his eyes and listened. It was a trick he'd picked up early on in prison, learning that you may not always be able to see your enemy in the dark, but you could always hear them.

Ten minutes passed before Blackie heard the footsteps.

They were faint, as though someone was doing their best not to be heard, but they were there, and they were close. Sounding as if whoever it was was headed toward the back door, Blackie opened his eyes and crept along the wall until he'd reached the end of the building. Peering around the corner, he spotted four average sized men approaching the rear entrance. Watching, he waited to see what their intentions were. When one pulled a handgun from the inside pocket of his jacket, Blackie stepped out into the open and whacked him on the back of the head with the whiskey bottle.

Immediately unconscious, the man's deadweight hit the ground with a thud. With one powerful swing of his arm, Blackie tossed the bottle to the opposite side of the parking lot where it shattered the instant it made contact with the gravel.

"That was impressive, farm boy," said one of the three men coming toward him. "But I hope you're ready to die ... you can't take all three of us at once."

Blackie was about to correct the thug standing in front of him, assuring him that he could, indeed, take on the three of them with no problem. But before he had the chance to open his mouth, he heard a familiar voice. "Boy, you have no idea who you're standing in front of, do you?"

Glancing to his right, Blackie saw his two younger brothers, Judd and Rebel, walking toward him. Tilting his head up toward the night sky, Blackie rolled his eyes and wondered why Judd had to have such a big mouth

"Yeah," said the man, "three dirty farm boys."

By the time the first man threw a punch, the brothers were ready to fight.

The three McCassey's made light work of stopping the would-be-attackers. Blackie flattened the one who'd taken a swing at him with a quick left hook; Rebel and Judd each laid out their men with one-two punches—a fist in the gut followed by one to the jaw.

As the strangers lay panting and groaning in the dirt, the McCassey brothers stood side by side. Blackie could've handled the three men with no trouble, but it was nice knowing Rebel and Judd had his back.

Even if he hadn't always appreciated them.

Only ten months apart, those two had been more trouble than they were worth when they were younger—with all the beating they did on each other. But at thirty-four and thirty-five, they now were as close as brothers could be.

Rebel, the youngest, was part owner of McCassey's Garage, where Blackie and a handful of their relatives worked as mechanics. Reb had a certain quality that just made people want to follow him, reminding Blackie of the Pied Piper. Blackie hadn't understood it until a few years ago, but now had a healthy respect for whatever it was that made his youngest brother a born leader.

Happily married with two young sons and a baby daughter, Rebel may be a family man, but he was still a damn good fighter. One that Blackie, who enjoyed nothing better than a rough fight, would think twice about crossing.

Mostly a follower, Judd was the complete opposite. He and Rebel may have a lot in common as far as looks, height, and weight, but that's as far as their similarities went. With his quick temper, Judd was much more like Blackie. The two also used to share the same views on women, but since spending time around Gypsy, Judd, the single, full-time tow truck driver, had softened a little.

"What the hell are you two doin' here?" Blackie asked as he bent down and pulled a wallet out the unconscious man's back pocket. He removed the small wad of cash from the billfold and stuffed it into his back pocket, then filtered through the rest of the wallet until he found the State of Maryland driver's license. Blackie said the name William Ramsey over and over in his head, swearing it sounded familiar.

Judd chuckled as he and Rebel backed up to lean against the building. "Gypsy gave us the third degree for coming home without her oldest brother. She's afraid your brain cells are going to die if you sleep in a room full of paint fumes. I tried to tell her you don't have many brain cells left, but she insisted on having you there, anyway. We came to get you so we don't have to sleep in Outlaw's doghouse."

Blackie ignored Judd's playful insult and almost laughed, imagining the scene at Rebel's house when his wife saw only two McCassey brothers instead of three.

Gypsy was one of the few exceptions he'd made where his opinion of women was concerned. She was beautiful, accepting, and had always referred to him and Judd as her brothers, dropping the 'in-law'.

What did make him laugh was the picture that popped into his mind of his brothers fighting Rebel's huge German Shepherd for sleeping space.

"Never mind us," Rebel said impatiently. "What the hell is going on here? Where's Digger?"

"That's a good question. Angel said they had some trouble earlier and he went to the sheriff's office to press charges. He ain't come back yet. She seemed kinda spooked at closin' time, so I hung around."

Rebel ran a hand through his shoulder length, jet-black hair. "What do you mean he's not back? How long could it possibly take to file charges?"

"I don't know, little brother, I ain't usually the one doin' the filin'."

Judd picked up the unconscious man's gun, emptied the ammunition, and tossed it all into the woods. "Where's Angel now?"

"Inside. Let's go. We better check on her."

"Not so fast, farm boys."

All three McCassey's turned in unison, spotting the man standing just a few feet away with a nine millimeter aimed at them. Blackie looked at each of his brothers, shrugged, then took a step forward. Quick as lightning, he slammed his size fourteen-booted foot into the man's groin. He dropped the gun, which Judd immediately grabbed and tossed into the

woods. With a pained grunt, the man crumpled in a heap at Blackie's feet.

"Don't fuck with the McCassey brothers, asshole," Blackie warned, kicking him in the ribs a few times to make sure he stayed down. "And we ain't farm boys."

When he went to kick him again, Rebel grabbed Blackie's arm. "He's had enough. We need to check on Angel."

"Angel's fine."

At the sound of her voice, Rebel, Judd, and Blackie turned and looked behind them. Angel stood just inside the backdoor with a sawed-off shotgun aimed at the men on the ground, who were just beginning to stir.

Blackie slowly reached out to take the gun from her, but she raised her elbow and nudged his hand away. "Thanks, guys, but I can handle it from here."

She probably could handle it, which was what Blackie was afraid of. "Are these the bastards who were givin' you trouble earlier?"

"A few of them," she told him, lowering the barrel of the gun, pointing it at the crotch of the man whose head Blackie had broken the whiskey bottle on. "Boys, meet William Ramsey. My ex brother-in-law."

Judd's mouth fell open. "Ex?"

Rebel's wasn't far behind. "Brother-in-law?"

That's why the name sounded familiar, Blackie thought. It was so long ago he'd almost forgotten that Angel had been married. If he remembered correctly, she'd only been seventeen, and the marriage hadn't lasted more than a

couple of months. Neither she nor Digger had ever mentioned what happened.

All Blackie knew was that Digger had closed the bar one day and took off to southern Maryland. He'd returned with Angel, but no one saw her until two weeks later when she showed up to work the day shift.

"What are you doing here, Willie? What do you want?"

"What the fuck do you think I want, bitch?"

Willie let out a loud grunt when Blackie kicked him hard in the stomach, and started wheezing when one of Blackie's size fourteens put pressure on his throat.

"You ain't exactly in the position to call the shots here, asshole," Blackie whispered in his best you're-about-to-suffer-my-wrath voice. "And watch your language when you're talkin' to the lady."

Ignoring both Rebel and Judd's raised eyebrows at his use of the word lady, Blackie turned to Angel. "What's he want?"

"Revenge," Angel explained.

"For what?"

"For what I did to my—" She stopped suddenly and raised the gun until it was only inches from Willie's face. "Husband."

"Christ almighty, Angel," Judd said quietly, "what the hell did you do?"

"I'll tell you what she did," Willie offered, "she killed him. That bitch murdered my brother in cold blood."

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Chapter 2

Angel gripped the gun tightly, hoping none of the men could see her shaking.

She'd known there would be trouble after Willie, a couple of his relatives, and some of their friends had shown up at the bar that afternoon. But Digger had put an end to it by calling the sheriff. When the commotion was over, he went downtown to press charges and file a restraining order. She hadn't expected him to be gone the rest of the day, and was more than a little worried.

"Where's my brother, Willie?"

"Where do you think he is?"

Without warning, Angel raised the gun and fired it into the air. Trying hard not to imagine what the McCasseys were thinking, she pumped it again and shoved the smoking barrels between Willie's eyes. "I asked you a question, Willie. Where's Digger?"

"I'm here," came a voice from behind. Angel felt relieved when her brother lifted the gun from her hands and eased her out of the way.

Her legs suddenly felt like jelly, and she stumbled in her effort to get out of Digger's way. When an arm shot out to steady her, she looked up into Blackie's royal blue eyes and nodded, hoping he understood her silent appreciation.

"You're trespassing on private property, Ramsey, and there's a restraining order against you. I'd be perfectly within my rights to blow your head off."

"Oh, yeah? Well, you just go ahead and do that, Digger. I always knew you were as crazy as your damn sister."

Angel wasn't surprised when Digger put his finger on the trigger. She knew he'd love to get rid of Willie Ramsey. But she was shocked when one of Willie's friends jumped up to protect him.

"Look, don't hurt him, man. We'll leave."

Digger didn't move the shotgun, but did allow Willie's friend to drag him out from underneath the barrels. When he was free, the other three men stood and began backing away.

"Step one foot on my property again and I'll shoot you on sight," Digger warned, "that's a promise."

He kept the gun trained on the retreating men until they were out of sight, then fired once into the air, probably just to put a little extra scare into Willie. When Digger turned around, he handed the weapon to Blackie and put his hands on his sister's shoulders. "Are you okay?"

She nodded and used her right hand to tuck a stray strand of straight, shoulder length, light blonde hair behind her ear. "I'm fine. What about you? Where've you been all day?"

"It's a long story. Let's go inside." Turning to the McCasseys, he invited them in. "You boys want to come inside for a beer? It's on me."

Rebel declined. "Thanks, Digger, but I need to get back before Gypsy thinks something happened to me. We'll all be in trouble if she grabs a gun and comes looking for us. She's not as good a shot as Angel."

"Next time then."

"You got it. Are you two coming or what?" Rebel asked his brothers as he began walking away.

"Right behind you, bro," Judd announced. "Blackie?"

"Nah, I'm gonna hang out here a while. Tell Gypsy thanks, but I'll catch up with her tomorrow."

"You should have to tell her yourself," Judd said, "now I'm going to have to sleep with Outlaw."

Blackie laughed and gave his brother a shove. "No you ain't, she wouldn't do that to Rebel's dog."

Judd came back at Blackie with a harder shove. Just as they were getting into it, Rebel walked back around the corner, picked up Judd, and slung him over his shoulder. "Let's go, asshole, or we'll both be sleeping with the dog." He looked over at Angel and winked. "Don't be afraid to holler if you need anything."

She nodded. "Thanks, Rebel. Bye, Judd!"

Judd waved at her from atop Rebel's shoulder as he yanked his brother's long hair playfully. The three people standing at the back door of the bar broke into laughter when Rebel dumped Judd on his ass in the dirt. He was on his feet in seconds, and the two brothers chased each other through the parking lot to Rebel's truck.

"I'll take that beer you offered, Digger."

A good five inches shorter, Digger looked up at the taller man and laughed. "No you won't. I've got a feeling that shattered fifty dollar bottle of whiskey halfway across the parking lot has your name on it. The way I see it, McCassey, you owe me."

Blackie broke into a grin. "Oh, yeah? Well I just helped save your sister's priceless ass. I'd say that makes us even."

"Ahem," Angel cleared her throat. "I highly doubt that my ass was ever in any serious danger. If Willie and his friends had the intention of hurting me, I'm sure my ass would've been the last thing they went for." She was quiet for a second, then gave an ugly smirk and added, "Then again, maybe not."

The amusement on both men's faces disappeared. Digger sighed and put a hand on the small of Angel's back, guiding her through the back door and motioning for Blackie to follow. "Let's go have that beer."

In the main room, Blackie set the shotgun on the bar next to where he'd left his leather jacket, then took a seat on the stool he'd used earlier.

Digger turned the lights on low and handed him a beer from behind the bar. "You want one, Angel?" he asked his sister.

Still trying to digest what had happened, Angel wasn't sure what she wanted. Willie and his bunch had been harassing her off and on for the past ten years, but only through middle of the night phone calls and an occasional letter. They'd never traveled up from southern Maryland before, which was a good three and a half hour drive from Hagerstown.

Their threats no longer bothered her, but that was because she hadn't expected to ever see them again. It had thrown her when, after hearing the shattering glass, she'd looked out the back door and seen Willie. She was a little surprised to see the McCasseys also, but was glad they were there. Those

boys were a tough bunch. Being friends of her brother's, she knew they'd take care of anything she couldn't handle.

"An-gel?" Digger said louder, separating her name into two blunt syllables. "Do you want a beer or not?"

Planting herself two stools down from Blackie, she leaned on the bar and rested her chin in the palm of her right hand. "Yeah, I'll take one."

Digger reached into the cooler, grabbed two more bottles, and uncapped them. He set one in front of his sister, planted himself in a chair behind the bar, and took a drink.

The silence lasted only until Blackie spoke. "So which one of you two are gonna tell me why five men with guns came huntin' for Angel tonight?"

When he didn't get an immediate answer, he turned to Angel. "Did you really kill your husband?"

Never having been one for subtlety, she wasn't surprised by Blackie's question. "Yeah," she admitted, knowing she was in for a long conversation, "I killed him."

Blackie's gaze remained on Angel as he reached into the pocket of his jacket and pulled out a pack of Marlboro's. Placing one between his lips, he struck a match and lit up, inhaling smoke deep into his lungs. "Why?"

Before she had a chance to answer, Digger jumped out of his chair and distracted her. "I've got paperwork to do. I'll be in the back."

Staring at the mangled, chrome colored bullet hanging on a black string around Blackie's neck, Angel didn't speak again until she heard the door to the backroom close. Pulling her attention away from the bullet—which she assumed was from

Blackie's weapon of choice, a .44 Magnum—she made an excuse for her brother. "He doesn't like to talk about it."

"Talk about what?"

After taking a sip of her beer, Angel set it aside. "You remember that I married Marshall Ramsey when I was seventeen, right?"

"I didn't until tonight."

"Do you remember what kind of man he was?"

Blackie shrugged. "He was a lot like the rest of us. He fought all the time, got himself arrested for this and that, nothing major."

"I knew what kind of man he was when I married him, too," she explained, "but his violence never raised any red flags with me because I grew up around people like him. The way he was seemed normal to me. Everyone I knew acted the same way—Digger, you, your family."

Blackie swallowed hard. "The only difference was that he wasn't nice to you, was he?"

"He was at first. Marshall enjoyed the fact that I was a woman who didn't act like a lady. He got a kick out of having his wife along when he went to the drag races or out skeet shooting with his brother. Basically, he got to have his cake and eat it too—sex anytime he wanted and he never had to do or say any of those sappy things women love. He was a happy man."

Blackie winced. "Christ, Angel. You ain't gotta talk about yourself that way."

"Why not? It's true. I was ignorant, Blackie. I knew nothing about how husbands and wives were supposed to

treat each other. I never had any role models because I don't remember my dad, and my mom died when I was eight. Digger raised me right here in this bar because he was twenty years old at the time and we had no other relatives."

"You married Marshall Ramsey because he was nice to you?"

"No. I married him because he was wild and exciting. I was seventeen, and after working in here for two years, thought life was one big party. It was a stupid thing to do, but it seemed like a good idea at the time."

"Didn't Digger have anything to say about it?"

"Not really," she said, pausing to take a long drink. "He was drinking heavily and doing whatever drugs he could get his hands on back then; not exactly grounds for making the best decisions. Since I was underage, he signed the papers allowing me to get married. Marshall and I exchanged vows in the backyard at his aunt's house."

Finishing his beer, Blackie tossed it into the trashcan and leaned over the bar to snag another one from the cooler. He used the bottle opener on Kane's key ring to remove the cap, and sent that flying into the trash, too. "So what happened?"

"One week after the wedding, his dad called from southern Maryland and said he needed help on his chicken farm. I told Digger I didn't want to go and begged him to let me move back home. But he told me I'd made my bed when I decided to marry Marshall, and that I had no choice.

"Things were fine for the first month we were down there. We all worked hard and were so tired by the end of the day that there was no time for partying or anything. When we'd

gotten caught up on most of the farm work, his dad began giving us weekends off. That's when the trouble started.

"The night everything came to a head, we were sitting in one of the bars just outside of town. The place was packed. Everyone was drunk. Some of the men were playing darts and cards. Marshall was in a poker game with his brother and a few truckers that were passing through. He'd lost almost all his money, but they allowed him to go all in if he threw in a blowjob from me to make up the difference.

"In the end, Marshall lost. I was sitting at the bar talking to someone, and didn't know what he'd done until the man who'd won the pot came to collect his winnings."

Angel paused and reached for her beer, rolling the bottle between her palms to hide the shaking of her hands.

"I refused, of course, which not only made the winner mad, but Marshall, too. He dragged me outside and started screaming at me in the parking lot. Being me, I screamed right back, which drew almost everyone out of the bar. Marshall slapped me when I wouldn't do what he wanted, and I slapped him back. After that, he went crazy, beating on me so hard that I couldn't even get in a punch.

"No one did anything to help me. When I finally lost my balance and fell, Marshall sat on top of me, grabbed my hair, and started pounding the back of my head into the ground. I knew he had a gun in the front waistband of his pants. My vision was blurry, so I had to feel around until I found it. When my hand came in contact with the metal, I grabbed it and shot at him.

"I knew I'd hit him, but wasn't sure where. He collapsed on top of me, and I lost consciousness. I woke up in the hospital with an ... injury ... that kept me there a few days. When I was well enough to leave, they locked me in a jail cell."

"You were arrested?"

She took a sip of beer and shook her head. "Not exactly. More than a hundred witnesses told the sheriff I'd shot him in self-defense. The reason they had me behind bars was to keep me safe from Marshall's family.

"One of the deputies called Digger, and he came down to get me. He was also the one who told me I'd killed Marshall; my shot went through his chest and out his back, damaging his heart and both lungs."

Blackie let out a long, low whistle.

"Digger blames himself for what happened. He thinks if he hadn't given me permission to marry Marshall, then I wouldn't have had to go through any of that. But it would've happened anyway, if not with Marshall, then someone else. I was just as out of control as Digger in those days.

"One good thing did come out of that whole mess, though. My brother hasn't touched drugs or had a drink of anything stronger than beer since that incident."

"No wonder he's protective of you."

"He doesn't need to be. I'm twenty-seven years old and can take care of myself, Blackie. I don't need a man to fight my battles for me."

"No, Angel," he said, lighting another cigarette, "I don't guess you do. But why do you obey the rule he made about you not workin' until closing time?"

"Because I don't want to work that late. You know how rough it gets in here sometimes. I've never had a problem taking on anyone or grabbing a gun and firing a couple shots to calm things down." She paused for a moment and looked up at him. "I'm not sure I could stop myself if things got too out of hand, Blackie. And I don't want to hurt anyone else," she admitted quietly.

Blackie was suddenly on his feet and standing in front of her. "Jesus Christ, Angel, you ain't got nothin' to be ashamed of. Marshall would've killed you if you hadn't wasted him first, and you know it. I killed half a dozen men the day we rescued Gypsy from her father. I ain't proud of it, but I wouldn't change it, either. If things had turned out differently, Gypsy might not be alive.

"You do what you gotta do to survive, Angel. It ain't always right and it ain't always legal, but sometimes you just ain't got no choice."

Surprised by his outburst, Angel remained quiet. Blackie McCassey was a dangerous man. He'd probably spent close to half his life in and out of prison, and although he hadn't confirmed it until now, she'd known he'd taken men's lives when Gypsy was kidnapped four years earlier.

But Angel had never been afraid of him. In fact, she felt safe around Blackie. Not just because he was a friend of her brother's, but also because, for all the trouble Blackie had gotten into, he'd never hurt anyone who didn't deserve it. He was fiercely loyal to his tight-knit family, and from what she could tell, wasn't afraid of anyone or anything.

"I'm not ashamed of what I did to Marshall. And you're right, Blackie. He would've killed me if I hadn't shot him. But it took me a long time to bury all the anger I had toward him; to not feel like I wanted to explode every time someone insulted me or got out of line in here.

"You probably can't understand because I'm a woman and that's not normal female behavior. But look at me, Blackie." She slid off the barstool and stood in front of him with her arms stretched out at her sides. "I drive a truck and wear sleeveless shirts and jeans all the time. And although I wear makeup and probably get two marriage proposals a day from the men that hang out in here, I'm not your average woman. I don't care about fancy name brand clothes or expensive cars. I like working in a bar, shooting guns, and getting dirty. And most of all, I don't need a man to take care of anything for me. If I can't do it myself, it doesn't get done."

Angel lowered her arms and climbed back onto her stool. Blackie looked like he wanted to say something, but couldn't come up with the right words.

"I wanted to kill Willie and his buddies tonight," she confessed. "And I probably would have if you and your brothers hadn't been standing there."

"They attacked you, Angel. The law wouldn't have been able to do a damn thing to you if you had."

She shook her head. "Don't you see? Once I unleash the anger I have buried, there'll be no turning back. Digger knows that and I think it scares him, which is why he watches me so closely. I'm not a violent person, but in the right situation, I

could become one. That's not the kind of person I want to be."

"You ain't a bad person," Blackie told her. "Everyone has felt the same way you do at one time or another. Only you got more balls than most men I know, so maybe you're a little more likely to act on them feelin's. There ain't nothin' wrong with you, Angel."

She never said there was anything wrong with her. But how did he know she'd felt that way a time or two? Angel had always been comfortable with herself, but there had been a handful of times when she thought she wasn't normal. Without even realizing it, Blackie had just fixed a problem she didn't know she had.

"How come I've known you my entire life, Blackie McCassey, and we've never had a serious conversation?"

Grinning, Blackie took one last drag of his cigarette and extinguished it in the ashtray. "Because I don't have serious conversations. And if you tell anyone about this, I'll deny it ever happened."

"Well, believe it or not, you're the only person I've ever bared my soul to. Including Digger. And if you tell anyone what I said, I'll cut your tongue out with a butter knife."

Blackie winked. "You know, Angel, I really believe you'd do that."

She smiled in return and reached behind the bar for her jacket. "It's almost three o'clock and I have to be back here at ten. Tell Digger I'll see him at home, okay?"

As she was putting on her blue denim jacket, she saw Blackie reach around and pull something from his back

pocket. When he threw a wad of bills onto the bar, she raised a brow. "What's this?"

"Just call it a contribution from Willie," he told her, "for your trouble."

Angel knew then that Blackie had stolen the money. Willie owed her more than just a few dollars, so she scooped up the cash and stuffed it in her jacket pocket.

"Hey, you want a ride?" Blackie asked. "Rebel don't provide twenty-four hour a day towin' service no more, so I got his tow truck outside instead of my Harley."

"Nah, my truck's in the parking lot." She was halfway to the door when she stopped and turned around. Tilting her head to the side, she looked at Blackie as if seeing him for the first time. "Thanks for hanging around earlier. You knew something was up, didn't you?"

"Yeah, I knew."

Angel wondered briefly if Blackie had known what was about to happen because he'd been involved in things like that before. A former member of an outlaw biker gang based in western Maryland called the Renegades, it was common knowledge that Blackie had earned his colors at the age of seventeen. No one knew exactly what his initiation had been, but knowing that the leader of the gang had nicknamed him, 'The Devil', she could only imagine.

Studying him closer, she decided none of what Blackie had done in the past mattered. He'd never been anything but respectful toward her, and that was all that counted. In fact, she was glad he'd trusted his sixth sense enough to hang around tonight.

Smiling again, she winked at him. "Nice undershirt, by the way," she called when she reached the door.

Blackie's laughter followed her into the parking lot.

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Chapter 3

Blackie helped himself to another beer before going into the backroom in search of Digger.

"Hey, Digger, where you at, man?"

Angel's older brother poked his head out from the storeroom as Blackie passed by. "I'm in here. Have a seat," he said, turning an old bucket upside down. Blackie used his foot to push the bucket out of the way and sat on the floor with his back against the wall. He brought his knees up and rested his forearms on them, watching as Digger did the same.

"I guess she told you what happened, huh?"

"It ain't your fault, man."

"Bullshit. I was responsible for her, Blackie, and the only thing I was worried about was where my next line of coke was coming from. I didn't even care that my sister married a man ten years older than her; a man we all knew was violent and dangerous. He almost killed her."

"We were all violent back then, Digger. Hell, I'll be the first to admit that when the situation calls for it, most of us still are. And Marshall didn't kill her."

"Well, she was damn lucky."

"Yeah, she was. But she was also almost eighteen. All she had to do was wait a few more months and she could've married Marshall without your permission."

"I should've raised her better, Blackie. If I had, she could've made smarter decisions. But I didn't know anything

about girls. When I discovered she liked hanging around the bar, shooting guns, and working on my truck, I was thrilled. I'm ashamed to admit it, but treating her like a boy was just easier than taking the time to learn how to treat her like a girl."

"Why are you doin' this to yourself, man? Angel's tough. Ain't nobody I know would take a chance messin' with her."

"That's what I'm afraid of."

"Huh?" When Blackie saw the expression on Digger's face, his gaze lifted to the man's eyes—greenish-gray, just like his sister's. Only where Angel's twinkled and danced with mischief, Digger's were empty and hollow. "Just what the hell are you talkin' about?"

"She'll never get married again, Blackie. Not after what she went through the first time."

Blackie shrugged. He didn't see any harm in Angel staying single. It had worked just fine for him the past thirty-nine years. "So what? Ain't no law sayin' all women have to get married. And why would you want her to, anyway? In case you ain't noticed, your sister's none too fond of men."

"Believe me, I know. But I'd also like to know that she's got someone on her side when I leave."

"Leave? Where you goin'?"

Digger held his friend's gaze. "I'm going to prison, Blackie."

"Prison? What the hell for?"

"Tax evasion," Digger said solemnly. "I have to report to the medium security federal facility in Cumberland, Maryland by the first of November."

Blackie jumped up off the floor and began pacing back and forth. "What the fuck are you talkin' about, Digger? That's in six weeks. I didn't hear nothin' about you bein' arrested."

From his seat on the floor, Digger looked up. "I wasn't arrested. Not officially, anyway. But the Feds caught up to me about six months ago. I haven't paid federal income taxes in almost twenty years. My lawyer worked out a decent deal for me. I pled guilty and was only sentenced to seven years. That's where I was all afternoon. The judge handed down my sentence today. My lawyer says I'll most likely only serve three."

"I can't fuckin' believe this!" Blackie yelled. "How come you never said nothin'? How come Angel never said nothin', she's always talkin'."

"She didn't say anything because she doesn't know."

"Why the hell not? What were you plannin' to do, just disappear and make her guess where you were?"

"I haven't told her because there's a few things I have to take care of first."

"Like what?"

"I'm still working out the details, but what I'm doing is for her. I want to make sure she'll be taken care of."

"What do you mean? You're comin' back."

"Maybe. You've been to prison, Blackie. You know what kind of things go on behind bars."

"Christ, Digger, you're only goin' to a medium security prison. The worst thing that's gonna happen to you is maybe sprainin' a finger playin' too much checkers. And anyway, ain't she gonna have the bar?"

"Yeah, but she can't run it alone. You know what she's like, man. The first time a fight breaks out in here, she'll kill somebody."

Digger was right; Angel had all but admitted it.

"What're you gonna do?"

"Like I said, I'm still working out the details. But I may need your help. Can you give it to me?"

Blackie thought of all the times his oldest friend had been there for him and knew he couldn't turn him down. After all, if it hadn't been for Digger, Blackie wouldn't be alive today. "Sure man."

Digger stood and extended his hand, Blackie grasped onto it and shook hard. "You know where to find me."

Digger nodded. "I'll be in touch."

As Blackie drove back to the garage in Rebel's black GMC tow truck, he couldn't get the conversation he'd had with Digger out of his head. Tax evasion. What a goddamn stupid ass thing to get sent to prison for.

Angel was going to go crazy when she found out. Hell, Digger would be lucky to make it into prison alive once she got through with him.

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Chapter 4

One week later, Digger drove over to McCassey's Garage with the intention of talking to Blackie. When he walked in and heard the big man cussing a blue streak, he almost turned around and left.

"What's with Blackie?" he asked when Rebel offered his hand in greeting.

The youngest McCassey brother grinned. "He's been fighting with the carburetor on that Chevy pickup all morning," Rebel told him, "what can I do for you?"

"I need to talk to him. You mind if I hang out a while?"

"Help yourself. Rose is out to lunch; feel free to sit in her office and shield your ears from my brother's mouth. It shouldn't be long, he's wrapping up now. I'm warning you, though, he's not in a good mood."

Since Blackie's good moods weren't all that different from his bad ones, Digger knew what to expect. He supposed he could wait until Blackie was feeling better, but it was anyone's guess as to when that would be, and Digger just didn't have time to wait. What he needed Blackie to do had to be done as soon as possible.

"Thanks, Reb, but I'll take my chances."

Rebel shrugged. "It's your funeral, man. I'll let him know you're here."

Digger nodded his thanks and walked into the secretary's office to wait.

With a perfect view of the entire garage from where he was sitting, Digger watched the handful of McCasseys hard at work. Frank and Jimmy, Blackie's uncles, were in the far corner walking old tires down a set of metal stairs into what the McCasseys called, The Pit. It was a room ten feet underground mainly used for storage, and had served as a sturdy shelter when a tornado devastated downtown Hagerstown more than four years earlier.

Brady and Kane, Blackie's cousins, were arguing as usual. In their mid-thirties, they were two of the best body men in the business, making it easy to look past their devil-may-care attitudes. People from all over western Maryland brought their cars and trucks to the boys for bodywork, including Digger.

Rebel, who seemed to be successfully ignoring his brother's anger, was now helping Blackie with the carburetor. A born leader who'd always been highly respected by his family and friends, Rebel was a force to be reckoned with. He never started trouble; he finished it. And God help anyone who crossed him.

Focusing his attention on Blackie, Digger took a long, hard look at the friend who'd been in and out of trouble since his mother had given birth to him at the age of fifteen.

On the outside, Digger saw the same thing everyone else did: a wild, fearless, intimidating man from a family filled with wild, fearless, intimidating men. Only Blackie had always been just a hair more reckless.

But Digger knew more about Blackie than most people outside the McCassey clan. Fiercely loyal, Blackie had risked his life on more than one occasion to protect his brothers and

cousins. Digger had heard him quietly soothing his seven-month-old niece, Jade, with the same voice that when angry, could reduce the toughest man to tears. He'd also seen him cuddle the little girl carefully in hands that should be certified lethal weapons.

And although Blackie hadn't been in trouble with the law once in the four years since he'd been released from prison, Digger wasn't going to try and fool himself into believing the man was completely rehabilitated. Blackie may no longer be a bomb ready to explode, but he had the battle tactics of a warrior, and more than enough fire in him to handle a situation when it was necessary.

Digger was sure Blackie was the man to help him.

When Blackie finally finished tangling with the carburetor, he closed the hood of the pickup truck and handed his tools to Rebel. He looked toward Rose's office, held up his index finger telling Digger he'd only be a minute, then wiped his hands on a towel and tossed it into a barrel used for dirty linens. Still wearing his grease-stained, navy blue mechanics coveralls, he made his way to the office.

"Hey," he said, removing the rubber band that had been holding his long hair in a ponytail. "What's up?"

Clearing his throat, Digger whispered, "Is there someplace we can talk?"

Blackie reached into the back pocket of his coveralls and pulled out a pack of Marlboro's. "Yeah," he said, offering a cigarette to Digger, who declined. Putting one between his lips, Blackie struck a match, lit up, and opened the office door. "Let's go upstairs."

The smoke from the newly lit cigarette wafted into Digger's nostrils, making him wish he'd accepted Blackie's offer. He didn't smoke often, but this was one of those times when he could've used a little nicotine to settle his nerves.

"Hey, Reb, I'm takin' five!" Blackie called as they headed for the set of metal stairs leading to the apartment above the garage.

Once inside, Blackie turned on the lights and went in search of an ashtray. Unable to find one, he took an empty beer bottle off the counter and dropped his ashes inside. "You can shut the door if you want."

Digger stepped inside and closed the heavy door behind him. He'd been in the tiny room only once before, but that had been when Rebel was living there. The place hadn't changed much; the walls were still beige, and the room darkening shades Reb had hung up when he first moved in were pulled tightly closed. The only two pieces of furniture were a king size bed and a large pine dresser set against the far wall. Since there were no chairs, Digger remained standing.

"You're not a complicated man, are you?" he asked, referring to the empty apartment.

"No, but I ain't here much. Have a seat," Blackie said, motioning to the bed.

"No thanks, but you go ahead."

Blackie shrugged and sat down. "Suit yourself."

From his spot across the room, Digger watched Blackie finish his cigarette and drop the butt into the bottle. He

prayed both Blackie and Angel would forgive him for what he was about to suggest.

"What's this all about? Does it have somethin' to do with Angel?"

"Actually, it does."

Blackie set the bottle on the floor and sat upright. "Well, spit it out, Digger. There's an engine downstairs waitin' on me to overhaul it."

After spending two days trying to figure out an easy way to tell Blackie about his plan, Digger still didn't know what to say. The best way to do it, he guessed, was to just be blunt. "I want you to marry my sister."

Motionless, Blackie stared at him. "Come on, man, I ain't got all damn day. What do you really want?"

Digger took a deep breath and released it. "I really want you to marry my sister."

Apparently realizing Digger was serious, Blackie let his mouth fall open. "What?"

"I—"

"I heard you, Digger. Why the fuck would you want me to do a thing like that? You know how I feel about women. And as I reminded you last week, men ain't too high on Angel's list of favorite things, either."

Digger ran a hand through his short, chestnut colored hair and sighed. "I know."

"No, you don't know. Women are nothin' but trouble, man. They whine, cry, and spend money their men ain't got. They're all sneaky, vindictive, and play stupid little games.

Every last one of them is more trouble than she's worth. No. No way. I ain't gettin' married. Never. Find someone else."

"Aw, come on, Blackie. You could at least hear me out. When I'm done, if you still think what I'm suggesting is a bad idea, just tell me and I'll be on my way. I won't bother you with it again."

His brows furrowed, Blackie reclaimed his seat on the bed. "You got five minutes, man. And I ain't promisin' nothin'."

Digger nodded. "Fair enough."

"Well, hurry up."

"I owe the federal government over one hundred thousand dollars in back taxes. They've agreed to let me pay it off in installments and not take my bar, only part of the deal is that I have to start making payments now."

"How you gonna do that from prison?"

"That's where you come in."

Blackie lit another cigarette and rolled his eyes. "I'm listenin'."

"The only way to make those payments is if the bar stays open."

"Then let Angel run it. What the hell do you need me for?"

"I need you because she can't run that place alone, you know that."

"Okay, so she's got a short fuse and don't want to hurt no one. Ain't nothin' wrong with that. Hire someone you trust to help her."

"Would you be willing to do it?"

"I already got a job, Digger. And I don't know nothin' about runnin' a bar."

Digger walked to the bed and sat down. "You don't have to know anything. Angel's been working there since she was fifteen. She knows what to do and can take care of the business end of what needs to be done."

"So I'll ask you again. What do you need me for?"

"My bar is a rough place at night. You know Angel tends to shoot first and ask questions later. I need to know someone's there to keep order while I'm gone."

"Digger, are you out of your fuckin' mind? I ain't got the patience to play peacemaker. Hell, you know me. I'd probably grab whoever was causin' trouble and break their neck before Angel even had time to put her finger on the trigger. Uh-uh, buddy, you're barkin' up the wrong tree."

"Just the opposite, Blackie. I think you're the only man for the job."

Blackie looked at Digger through squinted eyes. "How so?"

"You're The Devil, my friend. Not only do most people avoid you, but the ones who are stupid enough to mess with you and yours aren't going to make the same mistake twice. You hear what I'm saying?"

"No," Blackie answered.

"When people find out you're working at the bar, when they see you standing in the background taking everything in, they won't want to cause trouble. And if they do happen to start something, after tangling with you, they'll think twice about it the next time. Don't you see? You'll be there to handle trouble so Angel doesn't have to."

Digger could tell by the expression on Blackie's face that his friend was thinking about what he'd just heard.

"Even if all that's true, which I ain't sure it is, why do Angel and I have to get married? Can't I be scary and intimidatin' without gettin' hitched?"

"Yeah, you can. But if the two of you are married, other men will stop coming onto her. As much as I'd like to see her start dating again, I know flirting makes her uncomfortable. Having a husband would keep men from propositioning her, especially if that husband was you."

Blackie shook his head. "I can't do it, Digger. I can't work in the garage and the bar at the same time. And I can't have a wife. I don't want one."

"Just let me finish, okay?"

Blackie let out an exasperated sigh. "There's more?"

"Just a little."

"Fine, go on."

"You don't have to be in the bar all the time, only the last few hours, say, from eleven to close. Hell, you're usually there most nights at that time anyway."

"True," Blackie agreed, "continue."

"You wouldn't be doing this for free, either. While I'm in prison, half the bar's profits will go to the federal government. You and Angel can split the other half, fifty-fifty."

"Nothin' for you?"

"I won't need any cash while I'm inside. And as far as the marriage is concerned, it can be in name only, meaning—"

"I know what 'in name only' means, Digger."

"Fine. But all I ask is that you move into our house with her so no one will know it's a sham. I don't want people losing respect for her."

"It doesn't matter if we live in the fuckin' white house with the goddamn President, Digger. No one's gonna have any respect for her once she marries a McCassey."

Ignoring Blackie's comment, Digger continued, "When I return, you two can get divorced and go back to living separate lives."

Digger anxiously studied Blackie as the big man stood and began quietly pacing between the bed and kitchen. Five minutes later, Blackie turned to face him. "And Angel agreed to all this?"

"Not exactly."

Blackie's mood suddenly turned dark. "What does 'not exactly' mean?"

Digger cleared his throat. "It means I haven't mentioned it to her yet."

"Goddammit! I should've known. She would've cut your tongue out for even suggestin' such a thing. You just wasted your time here, Digger. Even if I did agree to help you, it don't mean nothin' if Angel refuses to marry me."

"Don't worry about her, she'll agree. Does this mean you'll do it?"

Blackie sat back down on the bed. "We've been friends a long time, Digger. And I ain't forgotten about the night you took me to the hospital after one of them Jenkins boys shot me in the gut. I would've died if it hadn't been for your quick thinkin', so I figure I owe you one or two." Blackie took a deep breath. "I'll do it. But I don't see how you're gonna talk her into it."

"She loves the bar, Blackie, and it's all she'll have once I'm gone. If she doesn't agree to marry you, I'll threaten to sell it."

"And you don't think she'll call your bluff?"

Digger shook his head. "She can't afford to."

Blackie was silent as he seemed to be considering everything Digger had said. Then, setting the beer bottle on the floor, Blackie stood and extended his hand to Digger, who gave him a firm, deal-sealing handshake. "I need to get back to work. Let me know when the weddin' is."

"I'll be in touch."

The two men left the tiny apartment and descended the stairs in silence. Once Blackie went back to work, Digger stood just outside one of the open bay doors watching his future brother-in-law.

With a freshly lit cigarette dangling from his mouth, Blackie was already digging through his tool cabinet searching for the tools he needed to overhaul an engine.

There was no doubt in Digger's mind that he'd made the right choice. Blackie, although still reckless and rough around the edges, would make a decent husband for Angel.

Digger was more than happy Blackie had agreed to his plan. His main motive was keeping his sister safe from herself, something he had no doubt was going to keep Blackie extremely busy.

One down, one to go.

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Chapter 5

"I can't believe what I just heard!" Rebel said in shock.
"You're doing what?"

Blackie knew his brothers were going to be surprised when he told them he was planning to marry Angel Shelby. From his seat across the small square-folding table they occasionally used to play cards, he watched them. Judd was white-faced and silent. But Rebel, who not once in his thirty-four years had ever thought twice about challenging his oldest brother, looked like he had plenty to say.

"I'm marryin' her, Reb. Ain't nothin' you say is goin' to change my mind. Digger needs a favor. I owe him one."

"You owe him, so you're going to make his sister your wife? You don't marry people to pay off debts, Blackie!"

"What are you so hot and bothered for, little brother? You're happily married."

"Yeah, I'm happily married to a woman I love, who I got to know before I married her. She loves me in return and became my wife because she wanted to. Not because someone threatened to take something away from her. Don't do it, Blackie, it's wrong."

Blackie threw back his head and laughed. "Since when are you worried about right and wrong?"

"Since my oldest brother lost his mind and decided to do something that seems too crazy, even for him."

Downplaying the seriousness of the situation, Blackie shrugged. "It's only a temporary thing, boys. When Digger

gets out, he'll come back, Angel and I can get divorced, and things will go back to normal. In the meantime, she gets to keep the bar, doesn't have to worry about hurtin' no one, and I get to drink for free and make a little extra money. I don't see the problem."

Rebel, who now only smoked when he was tense, stood up and walked to his tool cabinet for a pack of cigarettes. "You don't see a problem?" He lit one and returned to his seat. "You're about to get married. Married, Blackie. That means you're making a commitment. To one woman. And during that commitment, there won't be any other women."

"Don't preach to me, Rebel," Blackie warned. "I know what I'm gettin' myself into."

"So you don't care that unless you and Angel decide to make it a real marriage, you won't be having sex for the next three years?"

That was the only part of this deal Blackie was having trouble with. But he'd be damned if he was going to admit that to his brothers. He'd been able to go years without a woman when he was in prison because he'd put sex out of his mind and concentrated on survival—not that he hadn't stroked himself now and then. A man did have needs, after all.

But since he'd become a free man, he'd gotten laid whenever he felt like it. There were plenty of women willing to warm his bed for an hour or two that weren't looking for any kind of commitment. Giving that up wouldn't be easy, but he could do it if he had to.

"I said I know what I'm doin'. And I ain't askin' your permission. I'm tellin' you what's goin' on so you ain't shocked when Angel and I show up at one of them Sunday dinners Gypsy's so fond of hostin'."

"You're definitely going through with this?" Rebel asked.

"As long as Angel don't shoot Digger dead where he stands when he tells her about his plan."

Rebel threw up his hands in defeat. "Fine. But I want to know why you're really doing this. It's not like you to be this nice."

Rebel's comment hit a little too close to home, striking Blackie like a slap in the face. "Oh, yeah?" Blackie snapped, "Well maybe I'm turnin' over a new leaf."

Cautiously eyeing his brother, Rebel cocked an eyebrow. "Please don't tell me you expect us to believe that."

Thoroughly irritated by the fact that his brother knew him so well, Blackie backed away from the table and stood. "No. But I do expect you to shut your fuckin' mouth before I come over there and do it for you."

Rebel followed Blackie's lead and pushed himself away from the table. Mimicking his older brother's battle-ready stance, Rebel motioned for Blackie to advance. "Well come on, then."

Blackie took a step forward but stopped when Judd jumped between them. "Hey!" He spread his arms wide and placed a hand on each of his brothers' chests. "You two are not fighting in here!" Judd yelled, "not over something this stupid."

"Butt out, asshole!" With a mighty shove, Blackie sent Judd stumbling toward Rebel. "You too, Rebel. What I do ain't none of your business."

"Bullshit. You made it our business."

Blackie stared at both his brothers trying to look furious, not really wanting to fight either one of them. "Then forget I said anything!"

He turned to go, but the sound of Rebel's voice stopped him. "Don't you dare use that girl, Blackie! She's been through enough."

Unsure of what angered him more—Rebel's assumption that he was up to no good or the fact that he couldn't bring himself to tell his brothers the truth—Blackie saw red. Turning on his heel, he changed his mind and charged toward Rebel, who turned, blocking Blackie's path with his body.

The two men went down hard onto the concrete floor. Each trying to get the better of the other, they rolled around cussing and half-heartedly punching until Judd threw a bucket of cold rainwater on them.

"Goddammit, Judd!" Blackie scooted away, leaned back against one of the tool cabinets, and ran a hand through his soaking wet hair. "I'm gonna kill you when I get up!"

Rebel, sprawled flat on his back, wiped at the blood trickling from the split in his lip, then maneuvered himself to be able to see Blackie.

"You're a little too bent out of shape for someone who's supposedly just doing a man a favor," he teased. "You want to tell us what's really going on?"

Blackie shook his head, gingerly touching the spot under his eye where he'd caught one of Rebel's powerful right hooks. Rebel had his number, he always had. There was no need for Blackie to admit anything.

With a grin he knew his brother would take as an apology, Blackie stood and offered him a hand up. "Nope."

Blackie knew it was uncharacteristic for him to do something nice. But there was something about Angel that made him feel spending time with her wouldn't be so bad.

But he wasn't about to try and explain that to his brothers, either. They already thought he'd gone crazy. It was just better to let them believe what they wanted.

"So that's it?" Rebel asked when they were both on their feet again.

"That's it, little brother."

"It's a hell of a way to return a favor, but okay." Rebel made a fist and held it out in front of him. The gesture was something Rebel and his two brothers had done since they were kids. It was their silent way of saying all for one, and one for all. "No worries."

Judd, who obviously expected retaliation from his brothers for tossing water on them, cautiously inched over and touched his fist to Rebel's. When Blackie's joined them, all three murmured, "No worries," together.

The brothers backed away from each other and Judd chuckled. "So is there going to be some kind of fancy engagement party at the bar? Do I need to rent a monkey suit or something?"

"Fuck off, Judd," he said, unable to completely hide his grin, "I owe you an ass kickin'."

Laughing, Judd began dancing around waving his fists, imitating the actions of a boxer. "Come on, let's go, Blackie, I'm ready."

"Later," Blackie said, playfully shoving Judd out of the way, "I'm takin' a long lunch, Reb; there's a few things I gotta do."

Rebel nodded and asked him to hold on for a minute. Dashing into Rose's office, he returned a moment later with a sealed envelope and folded it in half. "Would you mind stopping by the house and giving this to Gypsy on your way? It was sent here by mistake and she needs it today."

Inspecting the envelope, Blackie shrugged and stuffed it into his back pocket. "Sure. I need to make plans with her to pick up the boys later, anyway. We're goin' fishin'."

"Just go ahead and take the rest of the day off when you're done," Rebel told him. "I'll cover for you and start the engine overhaul."

Blackie looked at his youngest brother and nodded. "Thanks, man, I owe you."

Rebel grinned. "Consider us even."

Confused, Blackie shrugged. "Whatever. Hey, don't say nothin' about this marriage thing to no one yet. It ain't even gonna happen if Angel refuses to go through with it."

"Nah," Rebel said nonchalantly, "we won't say a word."

"Good. I'll catch you two later."

* * * *

When Blackie was gone, Judd turned to Rebel. "What'd you mean by that? What are you two even for?"

"For me telling Gypsy that Blackie's plannin' to marry Angel."

Judd simply shook his head. "You're taking your life into your own hands defying him like that, Rebel. He's not going to be happy when he shows up at your house and gets ambushed by Gypsy."

"That's his problem, Judd. Blackie can't hurt me, but he probably will hurt Angel. Just because he's good with my kids and hasn't been in trouble with the law in four years doesn't mean he's husband material. If there's anyone who should be able to talk some sense into him, it's Gypsy."

"Maybe you ought to wait. Maybe Angel won't even want to get married. She's an independent girl, Rebel. Depending on a husband to take care of her doesn't seem to be her style. What do you think?"

"Angel Shelby is one girl I wouldn't want to piss off, Judd. And what I think," Rebel said sarcastically, "is that when she's done shredding Digger limb from limb for suggesting such a stupid plan, she's going to do the same thing to Blackie for agreeing to it."

Judd couldn't help but laugh. His brother was right. Angel had a mind of her own and wasn't the kind of woman who was easily persuaded. He wished he could be a fly on the wall when Digger mentioned his plan to her. "When are you going to call and tell Gypsy?"

"Right now. Not only do I want her to talk to Blackie, but if word gets out and she hears this from someone else, she'll be

hurt and angry that no one told her. Then Digger won't be the only one who's going to be shot to death by a woman. And you know Gypsy's a lousy shot. She'll probably put bullets in ten different places on my body before finally hitting an organ vital enough to kill me."

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Chapter 6

"Damn you, Digger!" Angel shouted as she sent a glass mug flying across the room. Digger ducked just in time for it to sail over his head and shatter against the wall. "How dare you mess with my life that way!"

Digger stayed low, shielding his head with his arms as his sister grabbed another mug from the shelf behind the bar, and hurled it at him from twenty feet away. Angel's reaction to his plan had been exactly what he'd expected. Only he'd forgotten just how accurate her aim was, a fact proven by the blood trickling down the side of his face where a shard of glass had nicked him.

"Angel—"

"Don't Angel, me!" she shouted, throwing an empty beer bottle in his direction. She waited until it hit the wall with a loud crash and all the glass had settled, before yelling again. "I'm twenty-seven years old; you do not have the right to make decisions for me! I can run the bar by myself, Digger. And I damn well don't need a husband to do it! It'll be a cold day in hell before I ever get married again!"

"Angel, will you please just hear me out?" Digger attempted to stand up, but the instant she saw him move, her arm shot out and grabbed a brand new, unopened, fifth of vodka. With a force he didn't know she possessed, she launched it straight at him. All he could do to avoid a direct hit was turn his body to the side. The bottle still clocked him

hard, but it was on the shoulder instead of his head, which was where he was sure she'd been aiming.

"No, I will not hear you out!" she hollered at the same time the bottle exploded and liquid covered the floor.

When she reached for a tray holding a dozen clean mugs, Digger knew that if he didn't put a stop to this now, she'd feel worse after what she'd been doing for the past ten minutes finally sank in.

"If you don't stop breaking all this shit, you won't have to worry about who's going to run the damn bar," he yelled in hopes of calming her down, "there won't be anything left in this place to serve drinks with!"

Thankful when she paused long enough to allow him to stand, Digger took the opportunity to move closer. When he was only a few feet away, he caught a glimpse of her face as she was turning away. For a minute, he thought he was seeing things, but realized there was nothing wrong with his eyesight. Angel's cheeks were definitely moist. She was crying.

Shocked into silence, Digger was suddenly at a loss for words. His sister had never been weepy. In fact, she was just a kid the last time he remembered seeing her cry. She'd never shown a lot of emotion, and knowing he'd been the cause of her tears made him feel like a heel.

"Angel," he reached out and laid a hand on her shoulder.

She shrugged him off and stepped away. "Don't."

"I'm doing this for you," he reminded her. "You may not see that now, but you will in the long run."

"All I see is a brother who doesn't believe I can handle things and take care of myself," she said with her back still toward him. "For some reason he thinks I need a baby-sitter."

"Blackie isn't going to be here to baby-sit you, Angel. He'll only be here to help out incase things get out of hand."

"Then why do we have to get married? He can keep an eye on the place just as well single as he could if we were married."

"I have—" he cut his sentence short and put his hand on her shoulder again, "will you please turn around and look at me?"

She turned around and faced him, not bothering to wipe away her tears.

"I have my own reasons for that. But I'm not budging on this, Angel. Either you marry Blackie or I put this place up for sale."

"But why?" she questioned desperately, "why Blackie McCassey? You know what he's like, Digger. How can you expect him to keep the peace in here when he's usually one of the first people throwing punches?"

"I've got my reasons for that, too. You're just going to have to trust me."

"Trust you? After you practically sold me to one of your friends? And how the hell did you get Blackie to agree to this, anyway? It's no secret how he feels about women. What'd you do, threaten to take away his birthday if he refused to marry me?"

A smart ass comment. She's feeling better. "I didn't threaten him, Angel. I just made a simple business proposition."

"So that's it, huh? It's all in the name of business."

"It was," Digger admitted. "That's how this whole mess got started in the first place. Now I'm just trying to do what's right."

Digger didn't miss the far away look in her eyes as she stared at him. "How could you, Digger? How could you be in so much trouble and not tell me? Why didn't you say something?"

Taking a seat on a barstool, Digger bowed his head and rested it in his hands. "To tell you the truth, I didn't think that not paying federal taxes was any big deal. I was a small business and figured they'd never miss the money. After getting away with it for so many years, I didn't think they'd ever catch up to me. When the feds came knocking on the door six months ago, it was just as big a shock to me as it was to you just now. I'm sorry I screwed up your life again, Angel, but this is the way it has to be."

Angel sighed deeply and sat down next to him. She laid her head on his shoulder and wrapped her right arm around his body. "You didn't screw up my life, Digger. You've been a good brother."

He chuckled and kissed the top of her head. "I'm sorry I made you grow up in a bar. I'm sorry for raising you like a little brother and for not teaching you to make better decisions. I can't help but wonder what your life would be like if you'd never married Marshall Ramsey."

"Forget about it. What's done is done. We can't change any of it."

"I hate to hear you talk like that."

"I know. But we both made bad choices and now we have to live with them."

They raised their heads and looked at each other.

"Tell me the real reason you want me to marry Blackie. Please."

Knowing he shouldn't keep the truth from her, Digger took a deep breath and prepared to tell her everything. "I want you to promise me something first."

"Promise you what?"

"If I tell you what you want to know, will you go through with the wedding?"

"You'll be honest? You won't leave anything out?"

Digger nodded.

"And if we do get married, we won't have to sleep together?"

"Once you're married, what the two of you do is none of my business. But you do have to live together and make it look like a real marriage."

For the minute that Angel was silent, Digger prayed that she was considering his offer instead of coming up with a slow, painful way to kill him.

"All right," she told him. "If it's that important to you, which apparently it is, I'll marry him. But we're only staying together until you get out of prison. Deal?"

Digger figured that little problem would work itself out on its own. Three years was a long time, and a lot could happen between now and the day he's released. "Deal."

Digger wasn't surprised when Angel extended her hand to seal the deal. He smiled, thinking of how well he'd taught her.

After they shook on it, he told her everything, praying he'd make it through the entire explanation before she resumed throwing beer mugs at him.

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Chapter 7

Set back in the woods at the end of a long dirt driveway, the tiny three bedroom shack that had once belonged to Blackie's parents no longer looked anything like it had when he was growing up. It was even a lot different than it had been four years earlier, when he, Judd, Rebel, and Gypsy all lived there together.

Blackie remembered how hard he and his brothers had worked to restore the house. Gypsy had been pregnant with Raider, her and Rebel's first child, at the time. And with her due date rapidly approaching, they'd worked day and night trying to make the rooms livable.

What had once been a warped, crooked floor made from simple planks was now sturdy and covered in plush, neutral colored carpet. The walls that had been water stained and peeling were gone; replaced by new drywall and fresh coats of brightly colored paint. Inside the kitchen that at one time had only housed an old refrigerator, washtub-like sink, and potbelly stove, were brand new appliances and a wooden table with eight matching chairs, handcrafted by Rebel.

The three bedrooms in back of the house had been gutted, remodeled, and two extra rooms added on as well. During Blackie's childhood, the living room, which was the largest area of the house, was filled with musty smelling, dilapidated furniture, old moonshine jugs, a ten-inch black and white TV, and numerous species of roaches. Now, clean, comfortable

sofas sat against the far wall, and matching pine end tables, also made by Rebel, sat at the end of each piece of furniture.

The two windows in the room that had always been covered in a filthy haze from his father's chain smoking were replaced during the remodeling and now sparkled.

Outside had undergone a transformation as well. After replacing the roof, the men had painted the exterior of the house pale yellow, giving it a crisp, fresh look. They'd built a swing set in the backyard for the kids, and the roses that Gypsy planted on the side of the house had taken easily to the rich soil. Rebel even got grass to grow where, at one time, there had only been hard, rocky dirt.

The McCassey brother's last project had been to finish the basement. They'd made a bedroom in the far corner, which was where Judd now lived, and the rest was a play area for the kids.

For a building that had once been drab and full of horrifying childhood memories for him and his brothers, Rebel and Gypsy's house was now a happy place filled with children's laughter, and the scent of Gypsy's famous fresh baked sugar cookies.

As he relaxed on one of the sofas, waiting for Gypsy to get the kids settled down for their naps, Blackie wondered briefly about the cold reception she'd given him at the front door. It wasn't like her to be unfriendly.

Deep in thought about what he could've possibly done to piss her off, he was abruptly distracted by a commotion in the hallway.

"Uncle Blackie! Uncle Blackie!"

Blackie looked to the right and saw his three-year-old nephew, Raider, running toward him. With his royal blue eyes and jet-black hair, the little boy looked so much like Rebel it was eerie. Blackie caught Raider in a bear hug as he launched himself onto the sofa. "Whoa, little man. Where're you goin' in such a hurry?"

Raider wiggled out of Blackie's grasp and maneuvered his three and a half foot, forty-pound body until he was comfortably sitting in his uncle's lap. "I came to see you."

"Ain't you supposed to be takin' a nap?"

"Yeah, but—"

"Raider!" Gypsy's voice echoed from the hallway. Two seconds later, she walked into the room with her seven-month-old daughter, Jade, on her hip. "I told you it's nap time."

"But, Mommy—"

"Don't argue with your momma, boy," Blackie instructed in the deep, cold-as-steel voice he reserved for intimidation purposes only. "If you don't get your ass back in bed, we ain't goin' fishin' later."

The surprised look on Raider's face was priceless, and Blackie had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing. "Go on," he said, setting Raider on his feet. "Get."

The boy took off running again and was out of the room in a flash.

"Thanks," Gypsy said in a slightly friendlier voice than the one she'd greeted him with earlier. She handed Jade to him and turned to leave the room. "I'll be right back."

Blackie stood his niece on his lap, supporting her under her arms. When it finally seemed to register to Jade who was holding her, she smiled and made a few sweet little baby noises before grabbing a fistful of his long hair. Blackie smiled in return, then kissed the top of her head where strawberry blonde curls were just starting to come in.

Blackie loved his nephews, Raider and Chase, but Jade held a special place in his heart. Gypsy had complications after her daughter's birth and had to have emergency surgery soon after. When she was finally able to come home, she'd been on bed rest for almost six weeks.

Blackie's Uncle Frank and Aunt Rose had taken care of Raider and Chase, Judd covered for Rebel at the garage, and Blackie spent nights sleeping on a cot in Jade's room; taking care of the newborn so Rebel could look after his wife.

Uncle and niece had formed a strong bond during those midnight and three a.m. feedings, and Blackie loved her as if she were his own daughter.

"I'm sorry, Blackie," Gypsy said when she came back into the room. Her curly, fiery red hair now pulled back into a ponytail. "Raider heard your voice and was out of bed before I could catch him."

"Don't worry about it. I knew it was naptime and shoulda kept my voice down. I shouldn't even have stopped by right now, but I got a bunch of stuff to do and didn't want to forget to give you that envelope."

"It's fine," she said, reaching for Jade. "Just let me put her down. I'll be right back."

Blackie unwound his hair from Jade's grip and kissed her soft cheek. "Sweet dreams, little darlin'." He handed the baby to Gypsy, and watched as the only two females who'd ever managed to get under his skin and into his heart, left the room.

Five minutes later, Gypsy was back and in the same sour mood she'd been in when she answered the door. Damn, what the hell was going on?

"Let's go outside and talk," she suggested.

"Why can't we talk in here?"

"Because," she snapped, "what's on my mind can't be said within earshot of the kids. Let's go."

Perfect. Blackie followed her through the living room, into the kitchen, and out the door leading into the front yard. Just fucking perfect.

Taking a seat on a bench next to the white picket fence, he had every intention of asking her what the hell was going on. But as he opened his mouth to speak, her flat, open palm made contact with his face.

"Ah! Christ!" His hand shot out and closed around her wrist in an iron grip. "What the fuck did you do that for?"

Using strength that had to be fueled by anger, she tore herself from his grasp and took a step back. "Don't cuss at me!"

"Then don't hit me, Gypsy! What the fu—what the hell is your problem?"

She turned her back to him and heaved a deep sigh. At first he'd thought she was about to cry ... until she whirled around and yelled, "How could you, Blackie?"

Gypsy wasn't the only one with a temper, and Blackie was damn close to losing his. Jumping off the bench, he snapped back. "I've had just about enough of your little game, Gypsy! How could I what? What the hell has gotten into you, goddammit?"

"How could you agree to such a stupid thing like marrying an unsuspecting girl that you don't even love? And just to repay a debt! How could you treat someone that way?"

Hot anger boiled inside Blackie until he felt as if he wanted to explode. Rebel and his goddamn need to tell his wife everything. "My brother had no business tellin' you somethin' I told him to keep quiet."

Gypsy's face suddenly turned red. "Did you really think he wasn't going to tell me?"

"To tell you the truth, girl, I never even thought about it. But if I had, I would've kept my big mouth shut."

"That's because you know what you're doing is wrong," she accused.

"I don't know no such thing! And who says I'm even doin' it? If Angel don't agree, there won't be a weddin'."

Gypsy took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. Blackie hoped she was releasing some of her anger. But her tone had just as much bite when she said, "Rebel told me that Digger isn't giving her much of a choice. Why Blackie? Why would you want to be a part of forcing a woman into doing something she doesn't want to do?"

Ah, that's where the anger's coming from. Blackie thought to himself as the boiling rage inside him cooled, and understanding took over.

Grabbing Gypsy by the shoulders, he not-so-gently-guided her to the bench. "Sit," he ordered, and she did.

Blackie sat next to her and, without removing his hands, looked directly into her normally sparkling green eyes. He ignored the shimmer of her unshed tears; tears he knew were more from anger than sadness. If he didn't ignore them, he would've had to admit to himself that his motive for marrying Angel was indeed wrong.

Instead, he focused on reminding Gypsy that he was nothing like the man who'd molested her at fourteen. That even though there were a handful of rumors flying around town about him doing all sorts of horrid things to women, not a goddamn one of them was true.

"You listen to me, Gypsy, and listen good. I've been a fuckin' bastard all my life, but one thing I ain't never done is force a woman to do somethin' she didn't want to do. Angel is more than capable of makin' her own decisions. If she don't want to marry me, then that's it, we won't get married. I ain't got no control over the choice that Digger's givin' her, but remember, it is a choice, and she can always say no."

Gypsy nodded and blinked, allowing the tears to slowly trickle down her cheeks. Blackie hoped that the reason she was quiet was because she was letting everything he'd said sink in. He could count on one hand the times that he'd cared what a woman thought of him. Normally, he didn't give a shit about anyone's opinion. But Gypsy's mattered to him. She was, for all intents and purposes, his sister. He didn't want to hurt her; didn't want her thinking he was no better than the

asshole who'd tried to rape her while his wife was sleeping just a few feet away.

"I'm sorry," she apologized in a near whisper. "It's none of my business. I shouldn't have said anything. I just—"

"Forget it, Gypsy." He let go of her shoulders and slid a few inches back onto the bench, but continued to watch her closely.

A minute later, although still low, her voice was back to normal. "Can I ask you something?"

He figured he owed her that much. "Go ahead."

"Why are you really doing this? Isn't there another way to repay Digger and help Angel at the same time? Why are you getting married, when you've always sworn that it was the last thing you ever wanted to do?"

"Rebel asked me the same thing an hour ago."

"What'd you tell him?"

"Pretty much what he told you, that I'm repayin' a debt to a friend. But I'm gonna tell you somethin' else, too."

"You are?"

"Yeah. I'm tellin' you that I've known Angel all her life and she's a good kid. She handles most things herself and don't take shit off no one. I respect that. She treats everyone the same and don't get offended by the language used by the men hangin' out in her brother's bar. That girl got a raw deal in life," he paused, knowing his sentimentality was going to come as a shock, "and to tell the truth, she reminds me a little of you."

Gypsy smiled and looked like she wanted to say something, but he continued. "I never did want to get

married, and I still ain't too sure about all this. But I do owe Digger, and that ain't an obligation I take lightly.

"Angel ain't got no one else, Gypsy, just like you didn't when you first came here. When I think about what could've happened to you if Rebel hadn't found you in the woods that day, I wonder about Angel, too. Who knows what'll happen to her without Digger."

He paused to study her reaction, but there was none, other than the smile on her face. "Can you understand that?"

Gypsy nodded. "I understand. You're a good man, Blackie."

Winking, he leaned down and kissed her cheek. "Well, don't tell no one. It'll be our little secret."

"Nobody would believe it, anyway."

Happy her sense of humor had returned, Blackie chuckled. "You got that right."

"You don't want me to say anything to Rebel about this, do you?"

"No. But I know you will."

"I don't keep secrets from him, Blackie."

He knew that, and it was just one of the many reasons he loved and respected her. "I know. And that's why it's okay."

He stood up and offered her a hand. She accepted and allowed him to pull her to her feet. "I gotta get goin'. There's somethin' I need to take care of."

"I'll see you later, though, right?"

"Yeah," he called on his way out of the yard. "I'll be by around five to take the boys fishin'."

"Come early and eat dinner with us!" she called as he climbed into the tow truck.

Blackie nodded and waved in return, silently telling her he'd be there.

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Chapter 8

During his conversation with Gypsy, it had occurred to Blackie that if his own sister-in-law had been thinking the worst about his marriage to Angel, he could only imagine what Angel must be thinking. With a sudden need to clear the air, Blackie drove toward town and headed to Digger's bar.

When he pulled into the gravel parking lot, he spotted Angel's late 1970s red Ford F250 extended cab pickup truck parked in its usual spot. His first thought was that this was a mistake, and he should turn around and leave. A conversation with Angel might be awkward if she hadn't reacted well to Digger's plan.

But he figured he might as well go in.

There was no time like the present to find out whether or not he was getting married. If Angel hurled a heavy object in his direction when he walked through the door, he'd have his answer.

The lights were low and the TV was on when he stepped inside. Blackie recognized the sound of glass when something hard crunched under his boots as he made his way to the bar. Bottles and mugs were the first things to go flying when a fight broke out, so he assumed there'd been a brawl earlier.

He was surprised at the lack of customers.

Thursday afternoons were usually a busy time at Digger's. The place was almost always filled with people by noontime starting their weekends early. But the only patrons inside now were a couple of regulars seated in the corner booth and old

Zeke Carson, who was sitting on a stool at the end of the bar reading a newspaper.

Blackie didn't see Angel until he reached the bar. With a broom and dustpan in hand, she was squatting as she swept up broken glass. "Hey, Angel Face," he said quietly, not wanting to startle her.

She looked up when she heard his voice. "Hey."

Even though the lights were dim, he could still see her greenish-gray eyes, which stood out even more with the black liner she'd applied to them. He also noticed that the neutral colored lipstick she had on was a nice compliment to her light hair.

Shaking his head, Blackie wondered when the hell he'd started paying attention to Angel's makeup.

When she stood and went to the trashcan to dump the glass, Blackie noticed the rest of what she was wearing and couldn't help staring.

Once again in skintight blue jeans, this time she was wearing a pair of worn, comfortable looking brown cowboy boots and a tight white sleeveless shirt that accentuated her round breasts.

Blackie shook his head again, trying to clear it. Now he was paying attention to what she was wearing?

Angel set the broom against the wall, then reached into the cooler and pulled out an ice cold Budweiser, setting it in front of Blackie.

"Thanks," he said after sipping the beer. "Man, there musta been a hell of a fight in here."

She nodded. "There was."

Something about the lack of animation in her voice alarmed him. "Where's Digger?"

"He went home to get cleaned up."

"Was it that bad?"

"Bad enough."

"What happened? Who was fightin'?"

As casually as if she were telling him what time it was, Angel looked at him and said, "Me and Digger."

Blackie didn't know what to say. He almost made a crack about Digger having to go home and get cleaned up and her not having a single scratch, but he stopped himself. There was no sense in pissing her off. He wasn't in the mood to dodge flying objects.

"Did you two make up before he left?"

"Yeah, we're cool. Aren't you going to ask what we were fighting about?"

"I got a feelin' I already know."

Angel leaned on the bar in front of him and spoke in a voice low enough so only he could hear. "What the hell are we doing, Blackie?"

So, she had agreed to marry him. He brushed the harsh realization that he was actually getting married aside and shrugged, wishing he had a better answer for her than, "I don't know."

"Do you think we're doing the right thing?"

He shrugged again. "I don't know that, either. But it seems awfully important to Digger. I ain't sure why." He took a long drink and set the bottle back in front of him. "What do you know?"

"Probably a lot less than you," she whispered, and went on to tell him everything her brother had told her.

Angel had gotten basically the same story Blackie had, only he noticed she'd left out whether or not she knew the reason he'd agreed to marry her.

Figuring their marriage was going to be awkward enough without deceiving each other, he felt compelled to make sure they understood where one another was coming from. This was a good opportunity to lay everything out on the table. "Look, Angel, I want to be straight with you about somethin'."

If she was surprised by his comment, she didn't show it. "Go ahead."

"I ain't never tried to keep it a secret that I don't want to get married. And since everyone knows you feel the same way, I figure I can say this without havin' you hit me with somethin' heavy."

Angel slowly smiled, and Blackie was actually relieved when the mischievous gleam returned to her eyes.

"I promise not to hurt you."

Knowing that since birth Angel had said and done anything she had to in order to survive, he looked at her skeptically. "I want your word."

Laughing, Angel picked up the white rag that had been lying on the bar and playfully smacked him. "Okay, smartass, I give you my word not to harm one single hair on your big, thick head. How's that?"

He extended his hand. "Shake on it."

She started to grab his hand but stopped suddenly. "You want me to spit in my palm, too?"

"Don't be gross, Angel Face."

She laughed at his childish remark and took hold of his hand, giving it a good, firm shake.

His gaze lingered on her an extra second before he said, "Thanks," and began his story. "When we were sixteen, your brother, me, and a few of our friends got into a fight down by Antietam Creek with some of the Jenkins boys from Frederick. We whipped their asses, then started jumpin' up and down, celebratin' our victory like a bunch of idiots. As they were leavin', one of the Jenkins pulled a gun. When he fired, the bullet hit me in the gut.

"I was bleedin' bad. Digger was the only one smart enough to know that you should put pressure on the wound. Your brother and a couple other guys threw me in the back of his truck and took me to the hospital. Someone else drove, and Digger stayed with me, pressin' a bundle of our friend's shirts against my gut. I woulda bled to death if it hadn't been for him.

"That was twenty-three years ago and I ain't had the chance to pay him back until now. He said he needed my help, and because I owe him in a big way, I agreed to marry you."

Blackie stared at the unreadable expression on Angel's face, waiting for her to get angry and unload both barrels on him. But nothing happened.

"Then I guess I should tell you that I'm only marrying you because he threatened to sell the bar if I didn't." She must've thought that sounded terrible, because she quickly added, "No offense, of course."

He liked that she seemed to be worried about his feelings, which took him by surprise. "None taken."

"This place is all I have, Blackie. I don't really think Digger would sell it, but I can't afford to take that chance."

"I understand."

"I appreciate your honesty. And it doesn't matter that you're just doing this to repay my brother. It's not a permanent thing, anyway."

"Three years is a long time."

"I know. But we've always gotten along okay. And it isn't like this is going to be a real marriage. Who knows, it might even be fun."

"That don't sound like the opinion of someone who littered the bar with glass just a couple hours ago."

"I know. But I've been thinking about it and Digger's right. Things get wild and out of hand even when he's here. I can't imagine what it'd be like if it was just me trying to keep the peace. I think you'll be good for this place. It may take a while, but once you make your presence known, I think there'll be a lot less trouble."

Blackie had serious doubts about that. People tended to get very brave once they got a few drinks in them, and they always looked for the biggest man in the room to start trouble with. His extremely muscular build and six-foot-seven height made him a magnet for assholes who got their courage from a bottle. As a result, he'd been challenged to more fights by drunks under six feet tall than he could count.

Not wanting to give her anything to worry about, he just nodded. "We'll see."

She gave him kind of a funny look, so to avoid having to explain himself, he got to the real reason he'd stopped by to talk to her. "There's somethin' else I want to tell you, Angel, and I want you to listen good."

Apparently seeing how serious he was, her smile faded and she leaned in closer. "I'm listening."

"My father hit my mother all the time," he said, "and beat me and my brothers senseless for doin' nothin' but lookin' at him the wrong way. I'll be the first one to admit that I ain't perfect. Sometimes my temper gets the best of me. I get angry, yell, fight, sometimes I drink too much; you've known me a long time and I think you know all that. But I won't ever raise a hand to you, Angel. I ain't gonna do nothin' to hurt you. Ever. I'm rough around the edges, but there ain't no reason for you to be afraid of me."

The smile Angel gave him was absolutely beautiful. It softened the normally guarded look she always wore, making her look much younger than her twenty-seven years.

"I could never be afraid of you, Blackie. Way down deep under all those layers of your don't-mess-with-me-or-I'll-kill-you personality, there's a heart. Not a cold black one, either. A soft, caring, loyal one. I don't think you're capable of hurting me."

Blackie also knew he wasn't capable of hurting her. He liked Angel a lot, but that was something he wasn't quite ready to admit, let alone discuss. Needing to change the subject before he said something much too nice that he knew he'd regret later, he used the sarcasm his reputation

demanded, and disagreed. Giving her a quick wink, he shook his head. "Bullshit."

Obviously getting the point, she laughed. "What are you doing here, anyway? Did you need to see me about something?"

"I just wanted to talk to you is all. But there're also a few things I need to talk to Digger about. Is he comin' back?"

"He said he was, but didn't give me a time. Could be ten minutes, could be ten o'clock."

"Damn, I can't hang around any longer. I'm takin' Rebel's boys fishin' and promised Gypsy I'd stop by for an early dinner. Tell your brother to give me a call when he has a chance; there's a few things we gotta go over. Thanks for the beer." He started to leave, then stopped and went back to the bar. "Hey, when's the weddin'?"

Angel shrugged. "Since this is Digger's thing I told him to make the arrangements. I think he said something about next Wednesday afternoon, though, so keep it open."

"Wednesday, huh? All right, I'll see ya."

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Chapter 9

Six days after agreeing to marry Blackie McCassey, Angel stood beside him, Rebel, and Digger in front of the Justice of the Peace.

Dressed in a pair of blue jeans and white sleeveless T-shirt with the words, Digger's Bar, written in black script across the back, Angel looked into the eyes of her soon-to-be-husband as she recited her vows.

Blackie's royal blue eyes, a common trait shared by all three McCassey brothers and most of their cousins, exuded the same recklessness and violence that her deceased husband's had. Only Angel knew that the man she was marrying now was much different than Marshall Ramsey.

Angel had known Blackie all her life and not once had he disrespected her in any way. Whether that was because he didn't have it in him to hurt a woman, or because she was his friend's sister, she didn't know. But they'd always been friendly to each other—even if they weren't real friends—laughing and joking whenever he came into the bar. There had even been a handful of times over the past four years that his caring nature, which she agreed was buried quite deep, had shown through.

She had believed Blackie when he said he'd never hurt her. Despite the reputation he'd legitimately earned for being a wild, reckless hellion who thrived on the rush he got by causing trouble, Angel had always felt comfortable in his presence. She'd heard stories about how badly Dolan

McCassey had beaten his wife and sons, and knew there was no way Blackie had it in him to be as cruel as his father.

After her first marriage had ended in disaster, Angel swore off men and vowed never to marry again. But back then she'd married for what she thought was a good combination of love and excitement.

This time was different.

Although life with Blackie was bound to be exciting, she wasn't in love. Not only was her head firmly planted on her shoulders, but it was also void of any and all illusions of what marriage was supposed to be like. Angel knew she and Blackie could work okay together in the bar. After all, he wouldn't be doing anything but standing there looking intimidating. The bartending and business end of things were going to be her responsibility.

When they'd both said their I do's, Blackie gave Angel a quick peck on the cheek, then Rebel and Digger stepped forward to shake Blackie's hand.

"Congratulations, big brother," Rebel said, then turned to Angel. "Welcome to the family. I know Gypsy's thrilled to finally have another woman to talk to besides Rose. Brady, Kane, and Flynn's girlfriends of the week don't count."

Angel smiled at her new brother-in-law. He was about as good a man as they came. "Thanks, Rebel, I'm looking forward to getting to know her better," which was the truth.

Angel didn't have many girlfriends. Most of the girls she'd grown up with had married and moved away, and not many of the women in Hagerstown wanted anything to do with the mouthy, tomboyish sister of a bar owner. It would be nice to

spend time with Gypsy; another woman who knew what it felt like to be looked down upon for where she came from and who she was related to.

By the time the foursome exited the courthouse, it was well past noon. Standing on the front steps, Angel noticed that the men were unusually quiet, each one of them looking more uncomfortable than the next. If she didn't break the silence, they'd be there all day. "I have to get back to work," she looked at her brother, "you coming?"

"Angel, you just got married."

"So?"

"Don't you want to do something?"

"Like what?"

Digger shrugged. "I don't know, celebrate?"

"Sure, Digger. I'll have a beer when I get back to the bar. Can I have my keys, please?" She held out her hand and wiggled her fingers, motioning for him to place the truck keys in her palm.

"Have one for me, too," Blackie said. "I gotta get back to the garage."

"Hold it!" Rebel called to his brother. "You're not going back to work."

"Why not?"

"Because you're fired for the rest of the day," Rebel told him, "you can come back tomorrow."

"What!"

"You heard me, Blackie. My garage, I call the shots. Go find something else to do."

"Yeah," Digger said to Angel, "you're fired for the rest of the day, too."

"Dammit, Digger—"

"Don't cuss at me, sister. You want to make it two days?"

Even though she knew exactly what he was doing, Angel couldn't help staring at her brother in shock. "Blackie and I have the next three years to spend together, Digger."

Grinning, he tossed Angel's truck keys to Blackie. "And there's no time like the present to get started."

Before she had the chance to voice the not-so-nice reply sitting on the tip of her tongue, Digger and Rebel were halfway to Rebel's tow truck. "I won't wait up!" Digger called as he climbed in the passenger's side.

Rooted to their spots on the courthouse steps, Blackie and Angel watched them go.

Blackie unrolled a pack of cigarettes from the sleeve of his black T-shirt and dug a lighter from the front pocket of his jeans. "What the hell just happened here?"

"I'm not sure," she said, declining the cigarette he offered her. "But I'd say they had that one planned."

"Son of a bitch! I shoulda seen it comin'."

"Well, it's too late to do anything about it now. What do you want to do?" She looked down at her clothes. "I'm not exactly dressed for anything but work."

Angel felt an odd tingle as Blackie's gaze swept over her body, realizing for the first time that those were the eyes of her husband. Husband.

"You look fine to me, Angel Face. How about we get a few six packs and go down to Antietam Creek? We can sit on the bank and down a few."

The beer Angel had told her brother she'd have was just so he'd let her go back to work. She wasn't a big drinker, and hadn't had a beer since the night two weeks earlier when she drank one with Blackie. She couldn't even remember the last time she'd had more than two in the same day.

"Sounds good. Let's get out of here," she said, and started walking toward her truck.

Blackie tossed his cigarette butt to the ground and caught up to her in two long strides. They walked side by side to the truck and stopped in front of the passenger's door. Angel held her hand out for the keys, but Blackie refused to give them to her. Instead, he unlocked the door and opened it, motioning for her to climb in.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"I'm openin' the door for you. What the hell does it look like I'm doin'?"

Trying not to smile, she put her hands on her hips and stared at him. "It looks like you think you're driving my truck."

Blackie winked. "That's because I am. I don't ride shotgun for no one if I don't have to, and that includes you. Now get your little heart-shaped ass into the truck, wife," he called as he walked around to the driver's side, "or you're walkin' to the creek."

It didn't surprise Angel when Blackie put the key in the ignition and fired up the diesel engine. But she was taken off

guard when, as she stood in the parking lot staring at him, he put the truck in reverse and started backing away.

"Hey!"

"Hey what?" he asked when she'd jumped in the truck and slammed the door. "I told you I was leavin'."

Despite almost being left behind, which Angel had no doubt Blackie would've done; she decided she liked the easygoing, lighthearted side of him. It wasn't often anyone saw it. In fact, she knew almost everyone in town would call her a liar for saying he had one.

"You want to stop at the bar and get beer?"

He pulled out onto the road and pushed the pedal to the floor. "Nah, we'll go to Cut Rate Liquors. It's closer."

She nodded, wondering if he was going to eventually slow down or drive eighty miles an hour right through the center of town.

"This old piece of shit runs good," he said, lightly tapping the brake. "Digger keep her tuned up for you?"

"When he has time," she answered. "If not, I do it."

Blackie gave her a sideways glance. "You?"

"Yes, me. Don't be a pig, Blackie."

"I ain't bein' a pig. I was just askin' a question. You like workin' on cars?"

"I don't mind changing oil and doing a tune-up every now and then, but what I really love is working on engines. Digger taught me to rebuild them when I was a kid."

Nodding his approval, Blackie pulled into the parking lot of the liquor store. With the engine still running, he tossed her a twenty-dollar bill. "Since I'm drivin', you're buyin'."

She'd known that was coming, and smiled as she stuffed the money in her front pocket. "What should I get?"

"Anything cold."

Angel got out of the truck and walked inside. She decided on a case of Budweiser in cans, since that was Blackie's favorite beer, and she didn't know if he'd want to have to worry about disposing of glass bottles.

The clerk rang up the sale and handed her the change, which she stuffed in the ashtray when she returned to the truck.

"You want me to drive?" she asked.

"Why, so I can drink a beer?" Without waiting for an answer, he said, "We'll be there in a minute. I'll wait."

Angel felt bad. Had her assumption that he was going to crack open a can and drink as he drove been that obvious?

She knew he'd been picked up a few times for drunk driving, but that had been years ago, before he'd gone to prison the last time. Since he was released, Blackie hadn't had any run-ins with the local law enforcement. Part of the reason for that must be that he was trying hard to stay out of trouble.

The other part had to be because Sheriff Ben Johnson was no longer harassing him. After being convicted for kidnapping Gypsy, aiding and abetting her father, and a long list of other things, the former sheriff was now serving a long prison sentence. Robert Walton, the new sheriff of Hagerstown, was a strict, by-the-book lawman. He was fair, stayed far away from small town politics, and got along quite well with most of the McCassey's.

When Blackie finally stopped the truck, Angel realized they were at Ten Acres, named for the ten acres of land that had been in the McCassey family for generations. Angel had heard the story many times of how Blackie's great-great-great grandfather, Patrick McCassey, won the land in a poker game back in 1832.

She'd also heard numerous stories about things that had gone on at the one-room cabin sitting in the middle of the property. The most famous one, of course, was the tale of the gun battle that had taken place there when Gypsy's father, Johnny Cooper, came after her. It was rumored that Rebel and two of his uncles, Frank and Jimmy, had taken down eight men by ambushing them with .38 Specials and M-16's when the men entered the property.

But Angel had heard the real story from the McCasseys themselves, and knew that Blackie, Judd, Brady, Kane, and Flynn had also been there.

Blackie drove a bit farther and parked in front of the cabin. Shutting off the engine, he left the keys in the ignition.

He grabbed the case and turned to Angel. "Ready?"

"Yeah, but what are we doing here?"

"We're goin' down to the creek." Tilting his head sideways, he gave her a puzzled look. "You didn't think I was gonna crack open a beer in the middle of the day on public property, did you?"

She'd forgotten that a small portion of Antietam Creek ran across Ten Acres. How was she supposed to tell him that was exactly what she'd thought without hurting his feelings? Luckily, he came to her rescue.

"Years ago, I wouldn't have thought twice about teasin' that bastard Sheriff Johnson. Fact is, I sat in the community park many times nursin' a six-pack, just waitin' for him to bust me. But I've been tryin' to keep my nose clean these past few years.

"Gypsy would kick my ass if I got sent back to prison. She already said she ain't bringin' the kids to see me."

Angel had a hard time picturing Big Bad Blackie McCassey getting chewed out by a girl as small and young looking as Rebel's wife. But she knew what he meant. Blackie obviously had a lot of respect for his sister-in-law.

"You love her, don't you?" Angel asked him as they walked through the woods toward the creek.

"Who?"

"Gypsy. The way you talk about her, it sounds like you care a lot about her."

"She's a good kid. And damn crazy about my brother. She ain't afraid of much, either. Was even willin' to stand next to us and fight when we all took on her father, even though she can't shoot worth a damn. Yeah, I love her." After a few seconds of silence, Blackie turned to Angel and winked.

"Jealous?"

She actually laughed out loud. "Of your sister?"

"Me and Gypsy ain't really related."

"Neither are we."

"I call married bein' related, Angel Face."

"We're married on paper, Blackie," she reminded him, "not for real."

Angel was relieved when they finally reached the creek. She wasn't crazy about the direction their conversation seemed to be headed.

When they sat down on the dirt bank, Blackie removed all four six packs from the box and put them in the water. "It'll keep them cold," he told her. She already knew that, but stayed quiet as she watched him set the bag aside and pull two cans free from the plastic wiring encasing them. He opened one, handed it to her, then opened another for himself and changed the subject.

"So how's this marriage thing gonna work?" he asked. "Are we supposed to set up rules or somethin'?"

That was a good question. She'd been wondering how they were going to iron out the details, hoping they'd have a chance to talk and lay some ground rules so there was no confusion.

Taking a sip from her can, Angel set it on the ground, put her hands behind her in the dirt, and leaned back. Tilting her face to the sun, she basked in its warmth against the cool September air. After thinking for a minute, she turned to him. "I don't want this to be a real marriage, Blackie. You can have Digger's old room, since he's living in the room that used to be my mom's.

"That's cool."

"And as far as I'm concerned, after Digger reports to prison, you can date who you want, sleep with who you want, it doesn't matter to me. Just don't bring them into my house."

"I ain't never gonna disrespect you, Angel. And I ain't gonna do nothin' to make you look bad."

Angel took another sip of her beer. "Thanks." And she meant that. She wasn't sure how she'd deal with Blackie picking up women in the bar.

"What about you?" he asked.

"What about me?"

He raised an eyebrow expectantly.

"Oh, you don't have to worry about me. I don't have a personal life." And she meant that, too. Angel hadn't dated one time since her marriage to Marshall ended. She just wasn't interested.

"What about work schedules?"

Now that was something she didn't mind talking about. "The bar opens at eleven in the morning. Since I'll be working nights now, I'm going to let the waitresses and dishwasher open. I'll go in around three in the afternoon. You don't need to show up until around eleven p.m. That way you can have dinner and get some sleep when you get home from the garage."

Blackie nodded. "Sounds good."

The business talk soon ended, and they sat on the bank of Antietam Creek for the next few hours drinking and talking. Blackie told her about some of the adventures his brothers and cousins had up at Ten Acres when they were kids, all the trouble they'd gotten into, and how they used to have bonfires behind their granddaddy's barn without him knowing.

"He always chased us off his property with a fire extinguisher when he found out we were there. He was afraid we were gonna burn down his entire crop."

"Did anything ever get out of hand?"

"Nah. Even though we were all up there to have fun, we were careful with the fire. Someone always stayed sober enough to keep an eye on it. The trouble started when we discovered guns. They don't mix well with moonshine, and there were many nights his neighbors called the cops because we were takin' drunken target practice at two in the mornin'."

Angel laughed and listened with interest as he told more stories. Since she and Digger were twelve years apart and he'd moved out of the house by the time she was six, she'd pretty much been an only child. She didn't have any fun, happy memories that included siblings, and her favorite tales were the ones he told about his brothers. "Tell me more about Rebel and Judd."

"Man, them two were hellions when they were little," he said, shaking his head. "When they weren't fightin', they were runnin' around these woods wreakin' havoc. My Uncle Frank was sure one of them was gonna fall in a water hole and drown. But they both learned to swim real quick when I threw them in the water."

"You threw them in?"

"Sure did. Ain't no one could get them to sit still long enough to give them a swimmin' lesson, so I dragged their asses to the pond behind my granddaddy's house and tossed them in. They took to it quick."

"How old were they?"

"I don't know, I guess about five."

"Five? You threw two five year olds who didn't know how to swim into the water?"

"Well, maybe Judd was six."

"Blackie!"

"What?" he asked, opening another beer, "I didn't say it was a smart thing to do, or that I'd do it to my own kids ... if I had any. And I sure as hell ain't doin' it to Rebel and Gypsy's kids. But I was ten, and it was the only way they were ever gonna learn."

"Man, if you treated your brothers that way, I hate to think of what you would've done to a sister."

"Sisters are different. And anyway, Rebel and Judd grew up just fine. Ain't nothin' I did affected them too much."

Blackie was right about that. All three brothers were very close. She guessed that was the only thing that counted. She and Digger became close after he'd taken her in when she was eight, but it wasn't the same as growing up together like the McCasseys had.

Since Blackie seemed to be in the mood for storytelling, Angel decided to ask him something she'd always wanted to know. Looking up at him, her greenish-gray-eyed gaze locked with his royal blue ones. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Go ahead."

"Will you tell me the story about the bullet on your necklace?"

Blackie's hand went up, fingering the chrome colored bullet resting against his heart. "My Uncle Frank dug this outta me when I was fifteen."

Her eyes widened. "You were shot with that bullet?"

"Uh huh."

"Who—"

"My old man," he answered. "At thirteen, I accidentally found the secret stash of moonshine he kept in the cellar of my granddaddy's barn. I started swipin' a little here and there, only takin' what I thought he wouldn't miss. Sometimes I drank it, but most of the time I just sold it. Believe it or not, I gave my mother most of the money since my father barely gave her enough to buy food.

"Two years later, I was walkin' out of the barn one mornin' with a small jug full, thinkin' I was safe because it was early. The barn door opened as I was leavin' and who comes strollin' in but my old man. He took one look at me, saw what I was carryin', and whipped out a .38 Special. I thought he was just tryin' to scare me when he pointed it in my direction, but the bastard shot me. The bullet went in right here," he pulled up his shirt and pointed to a small scar on his left side.

"Someone musta been watchin' out for me that day because it didn't hit nothin' important. It took a while, but I managed to walk to Frank and Rose's house, which is just on the other side of the hill from the barn. Rose screamed bloody murder when she saw me bleedin' all over the place—thought I was dyin'. It took him an hour, but Frank was able to dig it out."

"How come you kept the bullet?" she asked.

Blackie lowered his shirt and looked at her. "Originally, I kept it because I was fifteen and thought it'd be cool as shit to show my buddies the actual bullet I got shot with. When the novelty wore off, I tossed it in a drawer and forgot about it.

"But a year later, when I got shot in the gut and Digger saved my life, I realized that I was sixteen years old and had survived bein' shot twice. To me, it meant that I was strong, that no matter what anyone tried to do, they weren't gonna get the best of me. So I drilled a hole in it, stuck it on a string, and started wearin' it around my neck.

"The reason it sits against my heart is to remind me that no matter how strong I am, I ain't invincible. One bullet to the heart and it don't matter how strong you are. Ain't no one gonna survive. Knowin' that keeps me alert, keeps me from gettin' sloppy. It reminds me to never let my guard down."

Angel didn't know what to say. She hadn't expected Blackie's explanation to be quite so ... logical. He was a smart man.

A lot smarter than everyone gave him credit for.

* * * *

When the sun had set and the temperature began to drop, Blackie must've noticed her shivering, so he suggested they call it a day. He stood, brushed the dirt from the seat of his pants, and offered a hand to Angel.

Before accepting his help, she reached for the two six packs that were left in the water, but he stopped her.

"Leave them," Blackie said as he put the twelve empty beer cans in the box. "That way they'll be here for next time."

Next time? Was he really planning on bringing her back? She'd thought he only hung out with her all day because neither one of them had anything else to do. Was it possible

he'd had a good time? She had, although it was hard to admit that, even to herself.

Angel had gotten a glimpse of a side of Blackie today that she had a feeling no one else knew existed. He'd talked and laughed, and had been more relaxed than she'd ever seen him. She'd enjoyed it, and was actually a little disappointed it was almost over.

When she finally took his hand and let him help her up, she realized that not only had she been sitting for hours, she'd also been drinking on an empty stomach.

She swayed a little and he leaned over, catching her around the waist before she fell. "You okay?" he asked.

Distracted by the feel of his strong hands on her body, it took a good few seconds for his question to register. "I'm fine," she managed to say, shocked by how much she was enjoying his touch.

Only inches apart, Angel could smell the alcohol on Blackie's breath, mixed with the faint scent of soap from his morning shower. Her senses reeling, she looked up to find him staring at her. "It's just ... I mean ... I didn't eat anything this morning, and after four beers ... and you've had eight—"

"Angel," Blackie interrupted. Still holding her, he leaned in closer, and his lips parted.

Was he going to kiss her? Angel's stomach flipped upside down at the thought. Instead, to her surprise and disappointment, all he did was say, "It's no big deal. We can hang out at the cabin for a while. There's plenty of food in

there. Huntin' season's comin' and we started stockin' the shelves a couple weeks ago."

They hiked back to the cabin in silence. Blackie, carrying the bag with the empty cans, walked beside her the entire way. She had a feeling he was waiting for her to stumble and wanted to be there to catch her if she fell.

Having Blackie put his arms around her again wouldn't be so bad, she thought, and almost wished she'd trip so she could feel his touch one more time.

Other than her brother, Angel wasn't used to having anyone care about her. Begrudgingly, she admitted that it felt good to have someone, especially this big, strong man, looking out for her.

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Chapter 10

Blackie watched Angel closely as they approached the cabin. He could tell she was buzzed. It was stupid of him to only bring beer and no food, but truthfully, he hadn't thought they'd be down at the creek such a long time.

He'd enjoyed talking to Angel, and had been surprised when he'd noticed the sun setting. It wasn't often that he lost track of time while talking to a woman. Usually, he was watching the clock, scrambling for an excuse to escape.

He'd always known Angel was different from other women, but he'd never appreciated that until today. Because today ... because of Angel ... he'd laughed for no other reason than the fact that he was happy. The childish innocence hidden beneath her tough exterior had shown through as she hung on every word Blackie spoke during his stories about him and his brothers—revealing just how sensitive she was.

Seeing how much Angel had enjoyed herself, watching her relax in the heat of the Indian summer sun, hearing her laugh, all had a way of making Blackie temporarily forget who and what he was. That afternoon, he hadn't felt like a former outlaw biker gang member nicknamed The Devil, who'd spent almost one third of his life in prison. He was just Blackie McCassey, a man enjoying the day with his new wife.

Feeling a little buzzed himself, he knew it would be a good idea to hang around the cabin for a while. He could've driven with no problem, but had gotten the impression it would've

made Angel uncomfortable. Staying together a little longer wouldn't be bad. He was actually looking forward to it.

When they got to the cabin, Blackie bent down and reached into the spout at the end of the gutter, removing a key from a small hook on the inside. After using it to unlock the front door, he carefully replaced it.

"You ever been here before?" he asked.

She shook her head. "No, but I've heard plenty about this place, it's legendary."

Blackie rolled his eyes as he walked into the pitch black, one room, dirt floor cabin, motioning for Angel to follow. "I'm afraid to ask why."

Instead of searching blindly for the oil lamp they kept on the kitchen counter, he struck a match to light the way. When he spotted the lamp, he carefully lifted the glass and lit the wick.

"Don't be. I'm sure it's nothing you haven't heard before."

"I ain't heard much," he lied, knowing full well what her answer was going to be. In high school, he and his brothers and cousins had girls following them everywhere they went. Even girls from the right side of the tracks used to show up at McCassey parties. When their parents thought their perfect daughters were at the library studying, they were actually partying with boys they'd been forbidden to see, drinking moonshine, and rolling in the hay.

"I don't believe that for a second," she announced when she caught the playful grin on his face. "But I'll play along. Let's just say that every girl I ran with in high school wanted

to hook up with a McCassey cousin and be brought up to Ten Acres."

"Includin' you?" he asked, trying to imagine which McCassey she'd had her eyes set on.

"Nah, none of you gave me the time of day back then, except to treat me like Digger's little sister. As a teenager, I didn't have room in my life for guys who didn't excite me."

"There was logic behind the way we all treated you," he told her. "It went somethin' like: 'Be nice to the sister of the bar owner if you didn't want to be banned from the bar.'"

She laughed, and Blackie wondered why he'd never noticed how sweet she sounded when she was happy.

"That makes sense, I guess. Life would've been rough for you guys if my brother had refused to allow you inside one of the only bars in town."

Blackie walked over to the long wooden table in the middle of the floor and pulled out one of the eight matching chairs. "Have a seat and I'll tell you a secret."

She sat down, put her elbows on the table and rested her chin in the palms of her hands. "Wow," she said with exaggerated excitement, "a secret, huh? Do tell..."

"We never partied here," he told her as he walked around the cabin opening the numerous small windows, trying to get the chilly, stale air to circulate. "Not even once. At least I didn't. And as far as I know, the only girl who's ever been up here is Gypsy, and maybe a few that Judd has messed around with over the years. This was always sort of a guy place. Most of the partyin' we did was either behind my granddaddy's barn or down at the creek."

When he finished opening the windows, Blackie walked to one of the two pine bookshelves flanking eight neatly made cots lining the middle of the far wall. Stocked with everything from toiletries, towels, and first aid equipment, to linens, boxes of ammunition, and an abundance of clean clothes, Blackie found exactly what he was looking for on the top shelf. Removing an old blue and white flannel shirt that he had worn and outgrown years ago, he draped it over Angel's bare shoulders.

Sitting down in the seat directly across from her, he watched as she slipped her arms into the sleeves and buttoned up the extra large shirt. Looking much more comfortable, she turned to him and smiled. "Better?" he asked.

"Yeah, thanks."

He nodded. "Good. If we were gonna be here longer, I'd light a fire in the woodstove. That thing really puts off some heat."

"It's okay, she assured him. "I'm fine now. This shirt is plenty warm."

Blackie nodded again and changed the subject. "Are you surprised about us guys not partyin' up here?"

"Actually, I am. I should've known not to believe everything I heard. Usually I don't. I guess I just had my own ideas about what you guys were up to when you came here."

He bet she did. "Care to share any?"

Using her index finger to tap on her chin and pretend she was thinking, Angel was silent for a minute. "No thanks," she finally said.

Blackie couldn't help but smile at her teasing antics. "Well then, I guess I'll just have to use my own imagination to come up with what was goin' on in yours."

"Good idea."

Almost forgetting that he needed to get some food into her, Blackie walked into the small make-shift kitchen. Staring at the canned goods neatly stacked on custom-made shelves above the large washtub they used as a sink, he asked if she wanted something to eat.

Angel went to join him, pointing to a can of Chef Boyardee Beefaroni. "I'll have that."

Sure she was kidding, he looked at her skeptically. "Really?"

"Why, did you want it for yourself?"

"No. I just can't believe you're gonna eat that shit."

"Why not? I used to eat it all the time as a kid."

"You did?"

She looked at him and rolled her eyes. "Digger wasn't much of a cook."

* * * *

After they'd eaten and Blackie had washed the dishes at the pump, Angel lay down on one of the cots. Blackie could feel her gaze on him as he moved around closing the windows he'd opened earlier.

"You don't have to close those if you don't want to. I'm not cold anymore."

"I gotta close them anyway," he told her. "We're gonna be leavin' soon and I don't wanna forget; it's gonna rain tonight."

When he was finished, Blackie went back to the kitchen to make sure he'd left everything just as they'd found it. For a cabin used solely by men, the place was immaculate. It was something he and his cousins prided themselves on.

By the time he'd finished, he was more than ready to leave. He'd been up since five a.m., and Rebel's little, you're-fired-for-the-rest-of-the-day game had put him behind on the engine he was overhauling. He wanted to get an early start the next morning and it was already after nine o'clock. "All right, girl, let's hit it," he called from the kitchen.

When there was no answer, Blackie turned up the wick on the lamp and walked over to the row of cots. "Angel?"

He had no idea why, but just the sight of her made him smile. Still wrapped in his old shirt, Angel was curled into a ball, sound asleep. Chuckling, Blackie carefully untied and removed her tennis shoes. "I guess we're stayin' here tonight, huh, Angel Face?"

Remembering the sight of her shivering earlier, Blackie reached down and touched Angel's cheek, the same thing he did to baby Jade to see if she was hot, cold, or comfortable. Finding Angel's cheek cool to the touch, he unfolded the blanket at the bottom of the cot and draped it over her.

Tired but not yet ready to sleep, Blackie went ahead and lit a fire in the woodstove to keep the chill out of the air. He added three of the thickest logs he could find, and when

they'd all caught, he closed the stove door knowing the room would be warmer in a matter of minutes.

Unrolling the pack of cigarettes from his shirtsleeve, Blackie decided to have a smoke before turning in. After removing his steel toe work boots, he lit up, grabbed an ashtray off the shelf, and sat on the cot beside Angel's.

Blackie was enjoying watching Angel sleep. With her features relaxed, she looked much younger, appearing innocent and helpless, nothing at all like the tough, I-don't-take-shit-off-no-one girl who'd been working in a bar for the past twelve years.

Blackie realized then that he didn't know Angel very well at all. Knowing her as his bartender was one thing; knowing her as his wife was another. He suddenly had a hundred questions he wanted to ask her, all having nothing to do with the bar, business, or their ridiculously fast, semi-arranged marriage. He wanted to know what she liked and disliked, what she did and where she went for fun, and why, even after being rid of her husband for ten years, she still wanted nothing to do with men.

He knew getting Angel to reveal any personal information was going to be next to impossible. She'd stressed that she didn't want this to be a real marriage, but as far as Blackie was concerned, she'd been talking about sex, not conversation.

Finishing his cigarette, Blackie extinguished the butt in the ashtray and suddenly realized something else. This was the first time he could remember being interested in a girl for who she was, instead of just what she could do for him. That

thought wasn't just surprising, it was downright shocking. He'd always sworn women were disloyal and only good for one thing. But after spending all day with Angel, it dawned on him: maybe it was just the type of women he'd been hanging around with that were only good for one thing.

Angel wasn't like any other woman he'd ever known. Gypsy was the only person she might be comparable to, but even that wasn't close. The woman he'd just married had the same good qualities as Gypsy, but she was even more. Angel had a unique personality. She knew the score, could hold her own in a room full of men, and yet, even though she did her best to hide it, was all female.

Blackie hated to admit it, but by an ironic twist of fate, he was now married to the exact type of woman he'd been looking for his entire life.

Wondering exactly what he was going to do about that, he fell into an exhausted sleep.

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Chapter 11

The high-pitched scream followed the first deafening crack of thunder.

Blackie was wide awake in seconds; years of being in prison and six weeks of taking care of a newborn had turned him into a very light sleeper.

His eyes rapidly adjusted to the dark, and when he looked over at Angel's cot, she was huddled in the corner. Her face and hair were soaked with sweat, yet she was clutching the blanket and shivering uncontrollably. Thinking that maybe she was hurt, he rose from his cot and sat on the edge of hers.

"Angel?" He reached out to her, but she backed farther away.

In a voice that sounded nothing like her own, she said, "Don't touch me."

Wondering what the hell was going on, Blackie held his hands in the air so she could see them. "Easy, Angel. It's okay. I ain't gonna touch you."

Had she just had a nightmare?

Was she afraid of the storm?

Blackie had left the oil lamp burning low and wanted to go into the kitchen and turn it up, thinking more light might calm her down. But he was afraid to make any sudden moves and startle her.

"Angel?" he said again, this time remaining perfectly still.

It took her a few seconds to answer, and when she did, her voice was shaky. "What?"

"Are you—" he didn't get a chance to finish his sentence because another loud crack of thunder caused Angel to jump.

Taking his chances, he moved closer and held out his arms to her, the same way he did when something happened to frighten one of his nephews. Half expecting her to push him away, he was surprised when she dropped the blanket and crawled into his waiting embrace.

Unaccustomed to comforting anyone over the age of three, Blackie wasn't sure what to do or say. Instead of talking, he wrapped his arms around her trembling body and held her close. She responded by tightening her hold around his middle and burying her face in the crook of his neck.

Blackie couldn't imagine what had scared her, but had a hard time believing it had anything to do with a simple bad dream. And she was much too old, not to mention too tough, to be afraid of thunderstorms.

Rocking back and forth ever so slightly, Blackie held Angel tightly against him as the storm outside raged on. She didn't seem to mind the few soft kisses he placed on her forehead in an effort to relax her. And she didn't move once as the thunder boomed, lightening flashed, and rain pounded the roof of the cabin. At one point, he even thought she'd fallen back to sleep. But when he attempted to lift her from his lap and lay her down, she tightened her grip again.

It seemed like hours until the storm subsided, and when its violence had been reduced to nothing more than a steady drizzle, Angel finally allowed Blackie to move.

"Are you okay?" he asked quietly, helping her sit up. Her answer was short and to the point. "I'm fine."

Wondering whether or not he should ask what was going on, Blackie stared as she picked up the blanket and re-covered herself.

"I guess..." she swallowed hard, "I guess you want an explanation, huh?"

Turning his body until he was facing her, Blackie nodded. "I'm a little curious, yeah. Bein' afraid of a thunderstorm don't seem like you."

"I'm not afraid of thunderstorms."

Blackie wanted a cigarette, but now that he had her talking, he was afraid the distraction would cause her to change her mind and clam up. "Then what's up?"

Angel took a deep breath. "I left a few things out when I told you about what happened the night I shot Marshall. It's stupid, which is why I didn't tell you in the first place.

"It was raining when he dragged me out of the bar," she told him. "Not just a drizzle, but a heavy, soaking, wind driven rain with constant thunder and lightning. There was a big boom of thunder right before I pulled the trigger. I don't know why, but that's always stuck in my mind. Once in a while, when we have bad storms in the middle of the night, the thunder wakes me. Just for a second, I think I'm back there in that dirt parking lot with Marshall's weight on top of me, soaking wet and caked in mud, fighting for my life.

"Something else happened that night, didn't it?"

She looked at him in shock. "What?"

"Marshall did something else to you, Angel. I can tell. What was it?" he demanded.

"He ... stabbed me. Here," she pointed just below her abdomen. "It did a lot of damage inside. I ... I ... was told I can never have children."

Blackie felt sorry for her. He knew she wanted nothing to do with men, which probably meant she wasn't interested in having children, either. But he knew most women longed to be mothers, and wondered if Angel would feel differently about having a husband if her ability to have children hadn't been stolen from her at seventeen.

Then again, maybe not being able to have a baby didn't bother her. It didn't bother him at all.

Although he loved his niece and nephews, he just wasn't father material. If this marriage did happen to last, Angel didn't have anything to worry about when it came to not being able to provide him with children.

"That was the injury that kept you in the hospital before you were taken to jail?" he asked.

Angel nodded but didn't offer any more information, and Blackie didn't ask.

"It's been a few years since I woke up in the middle of the night," she told him. "I thought it was behind me. Sorry if I freaked you out. I'll try not to let it happen again. If for some reason it does, you don't need to pay any attention. I'm okay."

"Why the hell are you apologizin', Angel? I ain't worried about it happenin' again. And I ain't freaked out, either. Do you think this had somethin' to do with havin' contact with Marshall's family for the first time in ten years?"

Angel hesitated for just a second, then said quietly, "This isn't the first time I've had contact with them."

"What?"

"Willie's been harassing me on and off since Marshall died. But he's never come to Hagerstown before. Usually it's an occasional middle of the night phone call. I've also gotten a couple of threatening letters."

"Letters?" Was she kidding? "You mean that asshole actually threatened you in writin'?"

"Yeah, but after a while I just started throwing the letters away. Ignoring Willie makes him a lot angrier than if I was to respond."

"What does Digger say about all this?"

"He wanted to go down to southern Maryland and put an end to Willie once and for all, but I wouldn't let him."

Blackie felt white-hot anger surge through his body. She'd been harassed and threatened for the past ten years, yet wouldn't allow anyone to put an end to it. "Why the hell not?"

"My brother had other things to worry about, Blackie. Like running his business and making a living. I figured I wasn't in any danger from Willie as long as he was living three and a half hours away. Truthfully, I never expected to see him again. I thought he was just trying to scare me."

"And he succeeded, didn't he?"

Silence.

Her lack of an answer told him all he needed to know, but he wanted to hear her say it. "Didn't he?" Blackie asked harshly.

"Maybe a little," she admitted.

Hearing all of this reminded Blackie of Gypsy, and how scared Rebel said she'd been when she thought her father was coming to look for her. He had to imagine that Angel was feeling the same way ... only she was too damn stubborn to admit it, even to herself.

Blackie could feel his blood beginning to heat. Everything Angel had told him in the past few minutes had left a bitter taste in his mouth. It had stirred not only his anger, but also an urge to fight and maim that he thought he'd curbed years ago.

Clearing his throat, Blackie decided to tell her something that might make her feel better. "I know how you feel when you say that once you unleash the anger that's buried, there ain't no turnin' back. I feel the same way."

He glanced at her expecting to find a shocked look on her face. Instead, from what he could see in the dim light, it was one that urged him to continue.

"I told you that my old man used to beat on all of us," he reminded her, "my mom, me, my brothers. Part of the reason I started liftin' weights at the age of ten was because I couldn't wait for the day I was strong enough to kick his ass. By fourteen, I was givin' him a real run for his money. The bigger and stronger I got, the more violent our fights became.

"When I was sixteen, I happened to be home one Friday night and saw him start in on Rebel and Judd for no reason. They were only eleven and twelve, and for once, just sittin' on the floor mindin' their own business, not botherin' anyone.

"My father cussed out Judd then went over and kicked him in the side with a steal toe work boot, breakin' three of his ribs. When Rebel spotted me standin' in the doorway, I nodded to him and he jumped up, tryin' to get to me before my father caught him. But he wasn't fast enough. Before I could run interference, the old man grabbed his arm, jerked him back, and threw the poor kid up against the wall. He hit at an angle with such force that it dislocated his shoulder.

"When I saw that, it was like a floodgate opened and every bit of anger I ever felt toward that bastard just boiled over. I damn near killed him with my first punch. It felt so good to finally make him pay for what he'd done to all of us that I just couldn't stop. By the time I calmed down and quit beatin' on him, he was an unconscious, bloody mess.

"For years, I had no control over that anger. It got the best of me every damn time somethin' pissed me off, which almost always got me in trouble." He paused, and added, "All the time I spent in prison only made it worse."

Noticing how intently Angel seemed to be listening, he continued, "It wasn't until after helpin' rescue Gypsy that I learned to control it. But it's still there. And each time I think about someone hurtin' my family, the anger always reminds me that it ain't buried as deep as I'd like it to be."

Blackie reached out and put his index finger under Angel's chin and tilted it up, making sure she was watching him. "You're part of my family now," he told her, not exactly sure what had stirred his protective feelings. "Whether this is a real marriage or not, you're still my wife. And whether you like it or not, you're my responsibility. I ain't gonna let no one

hurt you. No worries, okay?" On an impulse, he reached out and caressed the side of her face.

It was dark inside the cabin, but not dark enough to hide the single tear that slipped down Angel's cheek.

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Chapter 12

The following day, neither Blackie nor Angel mentioned anything about their middle of the night conversation.

But that didn't mean Angel wasn't thinking about it.

As she helped Blackie move his things into her house, all that kept running through her mind were Blackie's words, I ain't gonna let no one hurt you. No worries.

That statement touched Angel in a way that nothing else ever had. Everyone knew that McCasseys say 'no worries' to each other all the time. That's how they let one another know their backs are being watched. It's a saying that had been born out of loyalty, and something never to be taken lightly.

Blackie had made it clear to Angel that he was only marrying her to repay an old debt to her brother. But she knew him well enough to know that he wouldn't have said, 'no worries,' to her if he hadn't meant something significant.

What surprised her most was that she didn't mind being thought of as his responsibility. It had always been important to Angel to be able to take care of herself. But it felt good knowing that Blackie McCassey, The Devil, was watching out for her.

Angel also thought of the story he'd told about being shot by his father. If Blackie hadn't confirmed the horror stories about the way Dolan McCassey had treated his wife and sons, she never would've believed they were true.

The stories made her speculate about what it must've been like to grow up in Dolan's house ... to be beaten by someone

who was supposed to love you. And even though Blackie had said that he couldn't stand Rebel and Judd when they were younger, she had a feeling he'd taken more than a few beatings he didn't deserve, just to spare his little brothers the abuse their father so generously dealt out.

Blackie had protected them in his own way, like when he threw them into the water so they'd learn to swim. Most people would think that was cruel. But it was just something that had to be done; like literally risking his life to make extra money to give to his mother.

Blackie McCassey did have a heart. She'd known it all along, but hadn't realized until now just how big and full of love it was. The realization made her want to tell off every single one of those judgmental, holier-than-thou townspeople who wouldn't know real devotion if it walked up and kicked them in the ass.

Her biggest realization of all was the reason Angel was upset about the way people looked down on Blackie. It was hard to admit, but she was falling for him.

And she had no idea what she was going to do about it.

* * * *

The first week Blackie and Angel worked side by side, the bar was much busier than usual. The rumor of their marriage was the hottest gossip in town, and Blackie knew the extra customers were just there to satisfy their curiosity. When two local teenagers ran away together and eloped the following week, the focus shifted away from him and Angel and things got back to normal.

Back to normal meant rowdiness, fights, and obnoxious, unruly drunks. Blackie had a lifetime of experience at being threatening, and had no trouble easing into his job as the bar's resident intimidator.

At the end of the second week, Blackie and Angel were sitting at the bar talking just after closing time. When the last of the help had gone home for the night, Digger walked out of the backroom and joined them. The look on his face told Blackie he didn't have good news.

"Somethin' wrong?" he asked.

Digger shrugged. "Not really. But I do have something to tell you two."

Blackie simply lifted a brow, but Angel wasn't quite so subtle. "Well?" she said, just anxiously enough that Blackie got the impression she knew what was coming.

"I'm leaving in the morning."

The color drained from Angel's face. "What do you mean you're leaving?"

"I'm going to prison, Angel."

"But you don't have to report until the first of November. You still have two weeks."

Blackie felt like an intruder as he watched the exchange between brother and sister. More to the point, he was watching the sister ... his wife. The look on Angel's face was very much like the one he'd seen during the thunderstorm the night they'd spent at the cabin.

When her brother reached out and covered her small hand with his larger one, Blackie could see that the gesture had touched Angel. There was no doubt in his mind that her hard

and fast blinking was a last ditch effort to fight tears. Her gaze darted over to him a few times, giving the impression that those tears were being held at bay for his benefit. Crying in front of him would've stung the hell out of her pride.

"The sooner I report, the sooner I get out. I'd like to get my sentence over with."

"But—"

"You're not going to talk me out of it, Angel, so don't even try," Digger told her. "I've been watching you and Blackie the last couple of weeks and you two work well together. You'll do fine."

Angel watched her brother turn to Blackie. "Can you give me a ride to the bus station on your way to work in the morning?"

Blackie nodded, not missing the accusing look that Angel shot him. Having no control over the situation had obviously made her angry, but that was just something she was going to have to get over.

Sighing, Angel slid off her barstool. She looked at Blackie, and then Digger, holding his gaze for what seemed like an eternity. There were no words spoken between the siblings, but Blackie could tell their silent communication said much more.

Turning on her heel, Angel bowed her head in defeat and strolled out the door.

"She'll be fine," Digger told him.

Not at all sure the man was right, Blackie looked up and raised a brow.

"Trust me, Blackie."

Blackie nodded, wondering just who Digger was trying to convince.

"Angel's a fighter who doesn't like to lose," Digger explained. "But there's no winning for her this time. This is something I have to do, and waiting another two weeks to do it won't make the task any easier."

"She'll be okay," Blackie assured him. "I'll make sure of it."

"I know you will."

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Chapter 13

Angel was wide awake when Digger and Blackie left the house the next morning at six-thirty. She and Digger had said their goodbyes the night before when he'd returned from the bar, and she just couldn't bring herself to say another one this morning. Instead, she peeked through the side of the curtain and watched as they walked past the lamppost outside her window.

Her brother was dressed in jeans and a white T-shirt, and Blackie had on a one-piece pair of dark blue mechanics coveralls with the sleeves cut off. The long hair he usually wore in a ponytail for work was flowing free, and the black bandanna he always tied around the top of his head to keep grease out of his hair was sticking out of his back pocket.

She watched her husband light a cigarette and stared at the glowing ember in the light of early dawn, then watched the shadow of his large frame as he climbed into the tow truck. Angel's heart fell a little when he fired up the diesel engine, knowing that in just a few minutes, both men would be gone and she'd be alone.

Part of her sadness was due to guilt. She felt bad for walking out on Digger and Blackie without a word the night before. Digger was only doing what he had to—taking his punishment for breaking the law—and she'd turned her back on him. She'd apologized to him late last night, but would do it again in the first letter she wrote him, since he made her promise not to visit the prison.

She was no longer that distraught about him leaving. It was only three years, after all. And when he came back, things would return to what passed for normal.

She also felt guilty for the look she'd flashed Blackie when he agreed to take her brother to the bus station. He had absolutely nothing to do with any of this, and didn't deserve the way she'd treated him last night. Knowing him, he probably hadn't noticed. But she was going to say she was sorry anyway, just to make herself feel better.

Even though she'd been awake until almost four a.m., then up again at six-thirty, Angel was restless after climbing back into bed and having trouble going back to sleep. Between the sadness she felt over temporarily losing her brother, and her confusion over the sudden feelings she'd developed for Blackie, she just couldn't relax.

Fifteen minutes after they were gone, Angel turned on her bedroom light, threw on her favorite light blue hooded sweatshirt and an old, ripped pair of jeans that were a size too big. Barefoot, she went into the bathroom and washed, then returned to her room and put on the stereo.

It wasn't often that she had time to herself. Sometimes it seemed as though all she did was work and sleep. But as she lay on her back listening to music, staring at the pale pink ceiling in her bedroom, she began thinking about Blackie. So far, being married to him hadn't been bad at all. He'd been living in her house for two weeks, but they hadn't had much contact. He was already at the garage by the time she woke up, and when he returned, she was at the bar working.

Trying to decide if things were going to change now that her brother was gone, Angel wondered what it might be like to be Blackie's real wife. To have him hold her in his arms every night the way he had during the thunderstorm; to be able to see his entire body, which she knew had to be amazing considering all the weightlifting he did. And the sex. Knowing Blackie and all he was made of, she just knew the sex would be absolutely incredible.

Surprised by her thoughts, Angel scolded herself for daydreaming. She reminded herself that Blackie wasn't in the market for that kind of wife, and that the only thing she meant to him was that he was no longer in debt to Digger.

Not only that, how many hundreds of times had she said she didn't want or need a man? It'd be too humiliating to go back on that statement now. And if she did happen to have a moment of weakness and tried to seduce him, she'd never be able to look him in the eye again if he turned her down.

A creaking floorboard outside her bedroom caused Angel to whip her head toward the noise. When she saw Blackie standing in the doorway, she quickly sat up.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, blushing as though he'd been able to read her thoughts. "How come you're not at the garage?"

Blackie stepped tentatively into her room and took a good look around. "I was at the garage. I dropped off the tow truck so Judd could use it and jumped on my Harley to come back and check on you."

Blackie's motorcycle was so loud that it shook the house every time he pulled up. Angel couldn't believe she'd been so preoccupied that the noise hadn't gotten her attention.

"You did?" she asked innocently, trying not to give away the fact that she was happy to see him. "Why?"

Blackie crossed his arms in front of his chest and leaned back against the wall. The look he gave Angel told her that was a question she should've known the answer to. "Because your brother went to prison this mornin' and I was worried you were sittin' here cryin' your eyes out."

"Oh." He'd come back just to check on her! To hide her smile, she leaned over the opposite side of the bed and pretended to pick up something off the floor. When she was sure her happiness was no longer showing, she turned back to him. "Thanks, but I'm okay."

He shrugged. "If you say so. I gotta get back to work."

She couldn't let him leave. Not yet. Not when he was standing right in front of her and there was no one around to interrupt them. Desperately searching for something to delay him, all she could come up with was an apology. "Wait!" she called as he turned to go, stopping him in mid-stride. "I'm sorry about last night."

"What about last night?"

"The look I gave you in the bar ... I was just angry with Digger. It didn't have anything to do with you."

"Forget about it, Angel Face. It ain't no big deal."

"I know, I just—"

"You just what?"

Why was this so hard? She'd never had trouble talking to him before. Why couldn't she think of a single thing to say? "Nothing."

Blackie was looking at her like she'd lost her mind. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

"Nothing. I told you, I'm fine."

He shrugged and threw up his hands. "I'll be at the garage until four o'clock if you need me," he said as he left her bedroom.

Angel did hear the thunderous roar of the mufflers on his Harley that time. And as he pulled out of the driveway, she could only imagine what he was thinking at that same moment ... because she knew that he hadn't believed a word she'd said.

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Chapter 14

After a long, hard day at the garage, Blackie was lying in bed in the room directly across the hall from Angel's. Even though it was only eight o'clock, he was exhausted and eager to get some rest before he went into the bar at eleven.

But sleep refused to come.

Instead, he was busy thinking about the poor excuse for a conversation he'd had with Angel that morning. Something else had been on her mind besides apologizing, but he'd be damned if he knew what the hell it was.

His other thoughts were on Angel's appearance, and the contents of her room. Her outfit—which included the only pair of jeans he'd ever seen her wear that weren't skin tight—was a far cry from her usual get-ups. And although her face had been void of makeup and the clothes were a little too big, she'd looked comfortable and ... cute.

What surprised him was how feminine her bedroom was decorated. Not once in the entire two weeks he and Angel had been living in the same house, had he been in her bedroom. She always kept the door closed, and he'd never had a reason to go anywhere near there.

From the pale pink ceiling, dusty yellow walls, and beige shag carpet, to the hand painted, colorful 1960s style flowers on a white dresser, the room was nothing like he'd pictured it. The only things that hadn't caught him off guard were the numerous posters of rock bands hanging on the walls.

Blackie found himself wondering about his new wife again, and all the things he didn't know about her. What did she like to do with her free time? Where were her favorite places to go? Did she have any hobbies?

Never having been interested enough in a woman to ask more than her name—and sometimes he didn't even get that far—Blackie wasn't sure how to go about getting his information.

But he was sure about one thing. He was more interested in Angel than he was ready to admit.

Not that it mattered.

She'd stressed from the beginning that she wasn't interested in having a real marriage, and he wasn't about to try and push her into something she didn't want.

* * * *

At first, Blackie thought he was dreaming about a ringing telephone. But as he started to crawl out of his deep sleep, he realized the sound was coming from the small table next to his bed. When he rolled over to answer it and got a glimpse of the digital alarm clock, he was surprised to see it was already nine-thirty. Obviously more tired than he thought, he'd been sleeping almost an hour and a half. "Hello?"

"It's Judd," the familiar voice said. "You'd better get down here, bro. Things are getting out of hand fast."

Judging from the loud shouts and sounds of breaking glass coming from the other end of the phone, Blackie knew he should've been afraid to ask his next question. "Where the hell are you?"

When Judd said, "Digger's," Blackie was up and out of bed in an instant.

"Keep an eye on Angel," he instructed his younger brother, "I'll be right there."

After slamming the phone receiver back onto the hook, Blackie flipped the wall switch, turning on the bedroom light. A quick search of the room turned up only one pair of jeans—the faded blue ones he'd discarded the night before. After pulling them on and buttoning the fly, he grabbed a black T-shirt from the closet, pulled it over his head, rolled a pack of cigarettes up into the left shirtsleeve, and left the room. He swung by the kitchen table for his motorcycle keys then ran out the door.

Imagining what was going on at the bar made the entire three-mile trip excruciating. He hadn't given Judd the chance to elaborate, but Blackie had witnessed, and even been part of some serious violence at Digger's.

The only thing keeping his temper in check during the short trip was that Judd was keeping an eye on Angel. And since McCasseys didn't usually go into Digger's alone, it was probably a safe bet that one or two of their cousins were with him.

When Blackie pulled into the packed parking lot, he shut off the engine and pushed his bike around the building, parking by the backdoor. Surprise your enemies, he reminded himself, slipping quietly inside.

The sounds of chaos immediately assaulted his ears. Itching to run down the hallway and into the bar's main room,

Blackie held himself back, knowing that stepping into this kind of situation blind could be deadly.

As it turned out, the commotion came from only two separate disturbances. In the far corner next to the pinball machine, two groups consisting of four men each were yelling at each other; the floor around them littered with broken glass. There was a bit of shoving taking place as well, but it didn't look like it had turned into anything serious ... yet. He could take care of that problem later.

What had him worried was the scene at the bar.

Blackie breathed a small sigh of relief when he spotted his brother Judd and their two cousins, Brady and Kane. The three men had spread themselves out along the length of the bar. With almost every one of the twenty-five stools along the bar occupied, including the five seats at each of the two short ends of the rectangle, Angel was boxed in. Blackie knew they'd been watching out for her until he could get there, and now that he'd shown up, he'd put an end to the problem.

And it didn't take Blackie long to discover exactly what the problem was: male, about six feet two, two hundred and thirty pounds, dressed in a company uniform defining him as a landscaper, and all hands. He happened to be sitting on the stool directly in front of the cooler. Every time Angel walked by, he stood up and grabbed at her.

"Hey, honey," the man called when Angel refused to pay attention to him. "I need another beer over here."

"You're drunk," she finally replied. "I'm not serving you anymore beer!"

Forcing himself to keep a tight rein on his temper, Blackie watched calmly from the edge of the room, waiting to see if Angel could handle the situation herself.

"Well, I'm hungry, too, honey," he said, reaching out and grabbing Angel's left wrist in what looked like an iron grip, "how about satisfying my craving?"

Before Blackie could even take a step, Angel's right hand flew under the bar. In one swift motion, she brought it out holding a nine millimeter, stuck the barrel between the man's eyes, and cocked it.

At the sound of the small click, the entire bar became deathly quiet, and everyone turned in her direction. Several mouths fell open in shock as the patrons watched their bartender take on the drunk.

"My name isn't honey, asshole," she said in a monotone voice, "it's Angel. I've heard more than enough of your mouth tonight. I want you out of my bar."

"Aw, come on, sweet thing, this is just a little misunderstanding. How about you take a break and come on out here? We can work this out."

"I'm a married woman, you son of a bitch. I'm not interested."

Seemingly un-fazed by the loaded gun in his face, the man tightened his grip on Angel's wrist. "Bullshit. I don't see any husband. He couldn't love you that much if he'd let you work in a place like this."

Blackie watched as Angel capitalized on the fact that the man's attention focused on her face, and took him off guard by yanking her arm from his grasp. Now gripping the gun

with two hands, she spoke louder and more confidently. "You may not see him, but he's here. Maybe you've heard of him. His name's Blackie McCassey. Or you could just call him by his nickname ... The Devil. Either way, when he gets his hands on you, you're going to wish you'd never stepped foot in this bar."

Blackie took the mentioning of his name as a hint that Angel was ready for him to put an end to the situation. Catching his brother's eye, he nodded, silently signaling Judd to be ready. Judd nodded in return, and slowly, as to not draw attention to himself, Blackie moved closer to the bar.

When he was just a few feet away, the drunk swiveled on his barstool, jumped to his feet, and pulled an eight inch hunting knife from somewhere inside his jacket. Blackie stopped in his tracks, took a defensive stance, and stared straight ahead. Knowing the man wasn't expecting a quick reaction, Blackie's arm shot out, his hand wrapping around the blade of the knife. Quickly jerking the weapon from the man's grasp, he ignored the pain as the blade sliced into his skin. Once he spotted Judd, who'd managed to work his way through the crowd and stood just a couple of feet away, Blackie tossed the knife to his brother.

Blackie could feel warm, sticky, blood oozing down his arm, but didn't dare take his attention off the man. Instead, he dragged his arm across his jeans to keep the blood from running all over him.

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see that Angel still held the gun. He wasn't sure whether or not she'd use it in a

room full of people, but wished Brady or Kane would have the good sense to take it from her just in case.

The shock of being unexpectedly relieved of his knife showed on the drunk's face, which Blackie took advantage of. "The lady told you to leave her bar," he said, "and I'm givin' you three seconds to get your worthless, drunk ass outta here."

Resting his hands on his hips, the man titled his head, challenging Blackie. "Or what?"

His temper threatening to erupt, Blackie did his best to keep from unleashing his anger. Settling for taking a step closer, he extended his arm and wrapped his bloody hand around the man's neck. Lowering his face until he was only inches away, he clenched his teeth and whispered, "Or I'll kill you for threatenin' my wife, you son of a bitch. One," he counted, fully expecting the guy to pull away and bolt out the door.

When he made no attempt to move, Blackie said, "Two," ready to fight.

Just before he got to three, the drunk moved and slid his right hand inside his coat. Cursing himself for not checking the guy for additional weapons, Blackie assumed he was reaching for a gun. Bending his right arm, he brought his elbow up quick and hard into the side of the man's face. The drunk lost his balance and flew backward, dropping what he'd been trying to grab—another knife.

As Blackie bent down to pick up the weapon that had fallen, a shot rang out. He stilled, surprised for a moment that he hadn't felt any pain. Hearing a grunt, followed by the loud

crash of someone falling into a bar stool, Blackie stood up straight, ready for another assault.

But nothing came.

Following the stares of the customers who'd hung around to watch the commotion, he turned and spotted Angel. The gun in her hand was pointed at the man who'd just been shot, the barrel still smoking.

Springing into action, Blackie pushed past the few people in his way and climbed over the bar. Taking the nine millimeter from his wife, he jammed it into the waistband of his pants. "Everybody get the fuck out!" he yelled, "now!"

The crowd dispersed quickly, including the men in the corner who'd been arguing. Just a curious few were left lingering near the door.

"Call the sheriff," Blackie instructed Brady and Kane. "Judd, get them spectators outside. This ain't no show."

Blackie picked up one of the white rags Angel usually used to clean the bar and wrapped it around his bleeding hand. After securing it, he gently put his hands on her shoulders and turned her to face him. "Angel?"

Her greenish-gray eyes were clouded, almost as if she was in shock. "I had to do it," she said matter-of-factly. "He was going to shoot you."

Looking across the floor to where the injured man lay, Blackie saw the gun in his hand, finger still on the trigger. There were so many people in the room at the time that the bullet most likely would've struck someone else before reaching him. But Blackie wasn't hung up on the fact that the man had tried to kill him. He was still reeling from the

realization that Angel had fired a shot and wounded another human being—something she swore she never wanted to do again—just to protect him.

He'd broken speed records on the way to the bar because he thought Angel needed saving, and in the end, she was the one who'd saved him. He'd never experienced the kind of feelings that revelation stirred inside him, but if he had to guess, they were a mixture of gratitude, admiration, and possessiveness.

He was sure now that he had felt something for Angel, even if he wasn't quite sure what it was. He did know one thing, though. If the drunk had harmed one hair on his wife's head, Blackie would've killed him.

Hearing the faint sounds of approaching sirens, Blackie removed his hands from her shoulders and cupped her face. "It's okay, Angel Face. Everything's gonna be okay."

She nodded. "Give me the gun."

"What?"

"You're on parole," she reminded him, "you're not supposed to touch a gun. Give it to me."

"I can touch—"

"Give it to me!" she yelled, grabbing at him.

Annoyed by her persistence, Blackie moved out of her reach and pushed her hand away. "Hold on!" Then he retrieved the gun, emptied the magazine and chamber, and handed it to her. "Here. Now go lay that on the bar. You don't need to be holdin' it."

Before Angel did as Blackie instructed, she snatched a rag from under the bar and rubbed down the weapon.

"What the hell are you doin', Angel? The cops ain't gonna dust that thing for my fingerprints. There're a hundred witnesses standin' outside that'll tell the cops I didn't fire no shots."

Throwing the rag back under the bar, she touched the entire surface of the gun before setting it down. "You can never be too careful."

No one but Rebel had ever cared enough to take precautions to keep Blackie out of trouble. But they were brothers, and had always watched out for each other. Why would Angel care what happened to him? Was it because his fingerprints on a firearm would be a violation of parole? Was she afraid of being left without help if he was sent back to prison?

Putting those questions out of his mind, he asked a more important one. "Hey, who's that thing registered to, anyway?"

"Digger."

Oh, man, she'd just shot a guy with a gun that was registered to someone else. Blackie threw his head back and spit out a sarcastic, "Terrific."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothin', Angel," he said, surprising himself with the amount of tenderness he'd put into his answer. "Come on over here."

She returned to stand in front of him just as Sheriff Walton and three of his deputies walked through the front door. In a protective gesture, Blackie put his good hand on Angel's left shoulder again and drew her back up against his front.

"Go see if he's breathing," the sheriff instructed one of his men. Turning his attention to Blackie and Angel, he waved them over. "I'd like to talk to the two of you."

Staying behind her, Blackie lifted the barrier and steered Angel out from behind the bar.

"Blackie." The sheriff extended his hand, and Blackie shook it.

"Sheriff."

"How about telling me what went on here tonight, Angel?"

"She didn't do nothin'—" Blackie started, but the sheriff interrupted him.

"On second thought, Blackie, why don't you go join your brother and cousins outside? I think it'd be better if I talked to Angel alone."

Blackie wasn't crazy about leaving Angel by herself to talk to the sheriff, but he also didn't want to raise too much hell. He'd heard the deputy say the man that had been shot was alive, and from what Blackie knew about the law, this didn't seem to be a complicated matter. However, the sheriff could turn it into one if he wanted to—by making a big deal about the gun Angel fired not being registered to her.

Giving her shoulder a light squeeze, he said, "I'll be outside if you need me," and walked out the door, vowing that if the sheriff upset her, all bets about not raising hell were off.

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Chapter 15

"Are you sure that's it, Angel?" the sheriff asked. "You didn't leave anything out?"

Angel had told her story four times already and had gotten the impression each time that the sheriff thought she was lying to protect Blackie.

"That's it, Sheriff. The guy had been here since just after I came in at three. He was quiet for the first four hours, just sitting here watching television. It wasn't until a couple hours ago—after he started drinking—that he got out of hand. Ask Judd McCassey, he witnessed the whole thing. So did Brady and Kane."

The sheriff nodded. "I need you to come down to the station with me and make an official statement. You'll be free to go after that."

"Just let me lockup first."

"I'm sorry but you can't do that. My men aren't finished their investigation. See if you can get a couple of the McCasseys to stay."

"Can I go talk to them?"

"You can do that on our way out. Let's go."

Angel walked out first, with Sheriff Walton close behind. As soon as she spotted the McCasseys, Angel motioned to Judd, Brady, and Kane. "Would you guys mind staying here while the police finish their investigation? I have to go to the station and make a statement."

They all nodded.

"The keys are on the desk in the backroom. Please make sure both the front and back doors are locked when you leave, but don't bother putting on the alarm. I'll come back and set it when I'm finished."

"No worries, Angel," Judd assured her, "we'll take care of it."

When the three men walked away, she turned to Blackie and looked into his eyes. She didn't want to go through this alone and desperately wanted him by her side, but was almost afraid to ask. "W-will you come with me?"

Angel saw him glance quickly at the awaiting police cruiser, then back at her. Knowing he'd probably spent more than enough time over the years inside of police cars, she wanted to kick herself for asking him to do such a thing.

Thinking there was no way he'd take a voluntary trip to the police station, she was surprised when he said, "I'll be right behind you."

"You can drive her yourself, Blackie," the sheriff told him. "I'm headed to my office now. Make sure I don't beat you two there by anymore than ten minutes."

"We'll be there," Blackie assured him.

They each watched Sheriff Walton climb into his cruiser and drive away. With Blackie's family inside and all of the witnesses gone, Blackie and Angel were left standing alone in the parking lot.

"I'm sorry," she apologized. "I guess this wasn't how you expected to spend your night, huh?"

"Why the hell are you sorry? You didn't start no trouble."

"I know. But—"

"But nothin', Angel. As long as you ain't the one startin' trouble or leadin' anyone on, I'll always defend you."

He'd always defend her? "Why?"

"Because you're my wife. Ain't no one gonna mess with you as long as I'm around."

Surprised by his answer, Angel turned away so he wouldn't see the smile she was trying to hide. She'd been expecting him to say that he'd defend her because it was his job, or because he made a promise to Digger, or even because she'd tried to protect him today and he felt he owed her one. Never in a million years did she think he'd defend her simply because she was his wife. "Thanks, Blackie."

"No. Thank you. I know what you did in there, Angel. And I know what it cost you to do it. I ain't forgotten the conversation we had. You said you didn't want to be the kind of person who hurt people when you got angry. Yet you didn't hesitate to fire that gun when you thought I was gonna get hurt. That means a lot to me."

"It does?"

He nodded. "With the exception of Rose and Gypsy, I ain't never felt like I could trust a woman enough to turn my back to her. But you proved somethin' to me today, Angel Face," he said with just a touch of humor. "And I'm thinkin' that you might even like me a little."

He smiled and winked in the darkness, but she saw it, making her think that maybe he might like her a little, too.

"So far," he said, "bein' married ain't half bad."

* * * *

Since Blackie had explained to Angel what would happen at the police station when she went to give her statement, the whole ordeal wasn't nearly as bad as she'd first anticipated. After an hour and a half of sitting in the sheriff's office, she was told she could leave.

Angel walked out of the room, and was halfway to where Blackie waited for her when the sheriff's voice stopped her. "One more thing, Angel."

"Yes, Sheriff?"

"Take Digger's guns out of the bar and store them someplace safe. Get a couple registered in your own name if you feel you need firearms on the premises. The next time I get called out there, the smoking gun in your hand better belong to you. And remember," he added sternly, "your husband's on parole."

Angel didn't know exactly how much trouble she could've gotten into for shooting a man with someone else's gun. But she'd gotten the impression that since the man she shot was going to be okay, the sheriff had let her little slip-up slide.

She didn't, however, appreciate his subtle reminder that Blackie wasn't allowed to have anything to do with firearms. Not wanting to press her luck, she chose to ignore it. "I'll get the guns and take them home tonight."

Sheriff Walton nodded and Angel turned away to go look for her husband.

Blackie held the pickup truck's passenger door open while Angel climbed inside, then slammed it shut and went to the driver's side. Not until he'd pulled out onto the main road and was headed back to the bar did he speak. "How'd it go?"

"Okay, I guess. The sheriff told me I can't keep Digger's guns at the bar anymore. He also said that if I want to have a couple, they need to be registered in my name."

"Dammit!" Blackie slammed his left hand against the steering wheel. "I knew he was gonna bring that up. The sheriff coulda fined you good for firin' someone else's gun, Angel. I got a couple .44 Magnums and a .357 up at Ten Acres. We'll see about havin' them transferred into your name first thing Monday mornin'. I don't want you workin' at the bar without protection."

There it is again, Angel thought. There's the part of him that sounds as if he really cares.

"I do have protection," she said confidently. "I have you."

"I can't be there all the time, Angel Face. And speakin' of that, I ain't waitin' until eleven o'clock to come in on Fridays and Saturdays no more. I'm goin' in at three with you."

At three? With her? "But—"

"But nothin'," he interrupted, "I know you don't usually have trouble handlin' yourself. But I don't want to think about what woulda happened if my brother and cousins hadn't been in there tonight."

"I figured one of the boys had called you."

He nodded. "It was Judd. Damn good thing he did, too."

Making a mental note to thank her new brother-in-law, Angel thought for just a second about what might've happened if she'd had to handle the situation alone. The drunk man, his weapons, his friends ... it wouldn't have been a pretty scene, and most likely, she would've been the one to suffer.

"Thanks for coming in early, Blackie. It's a little scary to think about what could've happened if you hadn't shown up. I don't think I could've gotten that knife ... oh, no!"

He slammed on the breaks and pulled to the side of the road. "What's wrong?"

"Your hand!" she scooted over next to him and reached out to touch his forearm, which was smeared with dried blood. "Oh, Blackie, I'm sorry. I forgot about your hand!"

He allowed her to lift his bandaged hand, which had been resting on his thigh, into her lap and inspect it. "Dammit, don't get all excited," he told her. "I'm fine."

But the rag he'd wrapped his hand in, the one that used to be white, was now crimson. Not only was the entire cloth saturated with blood, but a lot had smeared and dried on his forearm, giving his tattoo the appearance of a freshly used murder weapon.

Wondering how she could've forgotten that he'd used his bare hand to grab the blade of a knife, Angel pulled his entire arm close and cradled it against her chest. "You need to get this taken care of. You need stitches."

He tried to take his arm back, but she refused to let go. "I told you I'm fine. Frank can sew me up in the mornin'."

"Blackie, it's only one a.m. Tomorrow's Saturday, the garage is closed, and Frank probably won't be up until at least eight, right?" Without waiting for him to answer, she continued. "This is too bad of a cut not to be taken care of for another seven hours. I can do it."

He gave her a sideways glance. "You?"

"Yes, me. You don't think Digger went running to the hospital every time he got cut breaking up at fight, do you?"

"If I say no, you're just gonna hound me until I give in and let you at me with a needle and thread, ain't you?"

She smiled. "Of course."

"Fine," he told her. "You can play nursemaid. But we're goin' to the bar first to get your brother's guns. And I want that alarm set. Digger's is closed for the rest of the weekend."

"What?" Angel's hands flew to her hips, relinquishing Blackie's arm. "Why?"

Pulling the big truck back onto the road, he continued toward the bar. "Because somethin' ain't right."

"What do you mean, something's not right? If you're talking about what happened tonight, stuff like that happens to me at work all the time, Blackie. It's no big deal."

"Wrong. It is a big deal," he said, his attention never leaving the road.

"But why?"

"Because I say it is."

Blackie had never used this icy tone of voice with her before. But she had heard it, and knew that when he used it, it was best to back off and leave him alone.

They rode the rest of the way to the bar in silence. Angel thought long and hard, trying to figure out why what happened tonight was a good reason to close the bar. Weekends in the fall, with college football on Saturday and the NFL on Sunday, were their busiest days and best moneymakers.

Even though she hadn't come up with a single thing that was amiss, she wasn't going to argue with Blackie. He was the most street-smart person she knew, and she trusted him completely. If he sensed something was wrong, then he was probably right.

When they arrived at the bar, Blackie unlocked the front door and they went inside. Judd had left a note saying the police had finished up around midnight, and that he had Angel's keys and would return them in the morning.

"Go get Digger's guns. I'm gonna take a look around. I'll meet you back here in five minutes."

Angel didn't usually take orders from anyone, least of all a man. But Blackie seemed worried—worried about her—so she did as she was told. During the next few minutes, Angel collected one nine millimeter, a sawed-off, double-barreled shotgun, two .38 Specials, and numerous boxes of ammunition. She laid them on the bar and sat on a stool, patiently waiting for Blackie.

"Jesus Christ, look at all this shit!" Blackie's voice startled her and she jumped. "What the hell was Digger waitin' for, a damn war?"

"A lot of this stuff is left over from his drug days. He always told me that you can never be too careful. There were buyers and dealers in and out of here all the time. Every once in a while a deal went bad. He kept them all here even after he sobered up because it gets so rough at night."

Blackie simply nodded, and she looked at him, wondering if he'd ever been a part of her brother's drug activity.

"I wasn't nothin' but a drinker, honey," he said, as if reading her mind. "Grass put me to sleep and everything else was just more goddamn trouble than it was worth. A good jug of moonshine was always my drug of choice."

"I didn't ... I mean, I wasn't—"

Blackie leaned his elbows on the bar and picked up the shotgun, making sure it wasn't loaded. "Admit it, Angel, you were wonderin' if I was partners in crime with Digger back then. Well, you can relax. I knew what he was into, knew all the guys he was into it with, but never got into it myself."

Not sure exactly what to say, Angel changed the subject. "Did you find what you were looking for?"

All traces of humor left his face. "I ain't sure."

"What's that mean?"

"It means I ain't sure." Apparently not willing to discuss it any further, he set the gun down and reached over to turn out the lights. "Let's lock up and get all this shit back to the house."

Angel slid off her stool and grabbed all four guns, leaving the boxes of ammo for Blackie. She carried them out to the truck and laid them on the seat, then quickly moved out of the way so Blackie could dump the ammo there as well.

"Get in," he told her, "I'm gonna go lock up."

From her seat in the truck, she watched as Blackie hung a sign on the front door saying they were closed until Monday. After reaching inside to set the alarm, he locked the door and made his way to the truck.

Before they were married, Blackie was usually happy and joking around when she saw him in the bar. But the Blackie

McCassey walking toward her truck was a man she didn't know. His gait was steady and brisk, his facial expression hard and determined. No grin, no laughs, and only offering short, don't-ask-me-to-explain, answers. She could easily see why people who didn't know Blackie were scared to death of him.

She was a little uneasy herself at the moment.

When he returned to the truck, he opened the passenger door and handed Angel her key. "My bike is around back. I'm gonna ride it over to the house. I want you to pull out of the parkin' lot first and I'll follow behind. Go straight home and don't stop nowhere. When we get there, get out of the truck and unlock the front door. I'll take care of the guns."

"But—"

"No buts. Let's get goin'."

He closed the door, and she climbed over the pile of guns and ammo, settling herself in the driver's seat. Once she heard the roar of the exhaust pipes on Blackie's motorcycle, Angel started her truck and waited for him to drive around the building. The instant she saw the bike's headlight, she put the truck in gear and started driving the few miles back to her house.

As she drove, Angel tried to imagine why he was being so cautious and refusing to tell her anything. She wanted to believe he was making something out of nothing, but Blackie's instincts were too good. Something was amiss.

Shivers crept down her spine as she thought about the possibilities.

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Chapter 16

The uneasy feeling that had come over Blackie at the bar followed him to Angel's house.

Someone had been there.

Lurking in the shadows.

Watching.

Blackie hadn't seen them, but he'd felt their presence. His experiences had taught him to trust his instincts—his gut—and both told him trouble wasn't far away.

Blackie and Angel didn't say a word to each other until they'd unloaded and safely stored all the guns and ammo in the basement.

"Let's go upstairs," Blackie suggested. "We have to talk."

"Fine, but I'm going to stitch you up first."

Blackie nodded and stepped aside, allowing Angel to climb the stairs first. Needing a smoke, he immediately sat at the kitchen table and unrolled a pack of cigarettes from his shirtsleeve.

Watching as Angel moved around the room gathering scissors, thread, peroxide, and cotton, he lit up and suddenly wished he hadn't agreed to let her stitch his injured hand. His Uncle Frank had probably put more than a thousand stitches in various parts of Blackie's body over the years, and always did a fine job.

But he knew Angel.

She'd refuse to leave him alone until he gave in and allowed her to doctor him. To avoid being harassed, he'd let her do it.

Angel had been unusually silent since they'd gotten home. He couldn't remember her ever going more than thirty seconds without saying anything, and it had been a full twenty minutes since she'd opened her mouth. Blackie knew he'd probably scared her into silence back at the bar, but he'd had a bad feeling, and wanted to get her out of there as soon as possible.

"So, you gonna sew me up or what?" he asked, unfastening the rag he'd used as a make-shift bandage.

Angel set everything on the table and took a close look at blood smeared from his hand to his forearm. "It needs to be washed first. Go ahead and run it under cold water in the sink. Here," she set the bottle of peroxide next to him. "Pour some of this over the cuts when you're done. I'll be right back."

When Angel returned, Blackie was sitting at the table again, his hand wrapped in a dishtowel. She handed him an open bottle of whiskey. "It's not moonshine, but it's all I have," she told him. "Drink up."

Blackie took a few long, slow gulps, and set the bottle on the table. Slouching in the chair, he leaned his head back and gave his hand to Angel. "Be gentle," he joked.

He may not have been able to see the expression on her face when she said, "I promise not to hurt you," but Blackie could've sworn she was talking about more than just running a needle and thread through his hand.

If he didn't know better, he'd say that Angel cared more for him than she let on. All her actions pointed in that direction, but he'd be damned if he knew what was going on. She'd sworn she hated men, yet had been willing to kill someone today to protect him. Sure, she could've just fired that shot because they were friends and she was doing him a favor, but her explanation and actions after the fact told him differently.

And now, as she stitched, her touch was gentle and slow. She'd already stopped twice, staring at him as if she wanted to ask if he was all right, and even caressed his hand with her thumb a few times. He may not be all that savvy when it came to picking up signals from women, but he was sure his guess was dead on.

She was interested in him.

The realization that she probably cared for him made Blackie feel guilty for the way he'd treated her. Knowing he owed her an apology, he sat up carefully, swallowed his pride, and offered her one. "I'm sorry for bein' short with you earlier, but I had my reasons."

Although she didn't bother to look up, her voice was soft and understanding when she said, "I know you did."

Blackie was surprised. He'd been prepared to have to convince her there was a reason to be suspicious, but it sounded like she believed him. As long as she had an open mind, he might as well tell her his thoughts. "Tonight was no accident, Angel. That drunk didn't just happen to come into your bar. He was sent there by someone to give you a hard time."

The needle stopped and she finally looked up. "I figured it was something like that. You wouldn't have gotten serious and started ordering me around if you didn't think something was wrong."

Where the hell had all that trust and confidence in him come from? He'd been expecting her to ask a thousand questions and argue with him before she saw things his way.

"You think Willie sent that guy to bother me, don't you?"

She was smart. "Yeah, I do."

Angel took a deep breath. "And he came in early because someone's probably been watching the bar and knew that Digger hasn't been around, right?"

He nodded. "Right."

"They probably also knew you don't usually come in until eleven, and that I wouldn't have anyone to back me up. I guess they didn't do all their homework, though. They must not have known your family hangs out there."

Wanting to make sure she understood the situation, he corrected her. "Your family, too, Angel Face. Rebel and Judd are just as much your brothers now as they are mine. Same with the rest of the boys. You got more cousins now than you're gonna know what to do with."

She gave him a half smile. "Thanks. If Judd hadn't called you—"

"But he did. And even if I hadn't gotten there in time, Judd, Brady, and Kane woulda handled things until I showed up. McCasseys take care of their own. You know that."

"I know, but—"

"But nothin'. And I ain't leavin' you alone at the bar until I figure out what exactly Willie Ramsey wants and how to get rid of him ... permanently."

"You can't be at the bar with me all the time, Blackie. You have to work at the garage."

"I am gonna work at the garage. And you can either come with me and hang out there durin' the day, or stay home. That's your choice. But you ain't goin' into the bar until five o'clock now, and when you do, I'll be with you."

"What? Blackie, that's crazy! We never get home before three in the morning. How are you going to get up at six and go to work? You can't function on three hours sleep."

"It ain't gonna be for long."

"What does that mean?"

"It means I don't plan on lettin' Willie Ramsey get away with what he's doin' much longer. Just because that bastard decided to get brave after ten years of bein' angry don't mean we have to put up with his shit. You took his brother's life in self-defense, and I'll be goddamned if I'm gonna let him hurt my wife for protectin' herself. Or any other reason, for that matter."

Angel bent her head and went back to stitching, but not before Blackie saw her slight smile. She was smitten all right, and doing a poor job of trying to hide it. But Blackie wasn't going to give her a hard time about it. Because to tell the truth, he was just a little smitten himself.

* * * *

Too-many-stitches-to-count later, Blackie's hand was sewn shut and bandaged. Angel left him at the kitchen table with what was left of the fifth of whiskey, and returned her medical supplies to the bathroom.

Blackie had set aside the whiskey and had his left elbow on the table, resting his chin in the palm of his hand when she returned. He felt her hands on his shoulders just a moment before she spoke.

"It's almost four a.m.," she told him. "You should get some rest."

She was right. He'd been awake almost twenty-four hours.

Backing his chair away from the table, he stood, forcing Angel to take a step back. Before leaving the room, Blackie reached out and put his left hand on the back of her head, leaned down, and kissed her cheek. He hadn't intended it to mean anything, just wanted it to be an expression of gratitude, a way of thanking her for taking the time to doctor his hand.

But the kiss hadn't felt like nothing.

It stirred his loins to the point that he was painfully aware of the softness of her cheek against his lips. Combined with the sweet scent of her skin, their physical contact left him wanting more.

Making a move on Angel was out of the question, so he forced himself to think about cars, work, trash, anything that would erase from his mind the thoughts of what he'd like to do to her body.

"Go get some rest," he told her. "We have plans later."

"What kind of plans?"

"We're gonna have some fun. You do remember how to have fun," he teased in a whiskey-slurred voice, "don't you?"

She furrowed her brows and squinted at him. "Sure, I remember. Just what kind of fun are we talking about?"

Blackie sighed. "It's four o'clock in the mornin'. I'm tired, my hand is throbbin', and I got a lot to think about between now and Monday. Does it matter what we're gonna do as long as it's fun?"

"Well..."

Blackie shook his head. Women. "Fishin', Angel Face, we're goin' fishin'. Be ready to leave by noon, and pack a bag because we ain't comin' back 'till Sunday night." He turned his back to her and started to make his way down the hall, yelling, "Get some sleep," just before closing his bedroom door.

* * * *

As tired as she was, Angel found it nearly impossible to fall asleep. She was having trouble getting Blackie's kiss, which had completely taken her by surprise, out of her mind.

If she were a teenager, she'd vow never to wash that cheek again. But twenty-seven year old women were supposed to be way passed such nonsense. Instead, she lightly touched the spot where his lips had been, remembering every detail of their quick but soft caress.

Blackie. There was no longer any denying how she felt about him. Angel had never been in love before, but if she had to guess, she'd say that what she felt for Blackie had to be love.

She'd been terrified when she saw the man in the corner of the bar pull a gun and aim it at her husband. She might have sworn she didn't want to hurt another human being, but she never thought twice before pulling the trigger to protect Blackie.

Injuring that man hadn't fazed her a bit. And even if she'd killed him, it would've been worth it to save Blackie's life. Angel knew she wouldn't feel that way unless she was in love.

Another indication was that her insides had been doing flips all night. Every time he said or did something to indicate he was worried about her, the reassuring squeezes he'd given her shoulders at the bar, even every time they made eye contact, her stomach turned upside down.

Admitting she was in love with Blackie wasn't as hard as trying to figure out what to do about it.

He'd always made his position on women crystal clear—he didn't want to have anything to do with being tied down to one. He'd only married her to repay a debt to her brother, and that was because it was a short-term commitment. They had three years, though, and a lot could happen in that amount of time.

Had that crossed Digger's mind when he'd come up with this little arrangement?

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Chapter 17

"Why are we staying here until Sunday night?" Angel asked.

She and Blackie had gotten to Ten Acres just after noon. They'd spent fifteen minutes unloading their bags, putting fresh sheets on the cots, and getting things situated in the cabin. Now they were on their way to his favorite fishing hole, located on the southwest corner of the woods in the spot where Antietam Creek crossed McCassey land.

"Why the hell do you ask so many questions? Dammit, Angel, you're worse than a little kid."

She stopped walking, set the tackle box and bucket she carried on the ground, and placed her hands on her hips. "Don't cuss at me, Blackie McCassey. I have a right to know why I'm doing something."

Angel wasn't really angry. In fact, she enjoyed the playful banter they'd been exchanging all day. Blackie seemed relaxed, but she knew he had a lot on his mind. He still hadn't told her why they'd closed the bar for the weekend, but she figured he had a good reason and would tell her when the time was right.

It surprised her that she'd put so much faith in him. Normally, she didn't trust anyone other than herself. But there was something about Blackie, something that told her it was okay to believe in him. He'd make everything all right—if indeed there really was something wrong.

Looking hot enough in his old worn blue jeans and white T-shirt to make her knees weak, Angel loved the way he'd left his hair long and put on a backwards baseball hat to keep it out of his face. His cigarettes, as always, were rolled into his left shirtsleeve, resting on an enormous bicep muscle.

Looking at her like she'd gone crazy, he stopped five feet away, set his stuff down, and mimicked her stance. "Yes, you do have a right. But I ain't tellin' you until I'm ready. And I ain't cussin' at you, either," he said, giving her a wink, "now pick that shit up off the ground and lets go. If we get there too late the fish ain't gonna be hungry no more."

Blackie and Angel walked the rest of the way to the creek in silence. After setting everything on a dry spot near the bank, Blackie handed her a small, round, covered Styrofoam cup.

"What's this?" she asked.

"Bloodworms," he told her. "Bait."

"Oh."

Picking up the two fishing rods, Blackie motioned to Angel to follow him to the edge of the water. Still holding the cup, she followed.

They sat down side by side on a large boulder, and Angel immediately leaned over and set the cup on the other side of Blackie. She sat patiently as he unrolled the pack of Marlboro's from his shirtsleeve and lit one. With the cigarette between his teeth, he handed Angel a fishing rod and the cup of worms.

When she made a face and handed them back, he rolled his eyes. "Oh, Christ, Angel Face, you have got to be kiddin'."

Please don't tell me that the toughest girl I know, one that rebuilds engines, runs a bar, and ain't afraid to shoot a man for gettin' out of line, won't bait her own hook."

Not the least bit ashamed of her shortcoming, Angel looked him in the eye and proudly explained herself. "I don't like worms, Blackie, they're slimy."

He turned his head and dug around in the cup with his thumb and index finger, pulling out a fat, wiggly bloodworm. "So is motor oil, Angel Face, but apparently you don't mind touchin' that." He wound the creature around the hook and handed her back the rod.

"That's different," she said matter-of-factly. "Motor oil isn't alive and doesn't bleed all over the place when you put a hook in it."

"That don't even deserve a response," he cast his line into the water and took a long drag on his cigarette. After releasing the smoke, he turned to look at her.

"What?" she asked suspiciously.

"Nothin'. I just never realized how girly you can be."

Girly? "Hey—"

"That was a compliment, so don't even think about bitin' my head off. Now be quiet, you're scarin' the fish."

Angel tried hard to suppress the smile that threatened to spread from one side of her face to the other, but it didn't work. A compliment. Blackie had given her a compliment, and he'd admitted it!

They fished in companionable silence for the next two hours, Angel afraid to say anything and be the one

responsible for scaring away what was apparently going to be their dinner.

When they'd caught five plump catfish—that were happily swimming in the bucket Angel had carried down from the cabin—they packed up and headed back. Blackie put the rods, cup, and tackle box in the bed of her pickup truck, and she placed the bucket on the front porch near the door.

"Hey," Blackie called before going inside, "I'm gonna clean the fish. You find some kindlin' and get a fire started in the stone circle out back."

"How come we're cooking outside?"

"The cabin gets too hot if you use the woodstove to cook this time of year. I ain't lightin' a fire in there until we go to bed. Here," he tossed her a book of matches. "Get movin', Angel Face. I'm hungry."

Angel had a good fire going by the time Blackie reappeared, and sat as close to it as possible trying to keep warm. Her sleeveless shirt had been fine in the warmth of the Indian summer day, but wasn't nearly enough for the chilly mountain temperatures at night.

Quietly enjoying the crackle and pop of the logs in the fire, Angel thought what a nice change this was from the loud, rough, chaotic atmosphere of a Saturday night in the bar.

"Here," Blackie dropped a flannel shirt into Angel's lap and sat down beside her. "Put that on. I could see you shiverin' from inside the cabin."

"Thanks." She slipped her arms inside the same blue and white shirt she'd worn last time he'd brought her to Ten Acres. "It is getting chilly out here."

Blackie set the large cast iron skillet on top of a metal rack that had been built over the fire circle. The fish began sizzling.

"It's the middle of October, Angel Face. If you own any shirts with sleeves, now would be a good time to start wearin' them."

"I have a few." Since he was still in his T-shirt, she said, "Do you?"

"No."

"Why not?"

Blackie poked at the fish with a long metal fork, turning them over so they could cook on the other side.

"Because I don't get cold."

"Ever?"

"Ever."

Angel wanted to ask if the reason he didn't wear long sleeve shirts was because the muscles in his arms were too big to fit in them. Then she decided it was probably because he wouldn't have any place to keep his cigarettes.

As the sun began to set, Angel brought her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them. Resting her chin in between her kneecaps, she watched closely as Blackie tended to their dinner. His knowledge of cooking and living off the land was impressive, as well as his willingness to accept that she wasn't accustomed to nature.

When the fish were done, Blackie wrapped a towel around the handle of the skillet and lifted it off the fire. "Ready to go inside?"

She stood and brushed the dirt off the seat of her jeans.
"Ready. What about the fire?"

"Leave it," he told her, "we'll be back later."

Once they were inside, Blackie put the skillet on a towel he'd laid on the table. There were places already set, including plates, napkins, and utensils. She also noticed that the drain in the washtub had been plugged and there was a six pack of beer floating in the water.

She walked to the tub and smiled. "Boy, you sure are resourceful."

"Ain't nothin' colder than that water. It'll numb your hand in no time."

Angel reached in the tub and grabbed two beers, surprised to find the liquid just as cold as Blackie had said. She brought them back to the table and they shared a quiet dinner, engaging in idle conversation as they ate.

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Chapter 18

Blackie watched Angel, who was still wearing his old blue and white flannel shirt, as she moved around the small kitchen putting away the dishes they'd used for dinner.

The extra large shirt hid her body's curves, but he was well aware of where they were and what they looked like—through her normally skintight clothes, that is. He only wished he had a better view of her backside, knowing that every time she bent over, those skintight jeans of hers revealed every round curve of her heart shaped ass.

"You wanna go sit outside for a while?" Blackie asked when she was finished.

Angel hung the skillet on its hook to the right of the shelves and threw the dishtowel on the counter. "Sure, let's go."

Blackie held open the door, allowing her to walk out ahead of him. She waited until he was next to her, then grabbed onto his hand.

"It sure is dark out here," she commented. "How do you know where you're going?"

"I've been roamin' these woods since birth. It ain't hard to find your way around once you get to know the land. See that over there?" he pointed to the brightest star shining in the clear night sky. "That's the north star. If you ever get lost out here, just follow it. It'll keep you away from the creek, and dump you out on the main street in the center of town about a block from the garage."

"I'll remember that."

"You should. It's a good thing to know. Sorry, it never occurred to me that you don't know your way around. I shoulda brought you a flashlight."

"That's okay." She tightened the grip on his arm and quickened her steps to keep up with his long strides. "I'll just stick close to you so I don't get lost."

Great. As they walked side by side, Blackie hoped she had no idea how her closeness was torturing him.

Settled comfortably in front of the fire, Blackie sat on the ground leaning back against a tree. With his legs stretched out in front him, he smoked a cigarette and sipped from a small flask of moonshine.

Not two feet away, Angel had settled in next to him. Although no longer shivering, she was fidgety, and Blackie knew it was only a matter of time before she asked the question he dreaded giving her an answer to.

"Blackie?"

Here it comes. "Hmm?"

"When are you going to tell me why we closed the bar for the weekend?"

Finishing his cigarette, Blackie threw the butt into the fire and turned his head away from her, releasing the smoke. To stall for just a moment, he took a long drink from the flask, emptying it.

"What happened with the drunk at the bar last night was a setup," he told her. "That asshole was sent there by someone to start trouble with you."

"Are you sure?"

"Had you ever seen him before?"

She shook her head. "No. Maybe he was just passing through. Since it's the closest bar to the highway, we get a lot of drifters as well as locals."

"How many of them do you think were packin' eight inch huntin' knives?"

She shrugged. "Rebel carries one in a sheath attached to his belt all the time. So do you and Judd. What's the difference?"

Blackie shook his head in frustration. "Yeah, Angel, we all carry knives. But not into a bar."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm sayin' that obnoxious drunk went into Digger's yesterday with the sole purpose of givin' you a hard time. I ain't exactly sure what he was plannin' to do to you. But judgin' from the size and amount of his weapons, you can bet your ass it was more than just sayin' a few dirty words."

Blackie heard Angel swallow hard.

"And those other guys," she said, "the ones who were shouting at each other in the corner, one of the ones I shot; they were with him, weren't they?"

Now she's got it. "Their job was most likely to create a diversion and serve as backup if anything went wrong."

"But the guy came into the bar only an hour after I got there, Blackie. If he wanted to do something to me, he could've done it then. We weren't busy and there wouldn't have been many witnesses."

"He probably wasn't expectin' to run into any trouble and figured he had all night to do what had to be done. My guess

is that he was enjoyin' the scenery, if you know what I mean." And he hoped she did. Because he didn't want to have to think about or explain that the man had probably undressed Angel with his eyes the minute he walked into the bar.

"You know," she said, "now that I think about it, this has Willie Ramsey's name written all over it. Most of the time he's too much of a coward to do his own dirty work, but the few times he made an attempt to, he had an army of men with him."

"I figured as much."

"That's why you closed Digger's. You knew Willie was responsible for what happened and wanted to take the weekend to figure out how we're going to handle it."

The way she seemed to read him so well caught Blackie off guard. He was planning to take care of the problem, but he damn well wasn't going to let her help. "We?"

"Yes, we."

"Angel—"

"Don't, Blackie," she warned, her voice rising as she moved away from the tree and turned her body to face him. "Don't you dare treat me like a helpless woman and leave me out of this."

He knew Angel wasn't helpless, and was brave enough to take on anyone that threatened her. But Blackie had serious doubts about letting her help him take down Willie Ramsey. This situation was a hell of a lot more dangerous than firing a couple shots to end a bar fight. She wasn't used to the kind of combat it might take to put an end to this.

"I know you ain't helpless, Angel. And trust me, you ain't gonna be left out. But I got a feelin' there's more goin' on here than we know about.

"I find it strange that after ten years of harassin' you from across the state, Ramsey showed up just before your brother went to prison. He knew about it, Angel. He knew you'd be alone and probably came here thinkin' you'd be an easy target if you didn't have Digger.

"I'm sure he sent those guys into the bar to bother you. That was just too much of a coincidence not to have been a setup.

"Ramsey probably thought that last night would be the end of it. I'm sure he expected his thugs to drag you out of the bar and hand you over to him. Havin' been in town at least a few weeks, he most likely heard you and I are married. But he probably also knew I don't usually come into the bar until eleven.

"He wasn't countin' on me showin' up early last night and spoilin' his plan. I think he's desperate right now and may try to get to you any way he can."

"Is that why you brought me here?"

"It's part of the reason."

"What's the other part?"

That was a good question. In all honesty, he'd meant what he said about wanting her to have fun. But it wasn't until just now, when she'd raised her head and looked at him, when he saw the reflection of the fire in those greenish-gray eyes, that he realized why.

Angel meant something to him.

No, not just something.

Everything.

He loved her.

Suddenly, Blackie stood. He held his hand out to Angel, who grasped it, allowing him to pull her to her feet. Directly in front of her, Blackie stared as the realization he'd just come to sunk in.

Before he could stop himself, he lowered his head, moved in closer, and his lips found hers.

To his surprise, Angel didn't push him away. Her lips parted, giving him the access he desired. She wrapped her arms around his middle and pressed herself against him.

As their kiss deepened, red flags went up in the back of Blackie's mind. She doesn't really want this. Stop before you do something to upset her. Reluctant to relinquish her mouth just yet, he pushed his thoughts aside and caressed her tongue with his, relishing her sweetness.

When Angel started slowly moving her hands up and down his back, Blackie's body began to ache from the sensuality of her touch.

Injury and stitches be damned, he put his hands under her arms and effortlessly lifted her off the ground, bringing her body up against his. She wrapped her legs around his waist and her arms around his neck, weaving her hands into his thick, long hair.

To keep her close against him, Blackie wound his arms tightly around her middle. He could feel her breasts pressing against his chest, and she offered no protest when his finger tips brushed their sides.

Knowing he'd better stop while he still had control, he broke their kiss. "Angel..." he whispered.

She looked up, shaking her head slightly. "Don't stop, Blackie," trying to pull him closer, she put her hands on the back of his head and begged, "please, don't stop."

"Are you sure?"

Angel nodded and leaned into him, parting her lips once more. Blackie claimed her mouth again, more forcefully this time, unable to get enough of her.

When he took a step and started to walk toward the cabin, Angel's only response was to hold on tighter. He kissed her all the way to the front door, stopping only to open and close it and make sure it was locked.

Blackie eased Angel down onto one of the cots, then crossed the dark room to where the oil lamp rested on the counter. He raised the wick halfway; lighting the room just enough to be able to take pleasure in the sight of Angel's soon-to-be bare body.

Making a quick trip to the shelves holding the hunting supplies, Blackie grabbed four heavy blankets and laid three of them on top of one another in the middle of the room. Setting the last one down, he walked back to the cot where he'd left Angel.

Standing beside her, Blackie pulled his T-shirt over his head and tossed it on one of the cots. Bending over, he reached out and lifted her into his arms. She clung to him tightly, causing a surge in his need to make her his. Turning, he went to the makeshift bed and sunk to his knees, laying Angel on her back.

She mumbled in protest when he unwound her arms from around his neck, but he leaned in and kissed her before moving away. "I'll be right back," he whispered, and picked up the extra blanket.

When he returned, Angel was in the process of removing her shirt. She flung it to the ground, and, continuing to stare at him, reached around and unhooked her bra.

Thankful for the light, Blackie took in every detail of Angel's body as she slowly slid the bra straps down her arms, freeing one, then two round, supple breasts.

His overwhelming need to touch her got the best of him, and before she could toss away the undergarment, he pulled her against him. The light caressing that her erect nipples were doing to his skin sent shivers down his spine, giving him chills from head to toe.

Forcing Angel onto her back, he unfolded the blanket and pulled it over them both as he positioned himself next to her, and rolled onto his side. He found her lips again, but this time the kiss was brief.

Relinquishing her mouth, he moved lower.

Concentrating on her neck, he ran his tongue along her soft, creamy skin, wondering how he'd gotten lucky enough to be with a woman like her. At the same time, his left hand began to wander, traveling up her stomach and coming to rest as he cupped her right breast. The squeeze he gave it caused her to moan, the sound sending shivers of excitement through his already aching body.

Pinching one of her nipples between his thumb and forefinger, Blackie gently massaged it, taking great pleasure from the slight sounds deep in her throat.

Angel's right hand, the only one that was free, came around and settled on the button of her jeans. "Help me," she whispered.

Blackie didn't need a second invitation.

He began by untying and taking off her shoes. Next came the socks, which he took his time separating from her petite size seven feet. When it was time for her jeans, he unfastened the button, pulled the zipper down, and removed them slowly, one leg at a time.

Blackie shook with anticipation by the time all that was left to remove were her black bikini panties. Knowing that beyond them lay a piece of herself she hadn't shared with anyone in ten years, he was eager to show her what she'd been missing. He assumed that because all he was doing was staring, she thought he wanted her to take them off herself.

When she put her hands on the waistband of the bikinis and lifted her bottom ever so slightly, attempting to take them off, Blackie put his hands out to stop her. "Let me."

She nodded and stretched her arms over her head, waiting patiently as he unlaced and removed his heavy, steel toe work boots. After shedding the rest of his clothes, he was ready to separate Angel from the last remaining garment standing between him and what he knew would be paradise.

Kneeling beside her, Blackie closed her legs until they were only inches apart. Reaching out, he inserted one finger in each side of the waistband of her panties and began to take

them off. An electrical charge of excitement surged through him at the first sight of the neatly trimmed, pale hair peeking out from behind the material. He enjoyed watching as the cotton undergarment slid over her hips and down her smooth thighs—proven by his rock hard, eight-inch erection.

By the blissful expression on her face, Angel obviously enjoyed the teasing foreplay, too.

When she was completely bare, Blackie spread her legs wide and knelt between them. Reaching out, he started at her shoulders and ran his hands all the way down her body, stopping only to cup her breasts and finger their hard nipples.

Moving down over her stomach, he stopped once again, this time on her hips, grabbing them tightly. When he reached the soft, velvety area that had been hidden by the bikini panties, he purposely avoided her sensitive spot, just to tease her. He touched everything from the top of her pubic hairline to the inside of her thigh, and all the way down and around to her firm ass cheeks.

He could tell by the way Angel began to writhe beneath him that she was ready for more. And when she grasped for him, trying to touch his body, he grabbed her wrists and returned her arms to their positions above her head.

"Not yet," he told her, knowing that the instant her hands made contact with his body, he would no longer be able to restrain himself.

Once again placing his hands on the inside of her thighs, he continued his exploration, lightly caressing every inch of her legs until he reached her ankles.

"Blackie, please," Angel begged.

"Please what?"

"I need to touch you."

The erotic desperation in her voice was almost enough to send him over the edge. Wrapping his arms around her, he rolled onto his back and pulled her with him, settling her on top of his body.

He loved the feeling of her breasts being crushed against his chest. But it didn't last long. Scooting off and sitting beside him, Angel began playing the same teasing game he'd just tortured her with. Only she played dirty, beginning by leaning over him and running one of her nipples over his lips. His tongue shot out, and she allowed him to suckle for just a moment before pulling away.

When she straddled his stomach next, he knew she was purposely grinding herself into him so he could feel the wetness between her thighs. Lifting his hands to touch her, he was stopped short when she grabbed his wrists. "Not yet," she told him in a low, sensual voice.

Almost wishing he hadn't started this game, Blackie quickly changed his mind when Angel moved to his side again, and reached for his hard, heavy erection.

Closing her hand around him, she moved slowly, stroking him up and down. He thought he'd never felt anything as good until the tip of her tongue touched the head of his cock. Blackie sucked in his breath and could barely stay still as the smooth wetness from her mouth covered him.

Trying desperately to control himself, he knew that if he didn't distract her, their night would end sooner than he wanted it to.

His arms shot out and he caught her head in his hands. "Easy," he said, the ragged and frenzied sound of his own voice surprising him.

"Hmm," she moaned, "I like this game."

So she knows she's killing me. Well, Blackie intended to enjoy their coupling, and wasn't about to let it end with him losing control and her unsatisfied.

Grabbing her arms in his powerful grip, he pulled her on top of him again. When they were face to face, he placed his hands on the back of her head and pulled it down, kissing her hard. "I want you," he groaned savagely, "now."

Angel nodded and held on as he rolled them over.

The instant he was on top of her, she spread her legs. Supporting himself with his arms, he almost lost it when she reached down and touched herself with her fingertips and separated her lips; knowing it was an open invitation for his now throbbing cock.

Before Blackie could find his own way inside, Angel's hand closed around his swollen shaft and guided it to her opening. "Take me, Blackie," she demanded, spreading her legs wider as she inched forward, trying to force him inside.

"Oh!" she gasped as his thick, full eight inches plunged into her, but she immediately locked her arms around his neck, preparing for the ride. "Shove it in deep," she demanded, "now!"

Once he was inside, the walls of her sensual cavern tightened around him like a vice. Liquid heat covered his shaft as she began to move beneath him, and he knew it wouldn't be long before he lost total control.

Following her lead, he began moving as well. His thrusts were slow at first, quickly becoming more rapid each time he drove himself into her.

Wanting desperately to watch the facial expressions that went along with her panting and moaning, Blackie opened his eyes to look at her. Seeing nothing but a shadow, he closed them again and lowered himself until he was leaning on his elbows, and quickened his thrusts even more.

Finding Angel's mouth, he kissed her deeply, stopping only when he felt her shudder and heard her yell out his name in the throes of an orgasm. "Oh! Oh, Blackie," she panted, her body bucking underneath him. "Oh!"

Unable to restrain himself any longer, Blackie raised himself up and plunged into her one, two, three more times until he came; an earth shattering, almost violent, sensation like he'd never before experienced.

His body quivering from the intense sensation, Blackie breathed heavily. He lay still for a few moments before pulling out and collapsing to the side to avoid crushing her.

No words. There were absolutely no words to describe how Blackie was feeling. Never had being intimate with a woman meant so much; never had he thought he'd put someone else's needs and desires before his own.

But he had. So much, in fact, that he almost wanted to ask if it'd been good for her.

And instead of his usual routine of immediately leaving the bed, Blackie wanted to remain exactly where he was. He wanted to gather Angel in his arms and hold her against him, protecting her from the world outside.

The emotions that had overtaken Blackie were a lot to sort out. He'd never dealt with anything so intense, and wished he could find the words to describe to Angel the depth of his feelings for her.

But there just weren't any.

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Chapter 19

Angel had known sex with Blackie would be amazing.

When he started to enter her, she wasn't sure she was going to be able to accommodate all of him. But when his first thrust filled her, the pain it brought was followed by the most incredible pleasure she'd ever experienced.

The sounds escaping Blackie as he came were enough to make her want to come again. She'd felt herself starting to get excited, but he was obviously spent, and she didn't want to be selfish. There would be plenty of time for them to spend in bed together.

Had Angel known that being in love with the person you were in bed with made such a difference, she would've started going out with men again years ago. Then again, somehow, she didn't think anything would've been like being with Blackie. He seemed to be made for her.

When his breathing finally returned to normal, Blackie reached over and tried to pull her to him. "Come here."

Angel went to him then, not because he told her to, but because she wanted to feel his arms around her, wanted to know the safety and comfort of being close to him. There was nowhere else she ever wanted to be than right next to her husband.

After stating numerous times that she didn't want this to be a real marriage, Angel could only imagine what kind of thoughts were going through Blackie's head.

He was quiet for quite a while, seemingly content to hold her against him. When he did finally speak, what he said was the last thing she had expected to hear.

"I'm sorry, Angel."

"Sorry for what?"

"I never meant for this to happen," he said apologetically. "I won't make this mistake again."

Mistake? Angel had never had such amazing sex. She couldn't really call it making love, since they had both been equally as hungry for each other—or so she'd thought.

She wasn't ashamed to admit that she'd enjoyed the way Blackie had just taken what he wanted. He'd been dominating and forceful, but had made sure she experienced just as much pleasure as he had.

Now he was saying it had all been a mistake?

"Get away from me!" she yelled, pushing at him. "I can't believe this, I should've known!"

Blackie grabbed at her, but she was too fast, jumping up and off the blankets before he could get a good grip on her arm. "Shoulda known what? What the hell are you talkin' about?"

"I'm talking about what we just did! It meant nothing to you! I'm nothing to you ... nothing but something to stick your dick in!"

Completely nude, she walked barefoot to the kitchen and turned up the wick on the oil lamp just enough to be able to see her clothes.

Forgetting about a bra, Angel put her shirt on and picked her jeans up off the floor. Before she could get one leg in, Blackie reached over and grabbed them out of her hand.

"That ain't very ladylike talk, Angel. Now what the fuck are you talkin' about?"

Angel had never heard Blackie's voice so full of anger. She knew she'd made him mad, but she didn't care. She was just as irate.

"You heard me!" she yelled.

Managing to snatch her jeans from his hand, she moved farther away from him and pulled them on.

He followed her lead, stuffing one leg, then the other, into his pants. "I never said this didn't mean nothin' to me!"

"You didn't have to! Saying this was a mistake tells me all I need to know! I thought we might've had something here, Blackie. I thought you felt the same way I do, but apparently I was wrong. I've always known about your love 'em and leave 'em reputation and should've known you wouldn't turn down anything that was offered to you."

Blackie started walking to her, but she backed away.

"Goddammit, Angel, where did you get a stupid idea like that?"

"Stay away from me!" she yelled, more out of embarrassment from knowing that she'd practically thrown herself at him, than not wanting him to be near her. She'd give anything to be held against his big, muscular body again. But the farther away he stayed, the more dignity she'd have in the morning. Thankful for the semi-darkness, she knew he couldn't see the unshed tears of humiliation in her eyes.

He froze and put his hands up. "I ain't comin' nowhere near you if you don't want me to. But you got this all wrong!"

"You said you made a mistake! You said it wouldn't happen again! That tells me you're sorry about what we just did."

"I only said I was sorry because you were the one who said from the beginnin' that this wasn't gonna be a real marriage. You took me by surprise tonight when you practically begged me to take you to bed. And you're damn right, I wasn't gonna turn down the offer. But bein' desperate enough to stick my dick in anything ain't the reason I did it."

"Then why did you?"

He stared at her for a long minute. "You don't want to know."

She threw her hands up and started walking to the door. "Well, that's just great. You know what? You're right. I don't want to know!"

"Freeze goddammit!" he roared. "Don't you dare walk out that door."

Angel didn't normally take orders from anyone, but the rage in Blackie's voice stopped her cold. Right this second was the closest she'd ever come to being afraid of him.

"You ain't got no right to be angry at me! I told you that you took my comment the wrong way. Why the hell are you really mad at me, Angel? Did I do somethin' else, too?"

"Yes, you did, asshole!" Screaming at him wasn't exactly the way she wanted to tell Blackie how she felt about him, but he'd left her no choice. She was upset and couldn't have stopped the words from coming out if she'd tried.

"You made me believe that you cared for me, Blackie! You said you wanted me to be safe and that as long as I was your wife, no one was going to mess with me. I felt secure and protected around you. And I was stupid enough to believe that Big Bad Blackie McCassey, the man they say has a heart as dark and cold as his name, actually had feelings for me. You made me fall in love with you!"

Humiliated at having admitted her true feelings to a man who obviously didn't return them, Angel lowered her head and stared at the floor. She wished she could see Blackie's face. He was silent, but knowing what kind of expression he wore would've told her a lot.

Did he really mean he hadn't meant for it to happen, or was he telling the truth about being confused by her actions? Could this whole misunderstanding be her fault?

"You love me?"

Angel looked up, unable to clearly see his face in the dim light. "What the hell does that matter?" she asked, hearing the quiver in her own voice when she said, "You don't love me. Everything you said and did was only part of repaying your debt to my brother!"

"That ain't true!"

"I don't believe you!" Shaking her head, she backed closer to the door. "Men have brought me nothing but trouble since I was seventeen years old. I don't know why I thought you'd be any different."

"You're wrong." He stepped forward and reached out to her, but she shied away. "Goddammit, Angel, come here!"

She wanted to go to him, but her pride wouldn't let her. "No!" she yelled, "don't touch me!" Reaching behind her, she unlocked and twisted the knob on the door, flung it open, and ran outside.

"Angel!"

She wanted to stop immediately when she heard him call her, and wished she had. Because in the next instant, she experienced the most intense pain she'd ever felt.

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Chapter 20

Blackie assumed that the first loud cracking sound he heard was Angel throwing something at either the cabin or her truck. But when the crack came five more times in rapid succession, he knew it was gunfire.

Son of a bitch! "Angel!"

Rushing to the cabinet under the bookcase, he reached inside and grabbed the loaded .38 Special his brother Rebel always kept there. Bolting for the door, Blackie was almost there when Angel's blood curdling scream caused the hair on the back of his neck to stand up.

"Blackie!" she screamed, her voice laced with intense panic. "Blackie!"

He saw the shadow of her still form the instant he stepped outside. The woman he'd been rolling around under the blankets with not ten minutes earlier, the woman who'd said she loved him and had felt secure and protected in his presence, was lying in a heap on the hard ground.

Blackie skidded to a halt and dropped to his knees, shielding her body with his. He closed his eyes, listening for anyone who might still be in the woods. He fired a few rounds into the trees just for good measure, but knew whoever had been there was long gone.

"B-Blackie?" Her voice was strained and her breathing labored, as if she was in an incredible amount of pain.

He tucked the gun into the waistband of his jeans and cupped her face in his hands. "I'm here, Angel," he said quietly. "I'm right here."

"It ... hurts."

"Where, honey? It's so dark out here I can't see a goddamn thing.

"My ... ch-chest."

Her chest! Oh, God, no! No! Wasting no time, Blackie swept her into his arms and ran for the cabin. There was no phone inside to call an ambulance and they were a good twenty minutes from a hospital. If there was a bullet in her chest, she'd never make it to the emergency room in time.

Grateful he'd left the door open; Blackie rushed inside and set Angel on a cot. Grabbing the neckline of her shirt, he tightened his grip and pulled, ripping the material all the way down the front.

Not wanting to leave her side for an instant, even to turn up the wick on the oil lamp, he ran his hands gingerly over her chest. But the warm stickiness of blood wasn't there. In fact, it was as smooth and creamy as it had felt earlier.

Then Blackie suddenly remembered the day he'd been shot in the arm. Ironically, the stinging sensation he'd felt hadn't been in the arm itself, but in his chest. It was a pain unlike anything he'd ever experienced, and had hurt more than being shot in the gut. Acting on a hunch, Blackie started on her right wrist and carefully felt all the way up her arm, searching for the wetness of blood.

Nothing.

Then he moved to her left and did the same thing. It was dry up until he reached her elbow, then he felt a mass of the warm, gooey substance he knew was blood. He continued to move up her arm until she yelled out in pain when he touched the fleshy area just below her shoulder.

"Ahh!"

"Sorry," he apologized. But Blackie took the deepest breath he'd ever taken, then said a silent prayer to whomever might be listening, thanking them for keeping the bullet away from Angel's most vital organ.

Dashing to the kitchen counter, Blackie quickly turned up the wick on the lamp, brightening the cabin. He was back at Angel's side before she even knew he was gone.

He saw all the blood then, the dark crimson slowly seeping down her arm.

"Does it hurt anywhere else?" he asked.

"N-no."

He could tell she was close to tears. To ease her fear, he explained her situation. "You didn't get shot in the chest, Angel. It just feels like you did because of the area where the bullet hit, which is your left arm just below your shoulder."

"M-my arm?"

"I'll explain it all later, but the stingin' sensation you're feelin' should go away soon. There ain't enough blood here for any major vessels to have been hit, but I need to get a good look at that wound and get the bleedin' stopped. I'm gonna cover you with a towel to keep you warm while I wash away the blood, okay?"

She nodded, and he could tell she was desperately trying not to cry.

"I'm gonna go wash my hands so I can get you cleaned up," he told her. Then he placed a soft kiss on her forehead and walked to the kitchen.

Before heading to the sink to scrub his hands with lye soap—something his Uncle Frank insisted on keeping at the cabin—Blackie took the first-aid kit from the closet and set it by Angel's cot.

While standing at the sink, he was also trying to keep his anger from boiling over. The only thing keeping him from leaving to hunt down Willie Ramsey was the fact that Angel needed him right now. There would be time to deal with Ramsey later. He wasn't going to leave Hagerstown until he was sure he'd 'taken care' of Angel.

In the meantime, Blackie would keep his anger at bay by thinking of how to torture her former brother-in-law so he'd died an excruciatingly painful death.

After drying his hands, Blackie dragged one of the chairs to his wife's bedside. "Angel?"

She didn't speak, but did turn her head and open her eyes.

"Are you ready?"

Her slight, silent nod made Blackie even angrier. Angel was usually happy and laughing, and to see her quiet, sad, and in pain, broke that cold black heart of his.

Blackie's fingers already began to itch; he couldn't wait to get ahold of Willie Ramsey.

"First, I'm gonna cut the rest of your shirt off," he explained. "Then I'm gonna lay this nice clean towel over you to keep you from gettin' cold, okay?"

She nodded again, and Blackie dug into his back pocket and pulled out a six-inch, black-handled switchblade. He opened it, sliced through each one of the sleeveless armholes, and yanked the material away from her body. Throwing it to the floor, he set the knife aside and unfolded the fluffy, hunter green bath-size towel. Draping it over her chest and right arm, he did his best to cover her, leaving only the wounded area of her left arm exposed.

Satisfied that he'd done what he could to make her comfortable, he went to work.

Only because his survival instincts were in full gear, was Blackie able to ignore Angel's obvious pain. She wasn't complaining, and never did shed a tear. But the expression on her face confirmed that she was hurting.

"There ain't no reason to be brave just for me," he told her as he worked. "Go ahead and cry if you want. I've been shot more times than I like to think about. I know it hurts like hell."

Angel opened her eyes and looked at him. He didn't stop working, but did continue talking, hoping to keep her mind off the pain. "In case you're wonderin' if I ever cried, the answer is no. But that don't mean I didn't want to."

As he wiped the last of the blood from her arm, Blackie distracted her by telling her the story of how he was shot in the thigh while rescuing Gypsy. "Frank dug the slug outta me right here on this very cot."

When the area was clean enough, he began inspecting the injury. It didn't take long to find the point of entry, which was in a fleshy part of her arm just below her shoulder. Unfortunately, there was no exit wound.

The bullet was lodged inside.

"Shit!"

Angel had been quietly watching him the entire time, but after his outburst, she finally spoke. "The b-bullet's still in there, isn't it?"

He looked at her and nodded somberly. "You want me to take you to the hospital?"

Her eyes widened. "Can't you take it out?"

"I've had a lot of bullets taken out of me, Angel Face, but I ain't never dug one out of nobody else. I can do it, but it ain't gonna feel too good and I don't want to hurt you."

"I'll be okay. I trust you."

She trusted him. Holy hell. Why did she have to have so much damn faith in him? Why couldn't she have just burst into tears and demanded he take her to the hospital like a normal woman would've done?

Because she loved him, that's why. She'd screamed that in his face not thirty minutes earlier. Now she was willing to put her life in his hands.

Sure, she'd be fine ... as long as he didn't screw up.

"Are you sure?"

"I don't want anyone else to touch me, Blackie. Just you. I want you to help me."

She only wanted him. Only him. Although not the most convenient time for a revelation, it suddenly hit Blackie just

how much she loved him, forcing him to realize that he loved her just as much.

He was a little uneasy about prodding around inside her flesh, but he'd do as she asked. She needed him. She was counting on him. "Sit tight then. I need to do a few things in the kitchen."

The first thing Blackie did was put a pot of water on the small camping stove on the counter. When it began to boil, he dropped in a needle, tweezers, pair of scissors, and three other instruments his Uncle Frank always used when Blackie or his cousins needed medical attention.

Next, he refilled the flask of moonshine from the stash he kept in the kitchen. When he handed it to Angel, she looked at him skeptically. "What's this?"

"Moonshine. Drink it."

"I don't want—"

"Drink it, Angel! It's pure alcohol and tastes like shit, but it'll dull the pain. Trust me, you're gonna need it."

"But—"

Why the hell wouldn't she cooperate? Knowing that the longer the bullet stayed in her arm, the higher the risk of infection, Blackie lost his patience. "Drink, goddammit! Drink or I'll throw your ass in the truck and take you to the hospital right now!"

Less than five minutes later, Angel had downed half the flask, which he figured was more than enough. He took it from her and went back to the kitchen, removing the pot from the stove. While the instruments were cooling, he set up everything else on a chair next to the cot.

When he was ready to get started, Blackie closed his eyes and tried to remember exactly what Frank had done so many times before.

"I'm gonna get started, Angel. You ready?"

"Ready."

It was obvious by her slurred speech that she was feeling the affects of the moonshine. Blackie was a big man and it took a lot to get him drunk, but Angel was considerably smaller. He should've known better than to make her drink so much. Not only was she going to be sore in the morning, she was also going to be hung over.

Finding the bullet that was lodged in Angel's shoulder wasn't a problem. It had gone straight in and was lodged in the tissue.

The hard part was digging it out.

He was having trouble gripping the bullet because the blood made it slippery. And when he finally got a good grip and began extracting it, Angel jumped and the tweezers slipped, forcing him to lose his grip on the bullet.

Twenty minutes later, drenched in sweat and suffering from a severe tension headache, Blackie pulled the bullet free. He dropped it on the tray with his instruments and turned his attention to cleansing the inside of the wound. Unscrewing the flask, he prepared to dump the rest of the moonshine into the bullet hole, knowing it would kill any germs.

"This is gonna hurt like hell," he warned her. "Be tough."

Her eyes were closed and she didn't respond. Blackie hoped it was because she'd passed out. Pinning her down

with the weight of his body, he turned the flask upside down and braced himself for her reaction.

The instant the alcohol touched her skin, Angel's screams of pain tore through Blackie with a vengeance. It almost killed him to be the cause of her agony. But it was necessary; she'd be in big trouble if the injury became infected.

When she was calm again, Blackie dried her as best he could and got rid of the towel that had been draped across her chest. Lifting her into his arms, he moved her to a dry cot. Since she had begun to shiver, he made quick work of wrapping her arm and part of her shoulder in white gauze. Then he took the blue and white flannel shirt of his that she was so fond of, and laid it on top of her. Confident one more layer of warmth would do it, he covered her entire body with a thick, wool blanket.

Angel didn't stir once during the time it took Blackie to clean and return everything to its rightful place. He felt her forehead every ten minutes for the next three hours, and was thankful each time that there was no sign of a fever.

Around what Blackie assumed was near midnight, he finally began to relax a little. Angel was clean and bandaged and seemed to be doing okay. Maybe he hadn't screwed up after all; maybe she was going to be just fine.

After lighting a fire in the woodstove, Blackie turned the lamp down to a faint glow and settled onto the cot next to Angel's. He wanted a cigarette, but his fresh pack was out in the truck and he was too damn tired to go get it.

Instead, he watched his wife as she slept. Leaning in close, he brushed the hair away from her face and tucked it behind

her ears. With her expression relaxed and her guard down, she looked even younger than Gypsy. But Blackie knew that even though only two years separated his wife and sister-in-law, Angel was much older.

Gypsy had been through a lot, but by the time she was twenty-one, she and Rebel were married and he'd put an end to her living nightmare. Angel was already twenty-seven, and hers only seemed to be getting worse. Blackie wanted to help her but didn't know how.

Not so many years ago, he would've left the cabin while Angel was asleep and tracked down Willie Ramsey. He would've killed the man, disposed of the body, and been back before Angel even woke up.

The only thing keeping him from doing that now was his responsibility toward Angel. She needed him, and he wouldn't do her much good from behind bars. There was something else, too. Angel loved him. And although he hadn't told her yet, he loved her, too. He loved her enough to want to take care of Ramsey legally—despite his serious doubts that it would happen that way.

Tonight, the in-name-only aspect of their marriage had come to an end. The time he'd spent with Angel since their wedding was the happiest Blackie had ever been.

He knew they could have a great life together, and he'd be damned if he would let anyone take that away from him.

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Chapter 21

Holed up in a hotel room twenty-five miles southeast of Hagerstown in the town of Frederick, Maryland, Willie Ramsey paced the floor.

"Goddammit!" he yelled out loud. "Nothing ever works out for me! Why can't I ever get this shit right?"

Of course, no one was listening because he was alone. But it felt good to yell. It was the only means he had of taking out his frustration. What would work even better would be wringing Angel Shelby's neck. But since he couldn't get near it, hollering at the walls would have to do ... for now.

As if things couldn't get any worse, the phone rang.

It was almost midnight. Willie hadn't been expecting his father to call until tomorrow morning, but the man had always been impatient.

Setting his beer can on the nightstand, Willie sat on the bed and picked up the receiver. "Hello?"

"Well?" his father asked, "is it done?"

"Hello to you, too, old man."

"Don't fuck around with me, boy, I asked you a question. Did you get that girl or not?"

Willie didn't know if he'd gotten Angel. He'd heard her scream, but didn't know if that was because he'd hit her or because she was surprised by the gunfire.

"I don't know. I think so."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean? Did you or didn't you?"

Willie felt himself getting angry. Sometimes, he thought his father had sent him after Angel because he wanted to be rid of Willie, too. He'd taken his life into his hands tonight by trespassing on the McCassey's land, but he'd been desperate. It was pure luck when he managed to catch Angel alone, and he'd done his best to take advantage of the opportunity.

"I just said I didn't know, Dad. It was dark and I had to shoot from twenty feet away. She's a hard person to get close to."

"How hard could it be to get close to her? Don't tell me you can't handle one tiny, helpless female."

"Helpless female, my ass," he said in his own defense. "Apparently, you don't remember that Angel not only worked circles around you on the farm, but she also out-shot half the men working for you the day we had that skeet shooting competition. She'd take on a grizzly if one threatened her, and she already almost killed me once."

"Then you aren't being too careful, are you, boy?"

"This doesn't have anything to do with being careful, old man. Angel went and got herself married to Blackie McCassey. Remember him? He's more dangerous now than he was before we moved away, and still one badass motherfucker. I'm not overly interested in messing with almost three hundred pounds of solid muscle."

"Last night, I watched from a distance as he grabbed the blade of an eight inch hunting knife with his bare hand and ripped it away from someone without even flinching. The gallon of blood running down his arm didn't seem to make one damned bit of difference to him. Blackie's been by Angel's

side almost constantly the past few weeks. I can't get anywhere near her."

"Didn't you disguise yourself?"

"Of course! And I was in the bar when she shot someone clear across the room. I hung around until things calmed down, too, even though the place was crawling with cops. Blackie wouldn't leave her side, Dad. There's just no way to get to her."

"Well, you'd better find a way. If I have to come up there and waste her myself, I'm going to take care of you while I'm at it. You never were worth a damn when it came to getting things done."

Willie ignored the insult. Usually, there was no way to win with his father. But not this time. It was time to use the little piece of information he'd been holding onto.

"Take it easy, old man. You're not going to have to go anywhere. I've got a juicy piece of information that's going to help us ruin Angel without laying a hand on her."

"Forget it, Willie. I told you I wanted her dead. I want her to suffer for what she did to your brother."

"Oh, she'll suffer," Willie assured his father. "And not just for a little while. I've got a way to make her suffer for the rest of her life. Just call it an eye for an eye."

"What the hell are you talking about, boy?"

Willie spent the next few minutes telling his father about what he'd found out, and how they were going to use it against Angel.

For once, the old man agreed with him. "Forget about the girl and get your ass back down here," his father told him. "As soon as you're back, I'll make that phone call."

Smiling to himself, Willie hung up the phone. He'd get his revenge on Angel after all, and, thankfully, wasn't going to have to tangle with Blackie McCassey to do it.

Angel was going to get what she deserved; was going to be as miserable as one could be, and Willie didn't even have to kill anyone.

All was good.

Lying back on the bed, Willie folded his arms behind his head and closed his eyes. Although he couldn't wait to get home to southern Maryland, his trip hadn't been a total waste of time. He'd learned a lot during the time he'd spent lurking in his old hometown, but had found that for the most part, Hagerstown and its residents hadn't changed.

There were, however, a few things that had both surprised and interested him. Two pieces of information in particular had been quite useful. The first one he'd relayed to his father during their conversation. The second required Willie to make a short stop in his way out of town.

Things couldn't have worked out more perfectly...

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Chapter 22

Angel awoke to throbbing pains in both her arm and head. Groggy, she opened her eyes slowly, squinting against the bright light coming from the oil lamp.

Where was she?

The cabin. She and Blackie were at the cabin on Ten Acres. She'd been shot. That's why her arm hurt. But why did her head ... moonshine. Blackie had made her drink moonshine, saying it would dull the pain. Well, it had dulled the pain at the time, but now it felt like someone had smashed beer bottles over her skull.

Feeling each torturous throb, Angel gingerly turned her head to the right, searching for Blackie. She didn't have far to look because he was right there, just as he had been each time she'd needed him during the past few weeks. A few feet away, the man who'd been taking such good care of her, the man she'd come to love, sat on a cot watching her closely.

"Blackie," she tried to say, but her mouth was terribly dry, and his name came out as more of a mumble.

"Thirsty?"

Rather than try and peel her tongue off the roof of her mouth, she nodded instead.

Angel squinted as Blackie rose from the cot and went to the kitchen. He wore the same jeans he'd had on the night before, but the shirt was different. In fact, the white short sleeve T-shirt looked brand new. Why had he changed?

Returning with a cup of ice cold water, Blackie sat on the edge of Angel's cot, put his hand behind her back, and helped her sit up. "Sorry about the cotton mouth," he said, "moonshine'll do that to you every time. You have a headache?"

A you've-got-to-be-kidding-me glare was all she offered him in response. He knew damn well she had a headache.

"All right, I guess I owe you an apology for makin' you drink so much. But you woulda been in a hell of a lot more pain if I hadn't forced that stuff on you. And to tell the truth," he said, holding the cup to her lips so she could drink, "givin' you too much to drink was the last thing on my mind. I was more interested in gettin' that hunk of lead out of you before an infection set in. And speakin' of that, when was the last time you had a tetanus shot?"

Angel stopped drinking and looked up. "A few years ago."

The genuine concern in Blackie's voice brought back the memory of the argument they'd had just before she ran out of the cabin. She'd said some nasty things, and remembered Blackie telling her she had it all wrong. She hadn't believed him then, but was having second thoughts now.

He'd been extremely tender and comforting after she'd been shot. He'd also worked long and hard to remove the bullet from her arm, taking every necessary precaution, and making sure she was dry and comfortable when he finished.

When Blackie helped her sit up to drink, the heavy blanket had fallen away from her body. Angel was surprised to see that underneath, right up against her bare body, was Blackie's old blue and white flannel shirt. He must've known

how much she loved wearing it, and had put it there to comfort her.

He really did care.

Owing Blackie an apology didn't sit well with Angel. Especially after going over in her mind some of the things she'd screamed at him the night before. Knowing she would have to swallow her pride and apologize, she decided to do it before she lost her nerve.

Blackie set the glass on the chair next to Angel's cot and eased her back down. "Are you comfortable?"

"Yeah."

"You need anything?"

She shook her head. "No, thanks, I'm okay."

After covering her once again, Blackie went to the kitchen and lowered the wick on the lamp, taking much of the brightness out of the room. It was then that she glanced through one of the windows, noticing it was still dark outside. "What time is it?"

Blackie stretched and stifled a yawn. "I don't know, three, maybe four in the mornin'. Why?"

She tried to shrug, but the movement sent shooting pains down her injured arm. "I was just wondering. I thought it was time to get up."

"Mornin's a long way off, Angel Face," he said, heading for the door, "try and get some sleep."

Where was he going? Was he angry after all? "Blackie, wait!" she called. "Don't leave me."

He stopped with his hand on the knob and turned around. The look on his face was a mixture of sympathy and

confusion. "I ain't leavin' you. I'm goin' out to the truck to get a pack of cigarettes. I'll be right back."

Blackie was out the door before she had a chance to reply. She could only imagine what he was thinking, but wouldn't have been surprised to find out that it was probably something along the line of her going crazy.

True to his word, he came right back. A lit cigarette dangling from his lips, he went to the kitchen and turned the wick on the lamp lower. Then he grabbed an ashtray and took a seat on his cot.

Angel stared at him trying to figure out the best way to say she was sorry. Unaccustomed to apologizing to anyone for anything, she hoped she didn't choke on the words.

"Just spit it out," Blackie said.

How did he always seem to know what she was thinking? Was it because he'd spent such a long time in prison—a place where you had to stay one step ahead of everyone else in order to stay alive. Or was it because he just knew her very, very well?

Although it was fairly dark, Angel still had a clear view of Blackie's face. He was staring right back at her.

"Why'd you change your shirt?" She knew it was a dumb question, but at the moment couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Because my other one was soaked with your blood. Now tell me what's really on your mind."

"I..." oh she hated this! "I'm sorry."

His royal blue eyes stared at her, making her nervous. "Sorry for what?" he asked.

"For everything I said to you last night. You've been nothing but good to me since we got married and it was wrong of me to yell at you. You didn't deserve it. It's not entirely your fault that I fell in love with you."

Blackie took a long drag on his half-smoked cigarette and extinguished it in the ashtray. With his gaze settled on her, his expression suddenly became serious. "Are you sorry you love me, or just sorry you said it?"

If it hadn't been for the fact that Blackie had put out a cigarette before it was down to the butt, she would've thought he was playing some kind of game. But he wouldn't waste a perfectly good Marlboro for nothing.

He was dead serious.

Was she sorry she loved him? No. He meant more to her than anyone ever had. She wasn't even sorry she'd said it. It was only fair to be honest. She owed him the truth after what he'd done for her. She'd deal with his rage later. "I'm not sorry for loving you or for telling you. I'm just sorry for the way I said it."

"So you do love me?"

"Yes," she admitted. And then waited, fully expecting him to give her the same, this-isn't-going-to-be-a-real-marriage lecture she'd thrown at him before—and several times after—their wedding.

Instead of responding, Blackie moved from his cot over to hers. The instant he sat down, he leaned back against the wall and carefully pulled her into his arms. Angel's eyes filled with tears. "Blackie," she cried, and buried her face in his chest.

"Angel, you took a bullet in your arm last night and didn't shed one goddamn tear," he teased. "Now, all I'm doin' is sittin' next to you and you're cryin' like a baby. Why?"

How was she supposed to tell him that she didn't want to lose him, that her tears were for herself, because she knew in the end, she would get hurt?

Blackie sighed deeply. "Why are you women so goddamn hard to figure out? I ain't a mind reader, Angel Face. If I'd known how you felt, I woulda told you that I love you, too. But you were so hung up on us only bein' married on paper, that I just kept quiet."

She sniffed and tried to sit up, but needed Blackie's help to right herself. "What did you just say?"

"Which part?"

"The part about loving me."

He leaned in and placed a soft kiss on her forehead. "I love you, too, Angel."

He loved her! "Are you sure?"

Blackie ignored the question. "My first thought when you got shot last night was to hunt down Willie Ramsey and torture him to death. I coulda had it done and disposed of his worthless hide before daybreak. But then I started thinkin' that if I got sent back to prison, you'd be alone."

"I didn't want to do that to you, Angel. You deserve better."

Angel was choked up and didn't know what to say. All her life, she'd dreamed of having a man love her but never thought it would happen, and certainly not with Blackie

McCassey. Tears of happiness flowed steadily down her cheeks as Blackie talked.

"I've stayed out of trouble these past four years and ain't had one run-in with the law. It helps that Sheriff Walton ain't on my ass all the time like Johnson used to be. I admit that most of the trouble I got into was because I was bored. I didn't have nothin' back then and didn't care what happened to me. But now I got a wife. And believe me when I say that you're more than enough to keep me busy. I'll take good care of you, Angel."

Ignoring the pain in her arm, Angel shifted her body and snuggled as close to Blackie as possible. She had no words to offer that could even come close to how loved he'd made her feel. But she knew he'd understood when he wrapped his strong arms around her and pulled her close.

They stayed that way, huddled together on the cot, until Angel was almost asleep. She felt Blackie shift his weight away from her, felt him ease her gently onto her back, but she protested their separation. "Blackie," she mumbled sleepily, "don't go."

"Shh, I'm right here next to you," he whispered. "I ain't goin' nowhere."

Angel heard him drag his cot closer and held on as tightly as she could when he took her right hand in his.

Her last thoughts before falling asleep were that she didn't deserve this kind of happiness, and wondered how long it would last before something happened to destroy it.

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Chapter 23

"Why do I have to go to Rebel and Gypsy's house?" Angel asked.

She and Blackie had left Ten Acres and were on their way back to town. Her arm was sore, and all she wanted was a shower, some clean clothes, and a little quiet time with Blackie to convince him she'd be okay to go back to work the next day. She wasn't going to get any of those things if she had to spend the day at her in-laws. "Why can't we just go home?"

"Willie Ramsey's probably been lurkin' around there. He knows we ain't been home for two days, and I'll be damned if I'm gonna let you walk into the house before I check it out."

"Can't I just come with you and wait in the truck?"

"No."

Angel knew by the tone of his voice that there was no room for discussion. Blackie's word was law when it came to this type of situation. And where the old Angel would've fought his control, protested his decision, and harassed him until he gave in and let her go with him, the new Angel was different. She was in love and completely flattered that this big, strong man loved her in return and wanted to take care of her.

"I don't want to impose on them, Blackie. Shouldn't we call first?"

He looked over from the driver's seat and rolled his eyes. "Are you kiddin'? Gypsy lives for havin' the family over on

Sunday's, especially durin' football season. There's always plenty of beer, pickup games in the backyard at halftime, and kids underfoot. Gypsy's a great cook and always makes enough food to feed an army. You know, it's just typical family stuff."

Angel looked at him and tried to force a smile. She had no idea what Blackie was talking about because she'd never experienced it. "No, I don't know. Family stuff on Sunday's with me and Digger was always watching football at the bar. We ate whatever appetizers were on the menu that day and there weren't any kids allowed inside. I don't think I'm going to fit in, Blackie. Please take me home."

"Sorry, Angel Face, it's too dangerous. You can't go back until I make sure everything's okay."

Angel sighed and rested her head back against the seat.

"Anyway," Blackie added, "you're a McCassey now. Gypsy's been on my ass to bring you over, and this'll give you two a chance to get to know each other."

Angel was actually looking forward to that. Gypsy McCassey seemed like a nice person, but Angel worked so much that she hadn't spoken to the woman more than twice since she came to town four years earlier.

When Blackie turned into the long, dirt driveway, Angel sat up straight and looked out the window toward the house where Blackie, Judd, and Rebel had grown up. "If you're the oldest son, why does the house belong to Rebel and not you or Judd?"

"This place sat empty for a long time because it held a lot of bad memories for my brothers and me," he explained.

"None of us wanted it, so we just let it sit here and rot. But the little apartment above the garage was too small for Rebel, Gypsy, and a baby. After havin' a long talk, the three of us decided that since Rebel was the only one of us with a family, the house should be his.

"It was in bad shape and needed to be fixed up before the baby came, but Rebel was too busy workin' at the garage to do it himself. So the four of us all moved in together and remodeled it room by room. It took damn near a year to finish, but the important parts were done by the time Raider was born.

"There're a couple extra rooms and Rebel and Gypsy told us we could live there as long as we wanted. I'm happier alone, which is why I took the apartment over the garage. Judd still lives in the basement, though. He probably ain't never gonna leave."

Angel laughed because she knew Blackie was right. Judd McCassey was someone who didn't deal well with change. In fact, she'd heard that a lot of his trouble with the law had come after major changes in his life. The death of his mother, along with Blackie being sent to prison for the first time, were apparently what set Judd on the wrong path. It was all downhill after that.

There was something else she knew, too. Neither Blackie nor Judd had been in any trouble with the law since Gypsy had come into their lives.

Hoping she'd be able to measure up to her new sister-in-law, Angel released a breath she didn't realize she'd been

holding, just as Blackie brought the truck to a stop in front of the white picket fence surrounding the house.

Blackie had no sooner gotten out of the truck when two little boys burst through the front door and ran toward him. "Uncle Blackie! Uncle Blackie!"

Angel watched the scene with a smile as Blackie simultaneously lifted one boy into each arm. They were firing questions at him with lightening speed and he was doing his best to answer. "Where's your motorcycle?" the little one asked. Then the older one wanted to know, "Whose truck is this? Who's in there with you? Why are you here and it's still morning?"

Rescued by Rebel, Blackie handed the boys to their father and came around to help Angel. He opened the door and offered her a hand, but she refused. "I can do it."

After a few unsuccessful attempts at trying to ease herself out of the cab without jarring her injured arm—which Blackie had secured in a make-shift sling—she looked to him for help. "Okay, maybe I can't."

Without saying a single I-told-you-so, Blackie reached in and lifted her into his arms. He kicked the door shut with his booted foot and gently set her on the ground. She stood silently next to him as he introduced her to his nephews.

Chase said a shy, "Hi," but Raider didn't say a word. The look on his face, however, spoke volumes. Apparently, he viewed her as competition for his Uncle Blackie's attention.

"Take your brother in the house and go tell Uncle Judd to come out here," Rebel told his oldest son. "Then I want you to stay inside and help Mommy with Jade. Can you do that?"

Raider nodded and grasped Chase's hand. He led his little brother to the front door, opened it, and gave Angel one last, hateful look before disappearing.

"Sorry about that," Rebel told her, "He'll come around once he realizes you're not stealing Blackie away. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

Angel saw the look Rebel flashed Blackie, saw her husband nod, and wondered what kind of silent communication was going on between the brothers.

"I'll wait until Judd comes out," Rebel said, "that way you'll only have to tell the story once."

Judd appeared a minute later, and Angel filled him and Rebel in on what was going on. She sugarcoated it a little, but Blackie was sure to jump in and add anything she left out.

"Can Angel hang out here while I go check out the house? I don't want her near there if that bastard Ramsey is anywhere around."

"We'll go with you," Rebel told him.

"I don't need—" Blackie started to say, but Rebel jumped in and cut him off.

"Yeah, Blackie, just like I didn't need help rescuing Gypsy from her father," Rebel said sarcastically. "I'm going to walk Angel inside. Your ass better be here when I get back."

Angel hated imposing on people and looked to Blackie for reassurance.

"Go ahead, Angel Face. I ain't gonna be long."

"Make sure he doesn't go anywhere," Rebel instructed Judd.

With an evil grin, Judd looked at Blackie and winked.

"Don't even think about it, you stupid asshole," Blackie said. But it was too late. Judd had already pounced on him. Before long, the brothers were rolling around wrestling in the dirt.

"That ought to hold him for a minute or two," Rebel told her as they walked toward the house. "Blackie likes to leave me out of things he thinks are dangerous because of my kids, like he's trying to keep me safe for them. But he's my brother and I need to be there for him. Not only that," he said with a wink, "I'm the only one who isn't afraid to try and beat his ass when he needs it."

Angel knew that Rebel was the unofficial leader of the McCassey clan. She'd seen for herself how people gravitated toward him, wanting to be included in something just because Rebel was part of it. The family looked to him for guidance and answers and he never disappointed them. He kept them together and organized, and knew the score when it came to reality. He wouldn't let Blackie get in trouble.

"Just in case you need them," Angel whispered to Rebel, "my brother's guns are in the basement under a green blanket next to Blackie's weight set. The ammo is in a small laundry basket above the washing machine."

Rebel stopped and stared at her as he held the front door open. "You think we're going to need firepower just to go check out the house?"

She kept her head low, but raised her eyes and looked into his. "I hope not."

He nodded. "It'll be fine, Angel. Even if Ramsey was there while the two of you were gone, he'd have to be stupid to still be hanging around."

Angel turned for one last look at Blackie, her gaze lingering just long enough to draw Rebel's attention.

"He'll be fine, too," Rebel said with soft reassurance, "I won't let him get in any trouble."

"Is it that obvious?"

"What?" Rebel asked, "That you're worried about Blackie, or that you love him?"

Did he really expect her to answer that?

"Yes, Angel, it's obvious. But he feels the same way about you. He wouldn't have brought you here if he didn't."

Angel wanted to ask what Rebel meant by that, but Gypsy walked around the corner and distracted them.

"Hi, Angel! I heard you two drive up but was laying Jade down for her nap. Are you staying for a while?"

"Actually," Rebel jumped in before Angel had a chance to answer, "Me and Judd are running over to Angel's house with Blackie. She's going to stay here with you, darlin'. We'll be back in an hour."

"What's going on?" Gypsy asked her husband.

Rebel quickly filled his wife in on the situation, and to Angel's surprise, her sister-in-law took the news like it was no big deal.

Gypsy kissed her husband goodbye. "Be careful!" she hollered, and the two women watched until Blackie turned the truck around and drove out of the yard.

"I'm sorry to barge in on you like this, Gypsy. I could've gone with them, but Blackie wouldn't let me."

Gypsy smiled and motioned for Angel to follow her into the kitchen. "Are you kidding? I've been trying to get Blackie to bring you over here for weeks. I was just making a pot of chili for when everyone comes over later. Have a seat at the table. You want a cup of coffee?"

"No, thank you."

"Well then, how about a shower? I know what it's like to spend time at Ten Acres. You must be dying for one right about now."

Angel felt relieved. That's exactly what she needed. "If it's not any trouble, I'd love one."

Following Gypsy into the master bedroom, Angel accepted a fresh bath towel from her sister-in-law. But when Gypsy tried to give her a clean set of clothes, she declined. "Thanks, but you're little, I don't think they'll fit me."

"Don't be silly, Angel. I'm not that much smaller than you."

"That's okay," she assured Gypsy, "I can wear what I have on until the guys get back. Hopefully, Blackie will bring me a change of clothes."

Gypsy gave Angel a strange but knowing look when Angel had said she wanted to wear Blackie's old blue and white flannel shirt. Did she know? Were Angel's feelings toward Blackie as obvious to Gypsy as they'd been to Rebel?

"I'm sure he will, too. What about your sling, do you need help with that?"

She'd almost forgotten about the sling. "If you could just untie it, I can do the rest. I should try and move my arm,

anyway. It'll get stiff if it sits too long, and I want to try and convince Blackie to let me work tomorrow."

Gypsy lifted a brow, but said nothing as she untied the knot in Angel's sling.

"Thanks for your help. I couldn't have done that by myself."

Gypsy reached under the sink and pulled out a box of gauze, bandages, and other medical supplies. "No problem. I'll tie it again when you're finished. Here are some things to re-bandage your wound, unless you don't think you'll be able to do it by yourself."

"Actually, I'm right handed. I'll be okay."

"Well, just holler if you have trouble. Take your time and enjoy your shower. Come back into the kitchen when you're finished, and we'll have a nice talk."

Alone in the bathroom, Angel stood in front of the mirror. Being in love with a man who loved her in return hadn't made her look any different, but she sure felt different.

Wishing she could put a finger on the feeling that had taken over her, Angel was grateful for Blackie's love. It was something she never expected, but treasured what it represented. Someone to stand by her side, offer support and even ... protection. Angel had always been big on taking care of herself, but again, she thought about how much she liked Blackie taking charge, keeping her away from things that weren't safe.

As she stepped into the shower, a strange, eerie feeling crept up her spine.

Pushing it away, Angel didn't want to believe her life at this moment was anything less than perfect.

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Chapter 24

"You love him, don't you?"

The question came from Gypsy after she'd finished retying Angel's sling, and was standing at the stove stirring the chili. She was very matter-of-fact about it, like she'd known all along. It still took Angel by surprise, but she didn't know why. If Rebel had noticed, she should've known that his wife would as well.

"I've known Blackie a long time," Angel replied. "What's not to love?"

Gypsy laughed. "I could give you a list, but I have a feeling you don't need one."

"Blackie's a good man, Gypsy. I know that, despite all the trouble he's been in. He's never been anything but nice to me and I've always felt safe around him."

A look of approval crossed Gypsy's face. "Does he know how you feel?"

"Yes. I sort of screamed it in his face last night."

"Screamed?"

"It's a long story."

"He feels the same way about you," Gypsy said, "doesn't he?"

"How'd you know?"

"I sort of cornered Blackie into a conversation when I found out he'd decided to marry you."

"Cornered?"

Gypsy laughed. "That's a long story, too. But he told me that day he had a lot of respect for you. I can count on one hand the amount of women Blackie respects, Angel. For him to consider you one of them means he thinks you're special."

Special? Blackie didn't seem like the type to consider a woman special, especially since he'd made it well known that there were few, if any, he even liked.

"I don't know what to say."

"You don't have to say anything," Gypsy told her. "I'm just glad you two found each other. I don't know you very well, but I like you already. Incase I didn't say it before, welcome to the family. It's nice to finally have a sister."

"Thanks, Gypsy. I've always wanted a sister. I hope we can be close." Gypsy's hospitality made her feel at home and happy to be part of the McCassey family.

Gypsy finished stirring the chili and sat down across the table from Angel. "Since you've known everyone much longer, I bet you could tell me some amazing stories about Rebel and the rest of the boys."

Shifting in her chair, Angel found a comfortable position and settled in. "Well, I could, but only if you're interested in hearing about their fighting skills, which I'm sure you're well aware of. They've sent more people to the hospital than you can imagine while fighting in my brother's bar.

"Other than that, the only stories I know are the ones I've heard either from the boys themselves, or over exaggerated ones floating around town."

Gypsy seemed disappointed, so Angel added an explanation. "I've known the McCassey's my entire life, but

everyone with the exception of Flynn is a lot older, and we never hung out together. It wasn't until I turned fifteen and started working in my brother's bar that we all got to know each other."

Gypsy nodded. "I love when Rebel tells me stories about things he and his brothers and cousins did when they were kids. I grew up in foster homes in Baltimore City and don't have any living relatives. Hearing those stories makes me feel like I didn't miss out on so much."

Angel had heard Gypsy's story through the grapevine, but hadn't known it was true until now.

"Well, you definitely went from one extreme to the other," Angel said. "Now you're related to half the population of Washington County."

"So are you."

Truthfully, Angel had never thought of that. She had more family than she knew what to do with now. What a great feeling. "Yeah, I guess I am."

The phone rang, interrupting the women's conversation. Gypsy jumped up to answer it and spoke to whoever was on the other end of the line for just a minute.

"That was Rebel," she said, after hanging up. "The guys are getting ready to leave your house. He said Blackie has clean clothes for you; but if there's anything else you want, you should call back. They'll be there another few minutes."

After her shower, Angel had put her dirty jeans back on. She hadn't needed to since Blackie's flannel shirt fell to her knees. But she hadn't forgotten the hairs that had stood up on the back of her neck as she stepped into the shower.

Wanting to be prepared for anything, she didn't mind wearing dirty clothes until Blackie came back. "Clothes are all I need, but thanks."

Gypsy looked at her watch, then at Angel. "If you think you'll be okay for a few minutes, I'm going to go back and lay the boys down for their naps. That way they'll be sleeping by the time the guys get back. If I wait any longer and they hear Blackie's voice, I'll have to forget about them sleeping all together. They'll be too excited to settle down. Raider and Chase think their Uncle Blackie walks on water."

So do I. "Go ahead, I'm fine."

Gypsy disappeared, but was back in less than five minutes. "Lucky me. Chase was sound asleep on the floor next to his blocks and Raider had crashed on the sofa in the playroom. I tucked them both into their beds; they should be out for at least the next hour."

Returning to the table, Gypsy leaned her elbows on the surface, and rested her chin in the palm of her right hand. "You know, Angel, with all the stuff that's gone on in my life, sometimes I feel like the oldest twenty-five year old on the planet."

"I know what you mean, I—"

Angel suddenly stilled and looked at Gypsy. "Did you hear that?"

"It must just be the guys. They said they were on their way back."

"That was only five minutes ago, Gypsy. It would've taken them longer than that to get here. Are you expecting anyone?"

"Brady and Kane are supposed to drop by this afternoon. Maybe that's them."

Angel remembered her nephew's comment about it still being morning and asked Gypsy if Brady and Kane ever showed up before noon.

"No, but—"

"What about Outlaw?" Angel cut her off. "Is he outside somewhere?"

"No, I know Rebel left him at the garage this weekend. "What—"

"There's someone out there," Angel said sharply, and rose from her chair, slipping her feet into her tennis shoes.

Just then, another noise came from the yard, sounding like someone had tripped over one of the kid's toys. Seconds later, a deep male voice called out to her. "I know you're in there, Angel Shelby! And I know you got kids in there. Unless you want those little bastards hurt, you'd better get your ass out here!"

Gypsy immediately reached for the phone, but Angel stopped her. "There's no time for that. Go wake your kids and get them into the basement. Lock yourselves in a bedroom and barricade the door. Then call the sheriff."

"What about you?" Gypsy asked frantically. "You can't go out there alone."

"I have to. I'd never forgive myself if anything happened to you or your kids," Angel said. She grabbed a knife from the counter, sliced her sling, and yanked it from around her neck. Ignoring the pain of allowing her left arm to hang loose, she started toward the door. "Please hurry, Gypsy," she begged.

"I'm going outside to hold him off until either Blackie or the sheriff shows up. Go now."

"Angel—"

"Do it, dammit!" Angel ordered, waving her off. "Go!"

Gypsy hesitated, but when the man in the yard called for Angel again, Gypsy disappeared. When Angel was sure her sister-in-law wasn't coming back, she walked out the front door, making sure it was locked before slamming it shut behind her.

There was no sign of Willie Ramsey when she scanned the yard, but he was there. She knew she could keep him talking until help arrived, but only if they stood face to face. It was just a matter of finding him before he could grab hold of her.

"You wanted me and I'm here, Willie! Come on out, you cowardly bastard."

Angel listened carefully for any signs of movement. When a rustling in the woods to the left got her attention, she shifted her gaze toward the noise and spotted Willie. To keep him from coming closer to the house, Angel took a deep breath and walked in his direction.

She stopped ten feet in front of him. Despite the white-hot pain from her injury, she crossed her arms in front of her chest. Keeping the discomfort off her face to prevent Willie from knowing she was hurting, she addressed her former brother-in-law. "Don't you have anything better to do than trespass on private property, Willie?"

Just as round as he was tall, Willie mimicked her stance and tried to stare her down. "Apparently not, since I'm here."

"You're such a useless waste of space. What do you want?"

"I'm going back to southern Maryland today, but I just want you to know that I'm not finished with you."

"Sure you're not. That's the same story you've been telling for the last ten years, Willie, and it's old. You can't get to me because you don't have the balls to do the dirty work yourself. And if that was you shooting at me in the woods last night, you missed. So go on back to Mommy and Daddy on the chicken farm and quit wasting my time."

Angel turned her back on him, hoping he'd leave. But she heard him behind her, heard his footsteps coming closer. Knowing what she had to do, she made a fist with her right hand and waited. When she could almost feel his breath on the back of her neck, Angel whirled around and swung at him with all her might. Her punch landed square on his jaw, setting him off balance and causing him to stumble backward.

When the trunk of a tree stopped his motion, Angel advanced and lifted her leg to kick him in the groin, but he moved just in time and her foot only caught him in the thigh.

"You missed!" he yelled, then gave an evil laugh before he reached out and grabbed her by the shoulders, squeezing hard. Trying not to cry out, she could feel her wound beginning to throb as he pushed her back into the middle of the yard.

"You stupid bitch!" he screamed. "I wish my brother would've killed you that night!"

Adrenalin taking over, Angel yanked herself free and reached out, putting her hands on Willie's chest and shoving him as hard as she could. "Well, that's not how things ended that night, is it? Marshall deserved to die after what he did!

I'm not sorry for what happened, Willie. I'd do it again if I had the chance! I'd even do everyone a favor and kill you, too!"

Willie charged at her full force then, crashing into her and sending them both to the ground. Angel's head hit the ground first, stunning her for just a moment. She could barely feel her left arm anymore, but continued to fight him with all she had. Feeling as though she was being smothered, she kicked and punched—not an easy thing to do with the extra material of Blackie's shirt wrapped around her—doing all she could to get him off.

They rolled around in the yard for what seemed like an eternity. Willie was so heavy it was hard for Angel to move, but she did get in a few good punches and one lucky kick to the groin. But being much larger, Willie was slowly getting the best of her. His fist landed in her left side twice, and when she twisted out of the way, his next blow caught her in the kidney.

Disoriented, she thought she heard a gunshot. Or was that the pounding in her head? She fought until Willie slowed down to catch his breath, and she was able to roll out from under him and scoot to the side. But he moved toward her quickly, and because she could no longer lift her left arm, she lay on her back and lifted her foot, kicking him in the face.

The loud boom came again, and this time Angel knew someone had fired a gun. Had Willie brought others with him? Was someone shooting at her from the trees? It didn't matter. She had to keep fighting. She had to distract Willie and keep him away from the house, away from Rebel and Gypsy's kids.

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by Lauren N. Sharman

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Chapter 25

Driving back to Rebel's with the windows down in Angel's truck, Blackie and his brothers were less than a mile away when they heard the first shot.

"Was that what I think it was?" Blackie asked his brothers.

"Gunfire," Judd and Rebel said in unison.

When another blast came less than five seconds later, Blackie pushed his foot to the floor, revving the diesel engine and sending the truck into overdrive. He flew down the driveway and slammed on the breaks the instant the white picket fence came into view.

Rebel and Judd were out of the truck before it even skidded to a halt; Blackie slammed it into park and jumped out behind them.

Blackie couldn't believe his eyes when he saw Gypsy standing on the front porch holding a shotgun, and Angel rolling around in the yard fighting with a man who had to outweigh her by a hundred pounds. When Blackie realized it was Willie Ramsey, he saw red.

Racing into the yard, Blackie could think of nothing else but tearing into Ramsey. When he reached the melee, he leaned down and lifted the man away from Angel. Using every bit of his strength, Blackie tossed him through the air, where he slammed against a tree fifteen feet away.

Unable to control his rage, Blackie surged forward and kicked Ramsey in the ribs as he scrambled to get up, then slammed him over onto his back. Ramsey crossed his hands

in front of his face, cowering and trying to protect himself, but the effort was futile in the face of Blackie's single-minded vengeance. All Blackie saw in front of him was the man who'd shot and beaten his wife, and he had nothing on his mind but making him pay with his life.

Blackie ignored the warm, sticky blood covering his hands as he delivered blow after blow to the man's face and torso. "Nobody hurts my wife and gets away with it, you bastard! You messed with the wrong man, Ramsey. I'm gonna kill you!"

There was no response.

Motionless, Willie Ramsey's body was an open target limply splayed on the ground. Blackie heard his brothers in the background yelling that Ramsey had had enough. But he was unable to stop his assault. The next thing he knew, he was tackled from the side and thrown to the ground.

"Blackie!" Rebel's weight pinned him to the ground. "That's enough, goddammit! You're going to kill him!"

"Get the fuck off me, Rebel!" Blackie pushed and shoved trying to get away, but his youngest brother's strength now rivaled his own, and Blackie couldn't get Rebel to budge. "The bastard deserves to die!"

"Well, you're not killing him on my front lawn!"

"I don't want to have to hurt you, Rebel! Move!"

Rebel leaned forward, pressing more of his weight against Blackie's chest. "Calm the fuck down and start thinking with your head instead of your goddamn fists!" Rebel hollered.

Blackie struggled to sit up, but his brother wouldn't budge.

"I know you love Angel," Rebel said more calmly, "I can see it. Do you want to get sent back to prison and leave her alone? Because if you go away for murder, that's what'll happen. You'll be gone a hell of a lot longer than three or four years, and just think of what she'd have to go through without you. Is killing Willie Ramsey worth losing Angel? She loves you, too, Blackie, and she needs help. She's over there lying in the middle of the yard right now calling for you. She won't let anyone else touch her."

She loved him.

She needed him.

She was calling for him.

When Rebel's words finally penetrated his brain, Blackie couldn't get to Angel fast enough. "Let me up, Reb, you made your point."

Rebel stared at him long and hard before grabbing Blackie's forearm and helping him up. "Go to your wife, man. Judd and I will take care of Ramsey."

Blackie nodded and removed his T-shirt. Using it to wipe the blood from his hands and arms, he tossed it away when he was finished and rushed to Angel.

Kneeling on the ground beside her, Blackie nearly got sick as he took in the sight of his wife's battered body. It was a miracle she was still conscious. The first thing he did was run his hands along her to check for broken bones. Relieved not to find any, he relaxed a little.

"Angel?" he said quietly. "Hey, Angel Face, can you hear me?"

She opened her eyes, which were dilated to the point that their greenish-gray color was almost non-existent. "Blackie?"

"Yeah, it's me."

She suddenly squinted and grimaced in pain, then whispered, "Willie..."

"I know. I took care of him." Blackie glanced behind him and saw Judd tying Willie's hands and feet with rope. "He ain't gonna bother you no more."

"Did you ... kill him?" she asked.

"No. And he's one lucky son of a bitch that I didn't," he said, reaching for her. "Let me take care of you."

"Wait..."

"What's wrong?"

"Is everybody okay?"

Blackie had to lean in closer in order to hear what she was saying. "Gypsy and the kids are fine; Ramsey didn't get anywhere near the house."

Without saying a word, she blinked slowly, letting him know she understood.

"Stay with me, Angel, I need you to tell me what hurts."

"Everything," she whispered, and closed her eyes. This time they didn't reopen.

Brushing the hair away from her face, he spoke quietly. "It's okay," he said, unsure of which one of them he was trying to convince. "You ain't gotta talk no more. I'm gonna get you fixed up."

Blackie stared at his wife as she lay in front of him, shocked at the sight of her. Besides the blood that had soaked her entire left arm, her face was filthy, the knuckles

on her right hand were bloody and swollen, and she had an egg-size knot on the back of her head.

Wanting to get Angel inside and cleaned up, Blackie slid his arms under her and lifted her against him. The instant he stood, both his brothers were beside him.

"Gypsy never got a chance to call Sheriff Walton," Rebel told Blackie, "what do you want us to do?"

"I don't want Walton involved in this," he told his youngest brother. "We can get rid of Ramsey ourselves."

Rebel and Judd both looked at Angel's still form lying limp in Blackie's arms, then back to Blackie. "You better take care of Angel, bro," Judd said. "Me and Reb can get rid of Ramsey."

"I should do it. That lousy bastard is my responsibility."

"I think it'd be better for us to take care of it," Rebel said. "You need to see to Angel. She doesn't look too good."

Angel licked her lips. "Thanks for the ... compliment, Rebel," she whispered. "I'll ... be fine."

"Bullshit," Blackie said, "you look like you've been through a meat grinder. Quit tryin' to talk."

Blackie saw the corners of Angel's mouth curve into a slight smile and couldn't believe she was taunting him. Even with all the pain she looked like she was in, she refused to shut up. "I can ... talk if I ... want."

"Right," he said in a sarcastic tone. She may be trying to sound defiant, but to Blackie she sounded more like she was about to pass out.

Torn between taking care of Angel and completing his revenge by disposing of Ramsey, Blackie decided it was a

good idea to let his brothers deal with Angel's ex brother-in-law. As angry as Blackie was, he didn't trust himself not to bash Ramsey's head in once they were alone. "Fine," he told his brothers, "go dump him somewhere. But do it quietly. I don't want Walton gettin' wind of what happened out here."

Rebel raised his fist and lightly touched it to Blackie's. "No worries, big brother, we'll take care of everything."

"Thanks."

"Gypsy's waiting for you in the house."

Gypsy. He'd almost forgotten. "Is she okay?"

"Yeah, just a little shaken up. I think it bothered her more that Angel went after Ramsey and got into it with him than the fact that he threatened the kids."

Blackie nodded. He wondered if Gypsy had told Rebel the whole story, but he'd have to find out later. Angel needed to be taken care of first. "I need to get her settled. Be careful, boys, and be quick."

"We'll be fine. But Ramsey can wait a few minutes." Rebel motioned to where the man was hogtied in the middle of the yard. "We'll help you with Angel first."

Followed by his brothers, Blackie carried Angel into the house where Gypsy was waiting. "Lay her in here, Blackie," his sister-in-law called from the guest bedroom.

Blackie gently laid Angel on the queen-size bed and sat beside her. "I'll be right back, Angel Face. Judd's gonna stay with you a minute, okay?"

Seeing Angel nod lightened Blackie's mood a little, making him feel better about leaving her alone.

Motioning for Rebel and Gypsy to follow, Blackie walked into the living room. "I'm sorry about all this, Gypsy. Are you okay?"

Her eyes filled with tears and she reached for Rebel, who slid his arm around her shoulders. "I'm fine" she cried. "But, oh, Blackie, I'm so sorry. I tried to get Angel to stay in the house, but she refused."

Knowing none of this was Gypsy's fault, Blackie kept his cool. "What the hell happened?"

Supported by Rebel, Gypsy gave a play-by-play account of what went on the entire time the men were gone. "Ramsey threatened to come in here and hurt the kids if Angel didn't go outside. The minute I turned my back, she was gone. After I got Jade and the boys settled in Judd's room, I locked the door behind me and grabbed Rebel's shotgun.

"By the time I got it loaded and ran out the front door, the two of them were rolling around in the yard. All I could think to do was fire a couple shots and hope you guys were close enough to hear them."

Blackie leaned forward and kissed Gypsy's forehead. "I know how much firin' a gun makes you uncomfortable. But you did the right thing."

Stepping forward, Gypsy wrapped her arms around Blackie's waist. He returned the embrace and kissed the top of her head. "I tried to stop her, Blackie, but she wouldn't listen."

"Once Angel has her mind set on somethin', ain't no one gonna change it. It's all right, Gypsy. Angel's tough, she'll be fine."

Gypsy nodded and backed away. "Are you just saying that so I'll stop crying?"

"No. I told you the first time we met that I ain't no liar. Remember? If I say Angel's gonna be fine, then she is. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if she was in there tryin' to talk Judd into lettin' her get out of bed."

"Do you want me to run a bath for her?"

"Hold off on that," Blackie told her. "I need to take a look at her first, make sure she don't need to go to the hospital. I can only imagine what that bullet wound looks like right now."

"Go on and take care of your wife, Blackie," Rebel told him. "Send Judd out here and we'll go take care of everything."

Blackie knew he could count on his brothers to handle things. Rebel was smart, thorough, and would dispose of Ramsey without leaving a trail. "Take Angel's truck," Blackie told him, "the keys are in it."

Rebel nodded, kissed his wife, and walked out the door.

Gypsy touched Blackie's arm and looked up at him. "Isn't there anything I can do?"

"You've already done it, Gypsy. And you did good. Go take care of your kids. I'll call you if I need anything."

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Chapter 26

Back in the bedroom, the lights were off and Angel lay quietly on the bed.

"Hey," Blackie said softly, "are you doin' okay?"

"Don't talk to me like that," Angel warned her husband.

"Like what?"

"Like I'm a little kid you're trying not to scare. I'm fine."

She certainly sounded fine, although he wasn't sure he believed her. "Sorry, Angel Face. How you feelin'?"

"Sore," she groaned. "And I heard you talking about me in the hall. I don't want to go to the hospital."

"That's too damn bad. If I check you out and think you need more help than I can give you, you're goin'. You should see yourself; you look like you lost a fight with a bull."

"I did."

Blackie leaned over Angel, looking closely at her injuries. "I wouldn't say that," he said, trying to distract her by playing with her hair. "Ramsey don't look too good, either. You put a hurtin' on him."

Angel smiled, but Blackie could tell it was painful. "Stay still, I need to get that shirt off you and take a closer look at your arm."

Digging the switchblade out of his back pocket, he opened it and grabbed a hunk of her shirtsleeve with the intention of cutting away the material.

Just as he was about to slice through it, Angel tried to scoot out of his reach and yelled, "Blackie, no!"

He released the shirt immediately and backed away.

"What's wrong?"

"Don't cut it!"

"Why the hell not?"

Angel didn't answer him, only begged, "Blackie, please..."

Blackie was about to tell her he'd brought her extra clothes and she didn't need to worry about not having anything to wear. Then it dawned on him that she was wearing his blue and white flannel shirt. He didn't know why she liked that damn thing so much, but was flattered she was attached to something that belonged to him.

"All right, Angel Face, I won't cut it. But it's gonna hurt like hell when you have to pull that left arm through the sleeve."

"I don't care. Just ... don't cut it."

Blackie shook his head. "I won't if you promise to save your energy and quit talkin'. You said you ain't in pain, but I don't believe you."

"I never said I wasn't in pain," she corrected, "I said I was fine."

"Same thing, smartass."

"No, it isn't. The fact that I'm in pain doesn't mean I need to go to the hospital. It just means that I'm a little sore. I'm fine, Blackie, I swear."

"Don't swear, goddammit, it ain't ladylike. And I decide whether or not you need professional medical attention. Since you ain't exactly in the position to argue, I suggest you shut up and let me doctor you, before I haul your ass to Washington County Hospital just for spite."

Blackie saw her open her mouth like she wanted to say something, but must've thought twice because she closed it again and nodded.

"Let's get that shirt off of you then. You're gonna have to help me. We'll get your good arm out first."

Blackie unbuttoned the shirt and helped Angel slide her right arm out of the sleeve. "You ready to do the left one?"

"I think so."

"Here we go," he warned, "be tough."

Blackie heard Angel's sharp intake of breath the instant he laid a hand on her. Her eyes were shut tight, her entire body rigid, as he rolled her to the right, gathering the shirt out from under her.

By the time all he had left to do was peel the blood-soaked material away from her injury and down her arm, Angel was sweating and breathing heavily.

Fine, my ass. By her attempt to guard her injured arm, he could tell the extreme amount of agony she was in. He wished she'd faint so she wouldn't have to suffer.

"Almost done, Angel Face, just hang on a little longer."

"Ahh!" she screamed as the shirtsleeve slid down her arm, smearing blood all the way to her wrist.

She must really love me to go through this much pain just to save something of mine, Blackie thought. How the hell did I get so lucky?

Lying on the bed in nothing but her bra and filthy jeans, Angel began to shiver. Blackie quickly grabbed one of the blankets Gypsy had left on the bed and covered his wife as best he could, leaving nothing but her left arm exposed.

"No," she protested, "I don't want to get any blood on that."

"It's okay," he reassured her. "Gypsy left this out for me to use. We can wash it later."

Still breathing heavily, Angel closed her eyes and looked like she was trying to relax. Knowing now would be a good time to check out her arm, Blackie leaned in to get a closer look.

After wiping some of the blood away with a towel, he noticed that the wound had been torn open. It looked much worse than it had the day before, and he was afraid there was more damage than he knew how to repair.

"I don't know, Angel Face, this looks bad."

"It's fine, Blackie. Please," she begged, "don't take me to the hospital."

Blackie sighed in exasperation. "Will you please tell me what the hell you got against goin' to the damn hospital? They help people there, you know."

"I don't care. I'm not going and you can't make me."

"Oh, that's real fuckin' mature."

"Ahem," Gypsy cleared her throat and knocked lightly on the door. "You two sound like a couple of bickering kids. Can I come in?"

"Sure," Blackie and Angel said in unison. Staring each other down, neither one bothered to look at Gypsy as she entered the room.

"I can hear you all the way down the hall," she told Blackie, "so I thought I'd come in and see if you needed any help."

Blackie finally turned to her. "No help needed, Gypsy, but thanks."

Gypsy bent over and collected the bloody clothes and towels and threw them down the laundry chute. "Well then, can I borrow you for a second?" she asked Blackie. "I need you to reach something for me in the kitchen."

"I—"

"Go," Angel instructed him. "I'm fine."

When they reached the kitchen, Blackie crossed his arms in front of his chest and cocked an eyebrow. "I helped remodel this entire house, and know for a fact that everything you cook with is on the low shelves. The only thing you can't reach in this kitchen, Gypsy, is the ceilin'. What gives?"

"I know Angel doesn't want to go to the hospital, but I saw her arm. What are you going to do, Blackie? You're not a doctor. You want me to call Frank?"

"I don't need a doctor. Hell, I don't even need Frank. I can handle this myself. I'll clean her up and take care of what I can. If it still looks as bad once I wash away the rest of the blood, then I'll worry about what to do."

"Blackie—"

"It'll be fine, Gypsy. The wound is bad, but I've seen worse. Ain't nothin' else on Angel is hurt except her pride. Even though she'll be sore for a while, but she'll be okay."

Gypsy looked at him skeptically but didn't protest. "I'm going to go downstairs and throw in a load of laundry. Promise to holler if you need me?"

"I promise," he said, and headed back to his wife.

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Chapter 27

Angel was finally sleeping.

Leaning back in a chair with his feet propped up on the edge of the bed, Blackie watched her closely.

It had taken a long time to get Angel settled down and dressed after he'd cleaned and re-bandaged her wound. He'd been as gentle as he could, but she'd been in a lot more pain than she let on. And just as he was finishing, when she couldn't hold her tears at bay any longer, she started to cry.

Normally, Blackie ran in the opposite direction of female tears. But that thought hadn't even occurred to him when Angel fell apart. She'd been through hell and had handled everything better than most men he knew. Angel deserved to have a good cry, and he wanted to be the one to comfort her.

After gently gathering her in his arms, he held her close until the tears gave way to an occasional sob or hiccough. She eventually fell asleep, and he gently laid her down, covered her with a blanket, and settled into the chair to watch over her.

"She's been through a lot the past couple days."

Blackie had heard Rebel enter the room, knew his youngest brother stood behind him, but didn't turn around. "She's tough," he said, "she'll be fine."

"But will you?"

Blackie chuckled quietly. Rebel knew him well. "I'll be fine, too, little brother."

After a few silent moments, Blackie rose from the chair and crossed the room. "Let's let her get some rest," he told Rebel, and quietly closed the bedroom door.

Blackie settled onto the sofa in the living room while Rebel walked into the kitchen. "You want a bowl of chili?"

"Nah," Blackie called, "but I'll take a beer if you got one."

Rebel walked into the living room, handed Blackie a beer, and sat in a chair. "Angel's changed you. Ever since you married her, you've been a different man. I haven't seen the wild, reckless Blackie in weeks."

Blackie cracked open his beer and took a long drink. "I ain't got time to be wild and reckless. I've been too busy tryin'—and failin'—to keep my wife outta trouble. Every time I turn around, Angel's fightin', shootin' at someone, or gettin' shot at.

"Christ, I gotta stay two steps behind her just to make sure she don't kill no one, or vice versa. I've been in more fights since I started workin' at the bar than I have in the four years I've been out of prison. I've also been stitched up, and violated my parole—twice."

Rebel set his beer on an end table and turned his full attention to Blackie. "Twice?"

"It ain't that big of a deal, Reb. The first time I fired a gun. The second time, I was removin' Digger's own personal arsenal from the bar, so that the next time Angel takes aim at a customer, Sheriff Walton don't toss her ass in jail for firin' a gun registered to someone else."

Blackie could almost feel Rebel's laughter when he said, "Is that all?"

"No, as a matter of fact, that ain't all. Don't forget that I've spent a good amount of time at the police station and had to dig a bullet out of my wife's shoulder."

It was clear to Blackie that he wasn't going to get any sympathy from his brother. Angel was a handful, just as Blackie himself had always been. "I know what you're thinkin' over there and you ain't gotta be so smug about it."

Rebel grinned. "I didn't say a word."

"You didn't have to. You're thinkin' that this is my payback for causin' trouble all these years. That now it's my turn to do for someone else what you done for me a hundred times."

"Is that what I was thinkin'?"

Blackie rolled his eyes. "She ain't got no fear, Rebel. None. It don't matter how many people are harassin' her, it could be one or ten. She'd take them all on and go down fightin'. I realized today that even though I've known Angel all her life, I ain't really ever known her. Digger always handled all the trouble at the bar. I never saw Angel do anything other than serve drinks and make nice with the customers."

Rebel looked confused. "What are you trying to say?"

"Nothin'. Just that I'm surprised she's so ... aggressive. That girl's a magnet for trouble, little brother. She's not at all what I expected."

"It's a little like looking in the mirror, huh?"

Rebel was right. "Yeah."

Blackie saw a lot of himself in Angel. The only difference between them was that nobody ever bothered Blackie. Trouble used to be exciting for him; most of the time he went looking for it.

Angel, on the other hand, was doing what she had to. When people attacked her, she fought back. It was the only way she knew how to survive. Unfortunately for her, she was usually either overpowered or outnumbered.

But not anymore.

She was his wife now, and he would make damn sure everyone knew that if they messed with Angel, they were going to have to suffer the consequences of dealing with him.

Blackie cleared his throat and changed the subject. "She's also got this feminine side she can turn on and off like a damn switch."

Rebel smirked. "Keeping you on your toes, is she?"

"You're goddamn right she is! I don't know how Digger did it, man, I really don't."

"He did it because he loved her, Blackie. And deny it all you want, but you're doing it for the exact same reason."

"I ain't denyin' nothin', little brother."

Rebel lifted a brow, but rather than have to explain himself, Blackie changed the subject again. "What'd you two do with Ramsey?"

"Judd and I drove him back to where he'd stashed his truck, beat on him for a few minutes, then threatened to end his life if he ever showed his face in Hagerstown again. When he was able to drive, we followed him down Route 70 to the county line. He was long gone before we headed back. I don't think you'll be having anymore trouble from Willie or his family."

"Thanks, man," Blackie said quietly.

Rebel stopped eating and set his bowl of chili on the coffee table. "What's wrong?" he asked suspiciously, "why don't you look happy?"

Blackie shook his head. "Somethin' still ain't right. Ramsey may have been one problem, but he ain't the only problem."

"Meaning?"

"Meanin' our trouble ain't over, Rebel. It's just beginnin'."

"How so?"

"I ain't sure yet, but a man like me don't spend a total of almost thirteen years in prison without developin' some kind of sixth sense. Trouble's comin', little brother, I can feel it."

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Chapter 28

Three days after her fight with Willie Ramsey, Angel announced that she was ready to go back to work.

One week after that, Blackie finally agreed to let her. But there was a catch.

"Why am I even listening to you?" Angel shouted. She backed her chair away from the kitchen table and began pacing back and forth between the stove and refrigerator. "I'm a grown woman, Blackie! I don't need your permission to leave the house and I don't need a babysitter at work!

"What's with you, anyway?" She stopped pacing, rested her hands on the back of a chair, and stared at him. "It's been ten days since Willie left town and there haven't been any other problems. Why are you still acting like I need a bodyguard?"

From his seat at the table, Blackie casually dragged on a cigarette and released the smoke. "I stay with you at the bar, Angel Face, or you stay home."

Refusing to give in, Angel continued to argue. "You work full-time at the garage, Blackie, not the bar. Rebel needs you."

"I'm on vacation."

"But—"

"You heard my offer," he said coldly, "take it or leave it."

Angel gave up. She knew by the tone of his voice that he wasn't going to change his mind no matter what she said. If

she wanted to go to work, which she did, she'd have to do it with Blackie watching over her.

And while the woman in her secretly loved the fact that her husband was being a bit overprotective, Angel knew Blackie too well. There was a reason for his unwillingness to allow her to go to work alone. But what was it, and why wouldn't he tell her?

Reclaiming her seat, she leaned forward and rested her chin in the palm of her left hand. "I'll take it."

Blackie glanced at her; the most dangerous smile she'd ever seen appearing on his face. "Smart girl," he said, and pushed his chair away from the table.

"Wait!" she called before he stood. "Can you at least tell me what's going on? Why do you need to watch over me? Did something happen?"

"Not yet," he said, answering only the last of her three questions. "But my gut tells me trouble's comin'. And I ain't takin' no chances with you this time."

Angel had come to appreciate that Blackie's gut feelings were usually dead on. If he felt that something bad was going to happen, then it would. It was only a matter of time.

Shivering as she thought of what could possibly happen next; the fight left Angel as quickly as it had taken root. Suddenly, the only thing she wanted was for Blackie to hold her close. No matter what was going on around her, Angel always felt safe in his arms. He shielded her and kept away the danger that threatened them both.

As if he knew exactly what she was thinking, he stood and held out his hand. "Come on, Angel Face," he said, his voice

no longer laced with domination and authority, "let's go to bed."

Grasping his hand, Angel gladly went to him. She wrapped her hands around his waist and rested her head against his chest, allowing him to guide her into the bedroom they now shared.

There was nothing slow or sensual about their sex that night. They claimed each other more out of need—a need to know that neither of them was alone—than desire. Both releases came quickly, and they collapsed in a heap together, Angel engulfed in the safety of Blackie's arms.

Exactly where she wanted ... no, needed ... to be.

* * * *

The sun had barely begun to rise when the phone rang.

Lying against Blackie, her head resting just below his chin, Angel's entire body moved with him when he reached over to answer it. "Hello?"

On the verge of falling back to sleep, the alarm in Blackie's voice when he said an abrupt, "What?" brought Angel fully awake. She moved away from him and sat up, rubbing her eyes. Remaining silent, she stared at her husband until he said, "We'll be there by nine," and hung up the phone.

Angel's heart fell when Blackie turned to her. "What is it?" she asked, surprised by the unmistakable panic in her voice. "Just tell me, Blackie. I know it's bad news."

Before saying a word, Blackie threw back the covers and got out of bed. He pulled on the blue jeans he'd discarded the night before, walked around to Angel's side of the bed, and

sat on the edge. "That was Warden Davis from the prison," he said flatly.

Angel broke into a cold sweat and her heart began pounding violently against her chest. The roar was deafening. "What'd he want?"

When he looked as if he was at a loss for words, Angel urged him to continue. "Blackie?"

Raking a hand through his hair, Blackie sighed deeply. "There was a fight last night, Angel."

"Digger?"

"He's dead," Blackie said flatly.

Angel's hand flew to her mouth and she jumped out of bed, making it to the bathroom just in time to lift the toilet seat. Fully aware that Blackie watched from the doorway, bile burned her throat as she wretched over and over. Exhausted, she flushed the toilet and shut the lid, slumping over the cool porcelain.

Not surprised to feel a pair of strong hands lift her off the floor, Angel allowed Blackie to carry her back to the bedroom. When he deposited her on the bed, she crossed her legs, gathered a pillow into her lap, and hugged it for comfort. She waited until Blackie sat down in a wooden chair across the room, then focused on his royal blue eyes, looking into their depths, searching for an explanation.

"I don't understand," she told him, "that's a minimum security prison. They don't have violent criminals there! How could this happen?"

Leaving his chair, Blackie sat next to Angel again and gave her cheek a single caress. "Minimum security or not, Angel,

it's still a prison. And violent or not, the inmates are still criminals."

"But I've never heard of anyone dying in that place."

"Just because you ain't heard about it, don't mean it ain't happened."

Her temper suddenly flaring, Angel tossed her pillow at Blackie. "Just whose side are you on, anyway?"

He angrily set the pillow aside. "There ain't no sides here, Angel," he said, his voice rising with each word. "Just facts."

She jumped out of bed and paced back and forth. "But why would someone want to kill my brother?"

"There're a million reasons why men in prison kill each other, Angel. Anger, jealousy, revenge, hell, it could've even been a gang initiation. We'll probably never know."

The deadly tone of Blackie's voice when he said the word 'gang' caused Angel to stop short. Her head snapped up and, rooted to her spot on the floor, she stole a glance at him, wondering briefly if committing murder was how he'd earned his gang colors at such a young age.

"Don't ask," he warned her, and she wondered again how he always seemed to know what she was thinking. "I wouldn't tell you anyway."

"Why not?"

"I ain't ridden with the Renegades in a long time, Angel. All that shit is in the past."

"But don't you still have friends in the gang? Maybe someone knows something."

"No."

"But, Blackie—"

"I said no!"

The force with which he yelled at her caused Angel to jump. Why was he suddenly so angry? Did he know something she didn't? "Is there something you're not telling me?"

Appearing frustrated, Blackie took a deep breath and reached for the pack of cigarettes lying on the dresser. "Like what, Angel?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. You just don't seem upset."

"I don't seem upset?" he said. "Ten minutes ago, the prison warden called and told us that your brother died last night. And after takin' just a few minutes to puke your guts up, you're standin' here arguin' with me instead of cryin' like a normal female. What the hell is that all about?"

"I'm not a crier, Blackie," she said in her own defense, "you know that! But that doesn't mean I'm not upset!"

"Maybe it does, maybe it doesn't."

"Why are you being mean? I know you know something, Blackie, and I want you to tell me!"

"I ain't bein' mean, Angel, and I don't know a goddamn thing! I've known about Digger just as long as you have. I answered the phone, remember?"

She remembered. "But you're a smart man, Blackie, and I'm not stupid. You probably started running different scenarios through your mind the instant the warden told you what happened. You have your suspicions about what happened, I know it!"

Blackie stood and moved toward her, but she stepped forward, placed both hands on his chest, and pushed him

away. "Get away from me!" She wasn't strong enough to make him lose his balance, but he stayed back, watching her. "If you won't tell me what you think is going on, I'll just call the warden and ask him myself!"

"He doesn't want you to call him!" Blackie yelled as she went for the phone. "We're supposed to meet him in his office at nine o'clock. You need to identify Digger's body."

Angel stopped immediately and stood deathly still. The phrase 'Identify Digger's body' hit her with such force that she found it hard to breathe. Her brother, her last living relative, was gone. Digger was dead, and he was never coming back.

Suddenly feeling lightheaded, Angel found it hard to keep her balance as the room began to spin. Reaching out, she groped for something, anything to keep her swaying body steady. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Blackie moving toward her in slow motion. She reached for him, but he was suddenly gone. "Blackie?" she said, unable to recognize her own voice.

But he didn't answer. Or did he? No longer able to hear anything other than the pounding of her heart, Angel became disorientated and scared.

Feeling weightless, almost as if she were floating, Angel reached for the bed and tried to lie down, but her body betrayed her by refusing to move.

Then, for the first time in her life, Angel fainted.

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Chapter 29

Two weeks after his death, Digger Shelby was finally laid to rest.

Standing in the dark shadows that had overtaken the cemetery, Blackie remained silent as he watched Angel lying on her right side next to her brother's grave. She'd been there for hours, stretched out on the ground in a black dress she'd borrowed from Gypsy, staring at the freshly turned earth. She hadn't made any noise, but Blackie could see by the slow rise and fall of her chest that she was, at least, still breathing.

Ignoring his need for nicotine, Blackie settled for just knowing there was a fresh, unopened pack of Marlboro's waiting for him on the front seat of Angel's pickup truck. It wouldn't be long before he was able to curb his craving. The light mist that had been falling since the burial service earlier that afternoon was now a cold, steady rain, sure to become a heavy, wet snowfall by later that evening.

It was time to go.

Using oversized, rough and weathered hands to sweep his soaked, long, dark brown locks away from his face, Blackie readied himself. Taking a deep breath, he stepped out of the shadows and walked toward the grave, purposely making enough noise for Angel to hear him approaching.

She didn't move when he reached her, didn't protest when he knelt down and brushed away the wet hair that was matted to her face.

"Angel?"

No answer.

She just lay unmoving, barely breathing, staring at her brother's final resting place.

"I ain't gonna let you stay out here all night, Angel Face. You'll freeze to death." Which is probably exactly what you want.

Her only response was a deep, shuddering breath.

Reaching out, Blackie gently touched her shoulder and rolled her onto her back. Her entire right side was caked in mud, her dress drenched. Sliding large, burly arms under her, he lifted Angel and brought her body toward him. Bracing her securely against his broad chest, Blackie straightened and stood to his full, six-foot seven-inch height.

He had no idea what to say to her as he trudged through the thick muck caused by rain falling where there was too much dirt, and not enough grass.

Blackie reached the truck—the lone vehicle left in the large gravel parking lot—just as the rain began to fall harder. Shifting Angel so that her weight was being supported by his left arm, he used his right hand to open the passenger side door.

"In you go," he said in the quiet, soft voice he usually reserved for his niece, Jade.

Blackie backed away once he had her settled into the seat. Ready to slam the door, he froze when she turned her head and gazed at him.

When Angel suddenly whispered, "Blackie," he didn't need to see her trembling hands or the unshed tears in her now haunted, greenish-gray eyes, to know what was coming next.

Blackie had just enough time to open his arms before she jumped out of the truck and launched herself at him. He caught her in a bear hug, all two hundred and ninety pounds of his enormous body engulfing her petite frame.

Angel's sobs were silent but gut wrenching, wracking her body with an emotional violence Blackie couldn't begin to understand. He didn't know exactly how she felt, but knew that if they hadn't already been soaked, her tears would have nearly drowned them both.

These were the first tears Angel had shed since her brother's death. Blackie had never been an emotional person, but he knew it was good for Angel to cry.

Keeping her feelings bottled up the past two weeks had changed her. She'd been working sixteen hour days; undoubtedly trying to avoid dealing with the loss of her brother. There were dark circles under her eyes from lack of sleep, and he couldn't remember seeing her eat anything other than a candy bar or two and a couple of bowls of cereal since Digger died.

The worst part was that Angel had pulled away from him. They were still sleeping in the same bed, but she hadn't sought solace in his arms since the morning she'd fainted. She no longer smiled, and hadn't said more than a few words to anyone, including the customers at the bar.

The warden and his prison officials never did figure out who was responsible for Digger's death, which was only making things worse for Angel.

Blackie knew some of her anger was directed at him. She thought he knew who killed Digger, and while he did have his suspicions, they just weren't enough to go on. Blackie had learned his lesson about being impulsive and striking before he went in for the kill.

He wouldn't make that mistake again.

Blackie was doing what he could to ease Angel's pain. And although she wasn't responding and hadn't snapped out of it, he would keep trying. The truth was—Blackie missed her.

"Angel?" he said when she finally stilled. "It ain't gettin' no drier out here. Let's get you home."

Wordlessly, Angel unlatched her arms from around Blackie's waist and climbed back into the passenger seat. Satisfied her breakdown was over, Blackie closed the door and walked around to the driver's side.

With the exception of Angel's quiet sobs, the ten-minute ride home was silent.

* * * *

Two weeks after the funeral, Angel received a notice stating that the government was seizing Digger's assets, which included both his motorcycle and the bar, to pay off his debt.

After reading the letter, she crumpled it up, threw it in the trash, and told Blackie she was finished working at the bar.

"What the hell do you mean you're finished? That's your business, Angel, your responsibility!"

"Not anymore it's not. You read the letter, Blackie. It belongs to the government now."

"Not until January first! That's still a month away. Any profit the bar makes between now and then is yours to keep."

"Well, I don't want any of the money!" she shouted. "And I don't want to go to the bar. As far as I'm concerned, it doesn't exist anymore. I don't care if the damn thing burns to the ground. If you want to go in and work, fine. But I'm finished. I quit."

Blackie threw up his hands in exasperation. "You want to quit, well that's fuckin' fine with me, girl! I don't need the headaches of tryin' to keep the peace, and I'm too fuckin' old to be fightin' with obnoxious drunks every goddamn night! I'm tired of sweaty old men tryin' to put their hands all over my wife, too. You not workin' at the bar is doin' me a huge favor," he hollered, "thanks a lot!"

Swallowing hard, Blackie turned away from Angel and tried to put a rein on his temper. He could feel his blood boiling, the need to hit something so overwhelming that he made a fist and let it fly. "Ahh!"

Five punches in quick succession resulted in five gaping holes in the wall of Angel's old bedroom. Knowing he was lucky he hadn't hit a stud—which probably would've broken his hand—Blackie kicked the lower part of the wall with his steel toe booted foot, leaving holes down near the base moulding as well.

Feeling a little less agitated, he turned and stormed out of the room.

Unfortunately for them both, Angel followed him.

"Where are you going?" she demanded.

Blackie didn't stop until he was in the kitchen. He didn't want to talk to her, didn't even want to look at her. He loved Angel, but at that moment, he also wanted to strangle her. Struggling to keep the promise he'd made not to raise a hand to her, not to hurt her, he yelled, "None of your goddamn business!" grabbed his keys off the table, and headed for the front door.

"Blackie, stop! Please!"

Unable to ignore the desperation in her plea, Blackie stopped with his hand on the knob. "What?"

Not saying a word, she stared at him.

"I don't understand you, Angel. Next to Gypsy, you got the biggest mouth of any female I ever met. You never used to give up on anything and didn't take shit off no one. Then your brother dies, and you slink off into a hole and quit livin'. You're lettin' them win, Angel, and it's hard as hell for me to sit back and watch it happen."

"Who, Blackie?" she shouted. "Who am I letting win?"

"Whoever's responsible for Digger's death."

Angel put her hands on her hips and took a step toward Blackie. Her gaze darkened. "And just who the hell is that?"

"We've already been over this, Angel!"

"Well, I don't believe you! I still think you know something!"

"I don't give a fuck whether you believe me or not! I don't know who killed your brother! And even if I did, I sure as hell wouldn't tell you right now. Have you been listenin' to yourself? You sound like a goddamn broken record. 'Who killed my brother, Blackie? Who killed my brother? I know you know!' You're so stressed out that you're makin' yourself sick!"

"What?"

"That's right, Angel, I've heard you in the bathroom throwin' up the past couple days."

"I'm just stressed out! I miss my brother!"

"Then stop! All this shit ain't doin' you no good. Eventually, you're gonna drive yourself crazy!"

The hurt look that came over Angel's face broke Blackie's heart. He understood that she desperately wanted to know who murdered Digger, and he knew she wouldn't feel better until she had some kind of closure.

There was a lot about both Blackie and Digger's pasts that Angel knew nothing about. Blackie'd had his suspicions about what happened to Digger from the moment the warden told him the man was dead. He pushed them to the back of his mind, though, and tried to forget about them. But for Angel's sake, he could no longer do that.

Bending down, he leaned in and kissed her forehead, turned, and walked out the door.

He had a lot of thinking to do.

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Chapter 30

When Blackie rolled in at five-thirty the next morning, Angel didn't even care where he'd been, she was just glad he was safe. Their argument the night before had upset her more than she realized. Unable to sleep, she'd tossed and turned all night waiting for him to come home.

Angel knew he'd probably been at the garage sleeping in his old apartment. But she would've given anything for him to be in bed next to her, holding her in his arms. It had been two weeks since the last time they'd had sex, and she missed sharing that closeness with him.

Spending the night awake and alone, Angel had had a lot of time to think. She wasn't sure anymore that Blackie knew who had her brother killed, but she was sure she knew.

Angel climbed out of bed and walked into the hall when she heard the front door open. By the time she made it to the living room, Blackie was in front of the coat rack removing his leather jacket.

"I think Willie had something to do with Digger's murder, Blackie."

He threw back his head and shook it, as if trying to wake himself up. "Christ, Angel. It's five-thirty in the fuckin' mornin' and I ain't slept more than two hours since yesterday. Havin' this conversation ain't how I want to start my day. And it wasn't Ramsey."

Blackie walked down the hall and into the bedroom they shared. Angel followed him and stood in the doorway as he

pulled a clean pair of jeans out of his drawer. "How do you know?"

"Because I just do!"

Angel felt like screaming. She was positive her ex brother-in-law had something to do with Digger's death and wanted him to pay for it. "Why not? He had the perfect motive. I took his brother's life, so he took mine. It makes sense to me."

"I know it does, Angel," he said sympathetically.

"Then why won't you help me?"

"Because we ain't got nothin' to go on, goddammit! Willie Ramsey and his bunch may have had a motive, but they didn't have the means. They're smalltime thugs, Angel, nothin' more. Whoever killed your brother had to have had connections inside the prison in order to have gotten away with it."

Angel stared at him suspiciously. "Then ... you do know something."

He shook his head. "I don't know a damn thing about Digger's murder. But I do know that goin' after the wrong people sure as hell ain't gonna do us no good. Jumpin' to conclusions fucked me over in the past and I ain't gonna make the same mistake twice!"

Because she didn't have a good comeback, Angel flashed Blackie a look she knew would get him riled, then turned her back on him and fled the bedroom.

"Hey!" he called, and took off after her.

When he caught up to her in the kitchen, Blackie grabbed hold of her arm and spun her around until they were face to face. "Don't you dare walk away from me, Angel! You've been

followin' me around for two days draggin' me into a conversation I'm sick to death of havin'! You started this up again this mornin' and I'll be goddamned if I'm gonna let you walk away before we're finished!"

She pulled her arm from his grasp and stepped backward. "I do as I please, Blackie McCassey. You don't own me."

Staring at her, Blackie began to breathe heavily. When Angel saw the fire of rage ignite in her husband's eyes, saw his hands clench into fists and relax several times, she knew she'd gone too far.

Before they'd gotten married, Blackie had sworn he'd never raise a hand to her, but now she didn't know if he would be able to keep that promise. She knew he'd come close to hitting her last night, and was thankful he'd taken his fury out on the wall instead. Blackie was the strongest man she'd ever seen, and outweighed her by over a hundred and fifty pounds. If he chose to unleash his anger on her, there would be no stopping him.

Relief flooded through her when he suddenly turned and left the room. But her heart fell seconds later when she heard the roar of the tow truck's diesel engine.

For the first time since they'd gotten married, Blackie left for work without saying goodbye. As mad as she was at him for not agreeing with her about the Ramsey's, she was heartbroken that he'd left without a word.

I've lost him. I've lost everything.

Returning to her old bedroom, Angel flopped down onto the bed and stared at the ceiling. She wanted to cry, wanted to scream and punch holes in the wall the way Blackie had

done the night before. But she just couldn't bring herself to let go of her anger. Holding onto it gave her comfort. It kept her from feeling empty inside.

Instead, she went over every conversation she'd had with Blackie in the past month. He didn't think the Ramsey's were to blame for Digger's death, but she disagreed. When she killed Marshall, Willie and his father had sworn they'd get revenge.

She knew they had to be responsible.

Still, something Blackie had said the night before kept replaying in her mind, "You sound like a broken record, Angel, you're driving yourself crazy."

Was Blackie right? Was she obsessed? Was she going crazy? She had been grieving deeply for her brother, but had it really affected her that much?

Angel gave her head a slight shake to clear it, and by the time sunlight streamed in through the open curtains, she'd come up with a plan. She was sure the Ramsey's were involved, and wasn't going to let them get away with what they'd done.

Since Blackie had a no tolerance policy when it came to women who betrayed him, Angel figured he'd probably be filing for divorce once he found out what she was doing. She couldn't blame him; she hadn't exactly been a good wife. She loved him, but one would never know it by the way she'd treated him not only that morning, but in the past month. He'd been nothing but good to her, and she'd turned on him, refusing to believe him.

Figuring she'd lost the last thing in her life that meant anything, Angel didn't think she had anything to lose by going after Willie Ramsey. Her brother was gone, Blackie was gone, and soon the bar would be gone.

There was no doubt in her mind that she'd probably die trying to avenge Digger. Even if she was able to bring down Willie, and possibly his father, too, there were a lot of men working on the Ramsey's chicken farm. Angel was a good shot, but she'd never be able to hold them all off.

Surprisingly, the thought of dying didn't bother her as much as she thought it would. There wasn't anyone left that would give a damn about what happened to her, anyway.

Rising from the bed, Angel dressed in a lined pair of jeans, two long underwear shirts, and a black sweatshirt. She grabbed her backpack from the closet and went to the basement, where she stuffed both of Digger's .38 Specials and three boxes of ammunition inside.

Racing up the stairs, she stopped briefly in the mudroom where she pulled on her work boots, making sure to tie them tight. Before walking out the door, Angel removed Blackie's blue and white flannel shirt from the hook it'd been hanging on since Gypsy had washed and returned it to her. No matter how Blackie felt about her, Angel loved him more than anything. And if she couldn't have her husband by her side for what might be the last few hours of her life, the shirt that still smelled like him, despite being washed, was the next best thing.

Twenty minutes into her journey to southern Maryland, Angel's truck broke down. Luckily, she managed to pull to the

side of the road. Desperate to get where she was going, Angel decided not to bother looking under the hood. She didn't have time to work on the engine, and certainly didn't want to do it on the side of the highway.

Opening the door, Angel jumped out. Before she could reach behind the seat and grab her backpack, a car rounded the corner and came to a stop behind her truck...

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Chapter 31

Blackie was having such a hard time getting the fight he'd had with Angel out of his mind, that in the five hours he'd been at work, he hadn't accomplished a damn thing.

"What's with you today?" Rebel asked when Blackie had finally given up trying to work and sat down for a smoke break.

"You don't want to know."

"Try me, big brother. You look like you're torn between crying and wanting to kill somebody."

Knowing there was probably no one else capable of understanding what he was going through, Blackie told Rebel everything. "It's gnawin' at my insides that I can't convince Angel to forget about the Ramsey's."

"Do you know for sure that they weren't involved?"

"No, but I feel it. That family is smalltime, Rebel. They ain't got the power or connections to pull off a hit in prison without gettin' caught."

"Who do you think is responsible?"

Blackie turned to his brother. "This has gang initiation written all over it. I did some askin' around, though, and the gang activity in that facility is almost non-existent."

"But it is possible, right? It could've been gang related."

"Anything's possible."

"You think any of the Renegades were involved?"

Blackie shook his head. "I don't know, man."

"Digger was a member, wasn't he?"

"No, he just hung out with us every once in a while. He did do a lot of drug distribution and money launderin' for King, the leader of the Renegades durin' the seventies. But I never heard of him pissin' anybody off; at least not enough to where they'd want him dead."

"What about Angel," Rebel asked. "What are you going to do about her?"

"I don't know. She ain't herself no more, Rebel. Losin' Digger really affected her and she ain't handlin' it too good. She worked the two weeks before we buried him, and has been workin' the past two since the funeral. Then yesterday, she got a letter from the IRS sayin' they're sellin' both Digger's bike and the bar at auction to collect on his debt. So she quit. Just like that, she swears she don't give a damn about the place and don't care if it burns to the ground.

"She's been obsessin' over gettin' back at the Ramsey's so much that she's been makin' herself sick."

"Jesus, Blackie, maybe someone else should try and talk to her."

Blackie shook his head. "It won't do no good. She's convinced Digger's dead because the Ramsey's were gettin' back at her for killin' Marshall. I've tried tellin' her otherwise, but she ain't listenin'. When it first happened, I made the mistake of mentionin' that it could've been gang related. She wanted me to nose around and get in touch with some of the Renegades to see if they knew anything."

"But you didn't want to do that?"

"It wouldn't have been a good idea."

Rebel looked at Blackie with furrowed brows. "Why not? I thought you retired on good terms."

"Good terms with some," Blackie said, "not so good with others. It's a long story. One I ain't in the mood to get into."

"Just promise me something, will you?"

"What's that?"

"Let one of us know if you need help." Rebel raised his fist in the air, holding it out to Blackie. "Preferably before your stubborn ass is in so much fucking trouble we need shovels to dig you out."

Blackie laughed and touched Rebel's fist with his own.

"No worries," Rebel told him.

"No worries, little brother. Now I gotta get back to work before the boss fires me."

An hour later, Rebel stepped out of Rose's office and yelled, "Blackie! Phone!"

Without bothering to crawl out from underneath the car he was working on, Blackie hollered, "Take a message!"

Seconds later, Rebel crouched beside the car and stuck his head near Blackie's. "You better take it, man, it's Sheriff Walton. Digger's bar is on fire and they can't get in touch with Angel."

Blackie rolled out from underneath the car and sprinted to the office. He spoke briefly to the sheriff, who confirmed what Rebel had told him. By the time he hung up, Rebel was standing beside him.

"Well?"

Blackie unzipped his navy blue mechanics coveralls and stepped out of them. After removing the pack of cigarettes

from the side pocket, he rolled them in his left shirtsleeve and tossed the coveralls into the laundry bucket. "He told me exactly what he told you. The bar is completely engulfed in flames; it just went to three alarms. They called the house, but Angel didn't answer, so they called me. I need to get down there."

"You want me to go with you?"

Blackie stared at his youngest brother for a moment. Every time Blackie had needed something, anything, Rebel had always been there. He trusted Rebel with his life; God knows he'd saved it enough times.

"No, but can you go by the house and try to find Angel? I know she said she didn't care if the bar burned to the ground, but she didn't set the fire, Reb. She wouldn't do that. Digger built that place from the ground up. Angel was raised there and it means a lot to her. She ain't tellin' the truth when she says she don't care about it no more."

"It never even crossed my mind that she started the fire, man. I know she wouldn't do something like that."

Considering her state of mind, Blackie hoped Rebel was right. He sure as hell didn't want Angel going to prison for arson.

"Just do me a favor," Blackie said. "If she is home, try to get her to come back to the garage with you. I'll meet you both back here when I'm done dealin' with the cops, or the fire marshal, or whoever the hell handles this shit."

"You got it. Judd's out with the tow truck, but you can take my pickup. I'll borrow Kane's."

The brothers shook hands and left the garage together, driving off in different directions.

Neither one knew exactly what to expect when they reached their destinations; neither one prepared for what they were about to discover.

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Chapter 32

There hadn't been anyone home at Blackie and Angel's when Rebel got there, and since Angel's truck was gone, he didn't know what to think. Deciding it was best to just go to the garage and wait for Blackie, Rebel headed back to the center of town.

When he returned to the garage a little over an hour after he left, Judd pulled in right behind him towing Angel's truck.

"Where's Angel?" Rebel asked his brother.

Judd opened the door and jumped out. "I don't know, bro. I haven't seen her. I found her pickup out on Route 70 about fifteen miles east of here. It was sitting on the side of the road, didn't have the hood up or anything."

"What's wrong with it?"

"Nothing much, just a loose coil wire. From the knowledge Blackie says she has about engines, that's something she would've noticed immediately and fixed herself."

Rebel walked past Judd and peaked inside Angel's truck. "Did you look through it?"

"Damn right I looked through it. But I had to break in. The windows were up and the doors were locked." Judd dug into his front pocket. "I found these," he said, holding Angel's keys in the air. "And this." Judd produced a red and white feather and handed it to his brother.

"Where the hell did that come from?"

"You got me. It was on the seat."

"Anything else?"

Judd nodded somberly. He opened the door of the tow truck, reached inside, and pulled out Angel's backpack.

Warning bells went off immediately, and Rebel cringed as he stared at the bag. "I'm almost afraid to ask what's inside that."

Judd raised his brows and nodded. "You should be. Angel was packin', bro. There's two .38 Specials and a bunch of ammo in here."

"Damn! Where the hell was she headed?"

"I don't know, but she was after something. Or someone."

Rebel didn't want to ask his next question, but knew it was best to gather all the information they could before Blackie got back. He and Judd were going to need answers for the questions their older brother would fire at them. "Was there any sign of a struggle?"

Judd shook his head. "Nope. Not inside the truck or out. No hair, no blood, nothing. Not even a single rock or clump of dirt on the ground had been disturbed. It's like she just vanished."

Rebel ran a hand through his hair and took a deep breath. Reaching into the side pocket of his coveralls, he pulled out a pack of cigarettes. After lighting one, he offered the pack to Judd and leaned against the driver's door of the tow truck. "We got trouble, Judd, big trouble."

"I know. I'm surprised Blackie didn't come flying out here when he saw me pull in."

"He's not here."

"Why not? Where is he?"

Rebel spent the next ten minutes telling Judd everything Blackie said had been going on with Angel the past month. When he mentioned where Blackie had gone, Judd looked shocked.

"Digger's is on fire? Does Blackie think Angel did it?"

"He says no, but I'm not sure he knows what to think. All I know is that it's going to take all seven of us to hold him down and make him listen to reason once he finds out Angel's gone."

"Well, I'm not looking forward to that. How long you think we're going to have to wait for him to get here?"

Rebel spotted his truck on the main road. "Not long, here he comes now."

"Oh, shit."

"Toss Angel's bag into the tow truck then go inside and let the boys know what's going on," Rebel instructed. "Do something with that feather, too, until we can figure out where it came from. And do it fast. It won't take Blackie long to figure out something's wrong."

Judd jumped up and sprinted into the garage.

Rooted to his spot against the tow truck, Rebel watched Blackie park the pickup. When he got out, the look on his face was a combination of worry, fear, and rage. Moving his hand slightly, Rebel gave the signal, letting his brother, uncles, and cousins know it was time.

On cue, Judd, Frank, Jimmy, Brady, Kane, and Flynn walked out and stood casually behind Rebel.

Blackie held his arm out and gestured to the men in front of him. "What the fuck is this?"

As their unofficial leader, Rebel was the one who spoke.
"We need to talk."

Blackie looked from Rebel, to Judd, to Angel's truck.
"What's that doin' here? Where's Angel?"

Ready to grab onto his brother if need be, Rebel stepped forward. "She's not here."

"Well, where the fuck is she?"

When no one answered fast enough, Blackie stepped toward the group. "I ain't in the mood to play games with you boys," he warned. As his voice began to rise, the six McCasseys behind Rebel moved in closer. "If any of you know anything, you'd better tell me. Now."

"Let's take it inside."

"Rebel—"

"Inside, Blackie."

Rebel had exactly ten seconds to come up with a way to break the bad news to his brother. Once they were inside, Flynn lowered all three bay doors and Rebel forced Blackie into a chair.

"We don't know where Angel is," he explained carefully.
"Judd found her truck out on Route 70 an hour ago and towed it back here."

Blackie was surprisingly calm when he asked, "What was wrong with it?"

Judd looked to Rebel, silently asking what he should say.
"Tell him."

"Just a loose coil wire."

"Damn. That woulda been one of the first things she checked," Blackie said under his breath.

Watching the scene closely, Rebel waited for Blackie to explode. When he did nothing but unroll a pack of cigarettes from his left shirt sleeve, Rebel broke out into a sweat. He'd just given Blackie bad news. But something told him Blackie had news for them as well, and it was probably worse.

* * * *

Blackie studied the seven faces staring at him and knew his family was waiting for some kind of reaction. Truthfully, if he'd been at the garage when Judd pulled in towing Angel's truck, instead of at Digger's watching the bar burn to the ground, he would've gone crazy.

But there was no need now.

Blackie knew exactly where his wife was.

Reaching behind him, he pulled a red and white feather from his back pocket and dropped it onto the table.

There was nothing but silence as the rest of the men stared.

"What's that?" Kane finally asked.

"A message," Blackie told him. "I found it in the parkin' lot at the bar."

"Who the hell leaves feathers as a message?"

"Renegades."

Out of the corner of his eye, Blackie caught the quick look that flew between his two brothers, saw Rebel nod, and knew more bad news was coming.

Judd suddenly turned away from the group and dashed into Rose's office. After digging around in one of the file cabinets, he brought out a feather identical to the one Blackie

had found and laid it on the table. "This was on the front seat of Angel's truck," Judd said.

Flynn sucked in a loud breath and Kane's face turned white. With the exception of Rebel and Judd, the rest of the McCassey's shifted uncomfortably.

Rebel sat down in a chair next to Blackie. "Someone in the gang got a beef with you?"

"Looks that way."

"You think they have her?"

Blackie nodded. "I know they do."

"Then how come you're not halfway to their camp?" Kane asked.

Blackie looked up and glared at his impulsive younger cousin. "Because that's exactly what they want, what they expect. The man the Renegades know as The Devil is someone who would charge into the camp with his guns blazin', shootin' at anyone standin' in the way of gettin' Angel back.

"And years ago, I woulda done just that. But things are different now. I may still be a son of a bitch who can give the real devil a run for his money, but I ain't as impulsive as I was back then. I know it ain't really Angel they're after. Grabbin' her was just a way to get my attention, and that buys me a little time. They want to talk to me, and as long as she's alive, they know I'll come."

Kane lowered his head. "Oh, God," he whispered, "we're all going to die."

Blackie jumped out of his chair, reached past Brady and shoved at Kane. "Shut the fuck up, asshole, ain't no one dyin'."

"But we're outnumbered—"

"We?" Blackie questioned. "I ain't involvin' any of you in this. The Renegades would cut you boys to ribbons and have your body parts scattered all over western Maryland before you even knew what hit you." With a swoop of his hand, Blackie waved them off. "Get back to work."

Kane looked to Rebel, who motioned for him and the rest of the boys to go about their business. When they were gone, all that remained were Rebel and Judd. As usual, Rebel did the talking.

"What's the plan?"

Looking at his youngest brother, Blackie wished for the first time that they weren't close. This was one time that their all-for-one-and-one-for-all pact could hurt one, or all of them. "There ain't no plan, Reb. All that shit I just said goes for you and Judd, too. I rode with the Renegades for fifteen years. I know what they're capable of, and I ain't interested in attendin' either one of your funerals.

"Like I said, they ain't gonna hurt Angel. They may knock her around a little, but she ain't no good to them dead and they know that. Hell, with that wise-ass mouth and quick right hook of hers, she'll be fine as long as she don't piss anyone off too bad."

Rebel crossed his arms in front of his chest. "We're not letting you go in there alone, Blackie. Kane was right about one thing; you'll be outnumbered."

Blackie stood and moved in front of Rebel until they were only inches apart. Mimicking Rebel's stance, Blackie lowered his gaze a few inches and stared his brother in the eye. "I told you once that what I do ain't up to you, Rebel, and that ain't changed. It ain't the whole gang I'm at odds with; it's one or two guys. We'll be allowed to settle it on our own. Ain't nothin' gonna happen to me."

"Blackie, you helped—"

"Don't even go there, little brother. You don't owe me a damn thing. The situation with Gypsy's kidnappin' was different. You didn't know who you were up against and needed every man you could get. I know who I'm fightin'."

"We could hang back, just incase."

Blackie shook his head. "They got lookouts posted for ten miles before you get anywhere near the camp, and they can smell an outsider from two days away. You two can't go with me. This is somethin' I need to do on my own."

"Will you, at least, tell us what's going on? It's been seven years since you had anything to do with the gang. Why is someone coming after you now?"

Blackie looked around the garage at his uncles and cousins, busy at work. He knew they were all curious about what was going on, but he didn't want to involve them. The less they knew the better. He motioned for his brothers to follow him, and headed toward the one bay door that had been reopened. "Outside."

In the corner of the parking lot, Blackie lowered the tailgate of Rebel's pickup truck and sat down. "You were only

twelve when I became a member of the Renegades," he gestured toward Rebel, "Judd was thirteen.

"The funny thing is, I never even set out to join the gang. Digger was the one who wanted to be the big badass. He was workin' on buildin' his place back then and wanted to turn it into a biker bar. Only problem was, he didn't have any friends who belonged to the Renegades, and I did.

"So through Dragon and Church, two guys I'd been buddies with since junior high, we earned King's trust and were allowed to spend time at the camp.

"One day, Digger and I rode out to Cumberland with King and a few others. It wasn't until we got there that I found out Digger was supposed to earn his colors that day—by killin' a former member of the Renegades who'd left the gang and become a cop.

"The whole thing went down pretty fast. I was across the street on the back of King's bike and Digger was with Prince; King's second in command. Stump and Dozer went inside and robbed the liquor store where this cop—who was off-duty at the time—was workin' as a security guard. Digger had a gun, a .44, I think, and was supposed to blow away the cop when he came out of the building.

"As it turned out, ol' Digger wasn't the badass he thought he was. When the cop came outside and stood still in front of the building, Digger had a clean shot. He pointed the gun, but lost his nerve and refused to shoot. By the time he started scramblin' around tryin' to figure out what to do, the cop had spotted us.

"He turned his gun on King and me but never got the chance to shoot. Without thinkin' twice, I leaned over and grabbed the gun from Digger, took aim, and fired. The cop never knew what hit him; my bullet went through his heart and he was dead before he hit the ground."

Judd cleared his throat. "Holy shit, you murdered a cop?"

"It was an accident, Judd. I only wanted to keep him from shootin' us. Believe it or not, I was only aimin' for his shoulder. But the guy panicked and moved at the last second. Just like you two boys, I ain't never hurt no one who didn't deserve it."

"I may not have gone to prison for what I done that day, but that don't mean I ain't paid for it. There ain't a day that goes by I don't regret killin' that man," Blackie admitted, "and that's somethin' I'm gonna have to live with the rest of my life. The only excuse I have is that I was seventeen years old, scared shitless, and fired to protect myself."

"What happened then?" Rebel asked.

"What happened was that King turned to me, said, 'Man, you're the devil, ain't you?' and I wound up becomin' a member of the Renegades that day instead of Digger. King gave me the nickname, The Devil, and that was that."

"It wasn't a big deal to me. My feelin' was always that I could take the gang or leave it. For some guys, the Renegades were all they had. But my interests ran in other directions. Still do."

"Then why'd you join? Why didn't you just say no?"

"Because I was young and had made a lot of friends. I figured it might be a kick to ride with them for a while."

"What about Digger?" Judd asked, "Did they ever let him in?"

"One chance was all you got with King," Blackie explained. "If you couldn't complete the task he gave you, you weren't worthy of joinin'."

Rebel sat on the tailgate next to Blackie. "So what happened? Why'd you leave the gang?"

Blackie took a moment to light a cigarette before continuing.

"When I was released from prison last time, I rode out to the Renegade's camp and strolled in like I always did, expectin' everything to be the same. But when I got there, I found out that King had been killed. Prince was in charge, but he was nowhere near the respected leader King was. There was somethin' about King that made people want to follow him—kind of like you," he said to Rebel. "All Prince cared about was orderin' people around."

"One night, I was sittin' at a table watchin' a Redskin's game, nursin' a beer and mindin' my own business, when Prince walked over and sat down. He'd decided that I hadn't done enough to contribute to the gang over the past few years and told me I was the new man in charge of cocaine distribution. I told him to find someone else."

"So he kicked you out of the gang?"

"No, Judd, he didn't kick me out. He called me out. Prince chose to fight with knives and thought it would be funny to slice my jugular in front of everyone. Unfortunately for him, he assumed that since I was a crack shot with a gun, I didn't know how to handle a blade."

If the situation weren't so serious, Blackie would've laughed at the sight of Judd. The man was thirty-five years old, but his mouth was wide open and he'd been hanging on Blackie's every word. "Did you kill him?"

"Almost. If you die in battle, you're considered a hero," Blackie explained. "If you lose a fight and live because your enemy spared your life, you're considered weak. I humiliated Prince by lettin' him live. He lost all his credibility after that and fell in the ranks to just an ordinary member.

"I left the camp that day and never went back."

"Who's the leader now?" Rebel asked.

"A guy named Shiv. He joined around the same time I did, but I don't know him too well."

"What do you think they want from you?"

Blackie shrugged. "Beats me, Reb. From what I hear, they ain't real organized now-a-days."

"So you're just going to ride in there blind, not knowing what to expect?"

Tossing his cigarette butt to the ground, Blackie slid off the tailgate. "I ain't got no choice. Someone obviously wants to talk to me, so at least I know they ain't gonna shoot me on sight."

"There has to be a better way."

"There ain't, Rebel. You and Judd are outsiders. They'd kill the two of you just to piss me off. I have to go in alone. I need one of you to give me a lift to the house, so I can change and pick up my bike."

Without waiting for a reply, Blackie turned his back to his brothers and strode into the garage. He knew they were

probably out in the parking lot trying to come up with a plan to help him.

But they were wasting their time.

He had to handle this one on his own.

Before he married Angel, Blackie had never cared about the fact that his past could come back to haunt him. Allowing himself to dwell on that now would only sever the last thread of control he was desperately clinging to.

He needed to stay calm and think rationally.

Angel's life depended on it.

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Chapter 33

Angel knew now that Blackie had been right; the Ramsey's weren't involved in Digger's murder.

He'd also been right about something else; she had been well on her way to driving herself crazy.

It hurt to admit that because she'd always prided herself on being a rational person. Since her first marriage ended, Angel had been extra careful about every decision. She no longer jumped into things headfirst the way she had as a teenager.

So why had she gone off the deep end this time?

Why hadn't she listened to Blackie? After all, he'd been right about everything else in the short time they'd been married.

She supposed it could be that the grief she felt over the loss of her brother was far greater than she realized.

Yes, that was probably it.

Whatever had possessed Angel to slink out of town and go gunning for Willie Ramsey had come from a place inside her that she hadn't known existed. And now that she'd had time to think a little more rationally, she felt sick about the malicious thoughts that had crossed her mind that morning.

No doubt Angel would've been killed if she'd made it all the way to the Ramsey's farm. But, she thought to herself, maybe that's what she'd wanted. Maybe, in addition to losing her brother, the thought of losing Blackie—someone she'd

come to love more than life itself—had just been too much to bear.

There was never any solid proof that the Ramsey's had Digger murdered. And even if there had been, hunting them down like animals and shooting them dead wasn't the way to go about getting justice.

But none of that made a difference now.

When her truck had broken down that morning, she thought it was very coincidental that the two men who'd forced her into the backseat of a car at gunpoint had arrived so quickly. The stretch of road she'd been on was usually lightly traveled, especially early in the morning.

She was sure they'd been waiting for her.

As the late model black sedan they were riding in sped down the road, the fear that had consumed her quickly turned to dread when she overheard the driver talking on the CB radio. "Yeah, I got her," he said. "We'll be there in an hour. Don't worry, she ain't goin' nowhere."

The rest of the car ride was long and quiet. After the conversation the driver had on the CB, neither of her abductors had uttered a single word. They never even turned around to look at her.

Angel had tried to remain calm, wishing she'd had time to grab one of her guns before she was taken.

It hadn't been hard to figure out that the two men were working for someone else, so she was pretty confident they weren't going to hurt her. However, that didn't mean she wasn't going to be raped and murdered once they reached their destination.

Who would go to these lengths to get their hands on her? Besides the Ramsey's, Angel didn't have any enemies that she knew of.

When the driver exited the highway, he turned onto a narrow dirt road, its entrance almost hidden by dry, overgrown brush. Watching out the window as they drove slowly along the path, Angel spotted several men in the woods lining the road. They weren't in a group, but scattered sporadically about the grounds. Most of them were armed with shotguns, each one looking more intimidating than the next.

Angel's anxiety increased by the minute.

After what seemed like an eternity, the forest disappeared and they entered a clearing. What came into view stopped Angel's heart. Parked in front of a large one-story house were what looked like a hundred motorcycles.

What the—she wondered, and then it hit her; the bikes, the house hidden in the woods, a black and white flag with a black and red skull tacked to the door. This was the Renegades camp.

She'd been abducted by an outlaw biker gang.

The two men got out of the car and the one who'd been driving opened the back door, motioning for her to get out. He didn't have his gun this time, but he probably knew she'd gotten an eyeful of what was around her and wasn't going to risk running away. "You know where you are, don't you, Candy?" the driver asked.

Candy?

"Shut up, Tiny," the other one gave him a hard shove. "We ain't supposed to talk to her."

"Why the hell not? We did our job. She's here, ain't she?"

"Let's just take her inside and get the hell out of here. I don't want to be anywhere around when The Devil rides in."

The Devil? Were they talking about Blackie?

"Fine." The driver grabbed her arm and guided her toward the front door. "Let's go, Candy," he ordered, "someone inside is waitin' for you."

Angel wondered why they kept calling her Candy. I didn't take her long to find out once she walked inside the house.

She wasn't through the front door five seconds when a tall, lanky, dark-haired man approached her. Dressed in much the same attire as the men she'd seen along the road—black boots, blue jeans, a white T-shirt, and a blue denim vest—he stared at her with an evil grin.

"So," he said, walking in a wide circle, seeming to take in every inch of her appearance, "you're The Devil's candy."

Angel didn't think he was looking for an answer, but her curiosity got the best of her. "Excuse me?"

The man looked at her and laughed. "His woman, his bitch, his tight little piece of ass. You do belong to him, don't you?"

He could've stopped at the word 'woman'; Angel had gotten the point. Blackie was The Devil, and she was his piece of ass, something sweet for him to enjoy ... candy.

Willing her big mouth to obey, Angel decided that short, polite, to-the-point answers were the best way to go until she found out what he wanted. "I'm his wife."

"Well, you ain't much to look at, but you'll do."

By the way he studied her body, Angel realized that the man was only interested in her from the neck down. Lucky for her, her multiple layers of clothing, in addition to Blackie's flannel shirt, hid her figure.

Good, she thought. Let him think my body is unattractive; less chance of him being curious about what the clothes are hiding.

"And now that we know you're the right person, let's get the introductions out of the way." He extended his hand. "My name is Prince," he said as she gave his hand a firm shake, "and I'm gonna be the one to finally send The Devil to hell. Once he's gone, you'll belong to me."

Hoping her surprise wasn't showing, Angel stared openly at Prince. Was he serious? Did he really mean to kill Blackie and keep her for himself?

Well, there was no way in hell that was happening.

Angel decided she'd shoot herself between the eyes before letting that man, or any other man for that matter, touch her. She did belong to Blackie, she suddenly realized. Heart and soul, she was his. No other man compared to him ... not by a long shot.

Prince gave a quick, short laugh. "We can talk about all that later, come over to the table and have a seat," he said. It was more of an order than an invitation. "There are a few things I'd like to show you."

Warily, Angel took a seat in one of the chairs.

"Let me tell you a little story, Candy..."

During the next hour, Angel found out that the Renegades had been watching her and Blackie for weeks. Prince even

came right out and told her that they would've struck sooner, but by a strange coincidence, Willie Ramsey kept getting in their way.

During their conversation, she received quite an education on both her brother and husband. She was also told that Prince was the one who'd taken a hit out on Digger. "All he had to do was launder a little money for me, Candy, just like he did for King back in the old days. But he refused, and that pissed me off."

Past the point of not wanting to anger Prince, Angel couldn't ignore his remark. Her brother was dead, and Prince acted as if Digger's life meant nothing. "So you killed my brother because he wouldn't do something you wanted," she said matter-of-factly. "You got him back for not giving into you. What the hell do you need me for?"

"Bait."

"Bait?"

"Yeah," he said sharply. "I dropped little hints all over the place, but The Devil must be getting soft. He didn't pick up on a single one of them. I got tired of waiting, and figured that if I took you, he might finally notice."

"What do you want with him?" Angel asked. She didn't really expect an answer, and was surprised when Prince gave her one.

"We have a score to settle," he said, then went on to tell her the story of how they became bitter enemies. "He humiliated me. Now I'm going to earn my rank back by killing him."

If everything she'd heard already hadn't been bad enough, she'd been forced to look at twenty-two year old newspaper clippings about a former gang member turned cop who'd been murdered in Cumberland ... by Blackie. There were pictures, too; taken with a camera by a gang member who was supposed to be commemorating Digger's initiation to the Renegades.

Instead, the photographer had captured Blackie ripping a gun from her brother's hands. There was another picture of Blackie extending his arm and aiming, and one of a dead security guard; the front of his light blue uniform covered in the crimson color of blood.

No wonder Blackie refused to tell her how he'd earned his colors.

Angel was so disgusted by the fact that Prince seemed to be enjoying telling her about Digger and Blackie's pasts, that she wanted to throw everything to the ground and run outside screaming. She'd known that neither her brother nor husband was even close to being innocent, but that wasn't what bothered her. The evil grin that hadn't left Prince's face made her want to throw up.

Prince was enjoying himself, but what he didn't know was that Angel didn't care about what happened twenty-two years earlier. She knew the person Blackie was now, and that's all that mattered to her.

"I know what you're thinking, Candy," Prince said when she'd been quiet for a while. "But you'll learn to love it with me, I promise. I bet you I've got moves The Devil ain't never heard of."

She doubted that. When he reached out to caress her cheek, Angel slapped his arm away and jumped out of the chair. "Don't touch me!"

When Prince stood, his smile disappeared and the expression on his face darkened. She should've expected the backhanded slap that came next. But it took her off guard and knocked her off balance, causing her to stumble.

"Don't backtalk me, bitch!" he warned. "Now I know The Devil's getting soft if he allows you to talk to him that way. I don't take no lip from females." He pointed his finger in her face. "And that's your only warning."

Angel could taste blood. The side of her mouth throbbed and stung from his slap, but she would not let him know she was in pain.

Even worse was the anger Angel could feel beginning to bubble in her chest. She tried to control it, tried to push it from her mind the way Prince had verbally assaulted and disrespected not only her, but Blackie as well.

But she couldn't.

After the way Marshall Ramsey had treated her, she'd sworn that no man would ever use or abuse her again. Unable to hold her tongue any longer, she put her hands on her hips and assumed a defiant stance. "Fuck you."

The shocked look on Prince's face was worth the blow that followed. "What'd you say to me, bitch?"

Angel shook off his second slap. "You heard me," she said sarcastically. "I said, fuck you, Prince. No matter what you do to my husband, I'll never belong to you."

Prince's third blow was more like a punch, packing enough power to cause Angel to see stars. But she wasn't giving up, and she wasn't giving in. When her vision cleared, she took a step forward. Throwing caution to the wind, she decided to risk it all, knowing her chances of surviving in captivity were low.

"If you're going to continue to do that," she said, "then you'd better kill me. I may be a woman and I may be small, but I'm evil, and as dangerous as any of you with a gun. Wasting your sorry ass would make my day, Prince. It wouldn't be the first time I've killed a man, either. And I don't have the conscience my brother did, so if you think I'd get cold feet just before pulling the trigger, you're dead wrong."

The expression on his face didn't change, but Angel noticed that his right hand, which had been clenched into a fist, was now relaxed. She didn't think for a minute that he was afraid of her, but there were more than twenty people in the adjoining living room, all of whom, no doubt, had heard their exchange. Her guess was that Prince was desperate to get out of the house right about now; before one of his buddies in the next room suggested he let Angel take a few shots at him, just to see if she was telling the truth.

The next thing she knew, Prince's hand shot out and wrapped around her throat, squeezing hard enough to cut off her air. "You're the one who needs to shut the fuck up, Candy! Normally, anyone who talked to me the way you just did would've been dead ten seconds ago. But I'm going to let you live for now. I want The Devil to be here to see what I'm going to do to you."

When he let go of her neck, Angel gasped for air as Prince shoved her back into a chair. With rope that had been lying on the counter, he tied her to the chair by wrapping it around her waist, down her legs, and finally, around her ankles. He gave her one last slap across the face and, in his haste to leave, didn't even realize he'd forgotten to bind her hands.

Angel wasn't sure how much time passed before she began to feel as though someone was watching her. Turning her head slightly to the left, she noticed a large man, with an even larger beer gut, staring at her. From ten feet away, his dark brown eyes seemed to be dancing with amusement, the expression on his face almost friendly.

But made no move to untie her.

Was he afraid of Prince? No, that couldn't be it. This man looked powerful enough to take down Prince with no trouble at all. Then Angel remembered she'd heard that when one gang member had a problem with another, the two were expected to fight it out amongst themselves. As a rule, other gang members didn't usually get involved.

Still staring, the man looked as though he had something to say. Was she supposed to guess what it was? Confused, Angel shrugged.

Breaking into a grin, the man winked and nodded, gesturing toward a telephone mounted on the wall next to her.

Why hadn't she noticed that before?

Turning back to him, she smiled despite the pain in her face and mouthed a silent, "thank you."

He nodded again and walked out the front door.

There were numerous people milling around, and Angel knew she'd never be able to remember what they all looked like. But she wouldn't forget that man. Not only was he the largest person she'd seen, but the colorful tattoo of a fire-breathing dragon on his forearm was also unmistakable. She wondered if he was being friendly because he'd been a friend of Blackie's, or if that was his way of telling her he admired the way she'd stood up to Prince.

Staring at the phone, Angel weighed her options.

She could take a chance and call the garage. But she'd been gone for hours, and chances were that the Renegades had left Blackie a few other calling cards. He probably knew where she was.

No doubt he was already on his way.

She couldn't imagine anyone overpowering Blackie enough to kill him, especially someone the size of Prince. But, she supposed, it could happen. What if things got out of hand and other gang members jumped in? Would anyone take Blackie's side?

Halting her thoughts, Angel couldn't bring herself to think about what would happen if everyone in the camp turned against her husband. Glancing at the phone again, she decided to take her chances and call the garage. Blackie was going to need backup, and there were seven men she knew would stand by his side, no matter what.

Whatever Prince would do if he caught her using the phone couldn't be worse than what she'd suffered at the hands of Marshall Ramsey. She'd survived then, and she'd survive now.

Picking up the receiver, Angel dialed.

Someone picked it up on the third ring. The voice was male. "McCassey's Garage."

"Rebel?" she whispered frantically.

"No, it's Judd. Angel?"

"Yeah. Is Blackie there?"

"Where the hell are you?"

Why wouldn't he answer the question? She only had a few seconds and needed to talk to Blackie! "Judd—"

"Blackie left to come looking for you."

"He knows where I am?"

"He said he did."

"Judd, listen, I had to sneak and use the phone," she said quickly, "and I probably only have a minute before someone comes in and finds me. There's a man by the name of Prince who's planning to kill Blackie when he shows up here, and—"

"Angel!" Judd cut her off, "just tell me where you are goddammit!"

"I don't know exactly," she said, her voice cracking as panic began to overtake her. "Somewhere in Cumberland. I didn't see the exit number when we got off Route 70, but it was right after the area where they just built that big concrete company. The entrance to the camp is hidden by brush—"

The creaking of the front door stopped Angel short. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?" Prince yelled.

"Angel?" she heard Judd say. But she couldn't answer because Prince had yanked the phone away from her.

"Angel!" Judd yelled, this time it was loud enough that she heard it even though the phone receiver was a few feet away.

Still staring at her, Prince raised the phone and calmly whispered, "Angel's dead."

When she saw Prince raise his other hand, which held something that looked like a long, thick branch, Angel managed to scream, "Judd!" just before everything went black.

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Chapter 34

Dressed in his gang colors for the first time in seven years, Blackie stood in front of the full-length mirror staring at his reflection.

He felt trapped in someone else's body.

For the first few years he was a member of the Renegades, a rush of excitement came over him every time he slipped on the sleeveless denim jacket bearing their emblem. He still remembered the feeling of pride that washed over him when, over a hundred strong, the group would get together for a ride, cruising through small western Maryland towns.

Usually riding just two or three rows behind the leaders, Blackie felt important and powerful back then—like nothing could touch him. He loved that people would stop and watch in awe as they passed. He relished the fact that the Renegades were widely feared.

Now the entire concept made him sick.

Blackie didn't mind a bit that folks were scared to death of him, so the only thing he took advantage of these days was his bad reputation—which kept people exactly where he liked them ... at a distance.

He didn't need the support of a hundred men to make him feel strong—he never really did. He no longer thought causing trouble and destroying property were fun, either. And while he still got an exhilarating rush from a good fist fight, his days of getting drunk on moonshine and going out looking to brawl were long gone.

Blackie let his gaze travel over his image in the mirror one last time. The black leather riding boots, faded blue jeans, white T-shirt, and waist-length wavy dark hair defined who he was. His appearance and style of dress may or may not ever change. But after he dealt with the gang and got Angel back, he planned to burn the blue denim vest with the black bandanna sewn onto the back. The sight of the black and red skull and crossbones embroidered just above the word RENEGADES at the bottom of the jacket did nothing for him anymore.

That part of his life was over.

He was ready to move on.

Turning away from the looking glass, Blackie snatched the vest off the bed and carried it down the hall.

Although he didn't say anything at first, Blackie could feel Rebel staring at him as he passed by. The way Rebel watched him reminded Blackie of when his brothers were kids. The two of them used to think they were hiding as they followed him all over the house, but Blackie always knew they were there.

"Blackie—"

"Shut up, Rebel!" Blackie snapped as he laid his black leather jacket flat and threaded the sleeves through the armholes of the denim vest. He didn't want to hear the hundred and one reasons why he should allow his brothers to go with him.

Blackie stuffed a pack of cigarettes into his pocket and walked out of the room carrying his jacket. Rebel was right behind him. "Dammit! What the hell do you want, Rebel? I told you to leave me alone and go back to work!"

"I can't let you do this by yourself!"

Stopping suddenly, Blackie turned around and put his hands on Rebel's chest, forcing him backward until his back was against the wall. "And I already said you ain't got a choice! Angel's my wife! And whatever's goin' on with the Renegades is my problem! It ain't got nothin' to do with you!"

Releasing his brother, Blackie turned away and went around the house collecting what he needed. Rebel was still following him, but Blackie paid no attention.

Down in the basement, his .357 Magnum went into the waistband of his jeans, and a box of ammo into the pocket of his jacket. Back up in the kitchen, an eight-inch Bowie knife and sheath that matched Rebel's was hooked to his belt.

Certain he had everything, Blackie pulled on his jacket, grabbed his keys off the table, and headed for the door.

"Blackie!"

Blackie stopped just short of the door. "I ain't got time for this, Rebel!"

"Then make time!"

Because he felt guilty for refusing the help his brothers wanted to give him, Blackie decided to listen. "What is it?"

"You may be the only McCassey member of the Renegades, but you're not the only one who knows how to find their camp. If you're not back by tomorrow night, we're coming after you. Not just me and Judd, but all of us. So go to Cumberland, take care of business, and get the hell back here." With a slight grin, he added, "Because if I have to close down the garage to come bail your ass out of trouble ... again ... it's coming out of your pay."

Rebel raised his fist and Blackie lightly touched it with his own. Blackie wasn't going to argue with his brother this time. He was confident he could handle the Renegades alone, but just incase he couldn't, it was nice to know he had an army waiting in the wings.

"No worries, big brother," Rebel said. "I'll be at the garage if you need me. You know the number."

With that, Rebel brushed past his brother and walked out the door, leaving Blackie staring after him.

* * * *

Rebel pulled into the garage parking lot and wasn't out of the tow truck two seconds when Judd ran outside to meet him. "What's wrong with you?"

Breathing heavily, Judd took a second before answering, "Angel called."

"What do you mean, she called? When?"

"Right after you and Blackie left."

"What'd she say?"

"She's being held by the Renegades."

"We already knew that. What else did she say?"

"She told me where their camp is," Judd said, "but I have a feeling you don't need directions."

Rebel shook his head. "Anything else?"

His features lined with worry; Judd frowned. "Prince is the one who took her. He's planning to kill Blackie when he shows up to rescue Angel."

"I figured."

"What are we going to do?"

"I told Blackie that if he's not back by tomorrow night, we're all coming after him."

"Tomorrow night! Reb, that's too long! We need to go now!"

"Sorry, Judd," Rebel said as he began walking toward the office door. "As much as I'd like to ride in there like the fuckin' cavalry and save the day, we can't. This is something Blackie needs to take care of on his own."

"There's something else," Judd told him.

The unnatural sound of his brother's voice forced Rebel to stop and turn around, staring Judd straight in the eye. He didn't need to hear what Judd had to say to know the news was bad. "Well?"

"They hurt Angel."

"How do you know?"

"Someone took the phone from her when she was talking to me. I started yelling for her, but there was no response. The last time I called her name, a man got on the phone and whispered, 'Angel's dead.' Just a second or two later, she screamed my name and the line went dead."

"Fuck!" Rebel whirled around and hurled his truck keys toward the garage. They slammed into one of the metal bay doors with a loud clank before falling to the ground.

The noise brought Rebel's uncles, Frank and Jimmy, running outside.

"What are you boys carrying on about out here?"

"We got trouble, Frank," Rebel told him. "Round up the rest of the boys and meet me in Rose's office."

Ten minutes later, Rebel and Judd finished telling their uncles and cousins what was going on and what they planned to do about it.

Frank shook his head. "Blackie'll go crazy when he finds out Angel's hurt. And if they killed her, there'll be nothing left of those boys for even dental records to identify when Blackie gets through with them. You sure you don't want us to come with you?"

Rebel scratched his head and thought for a minute. He knew the Renegades code. Technically, whatever beef Prince had with Blackie should be settled solely between the two of them. But if Frank was right, if Angel was hurt ... or worse ... all bets would be off. Blackie would take out as many men as he could before they brought him down.

If they brought him down.

"No," he finally said, "you're better off staying here incase we do need something. Judd and I will keep in touch by CB, so keep this one," he pointed to the radio on Rose's desk, "on at all times."

"When are you boys leaving?"

"Five minutes ago." Rebel turned and walked out of the office. "Judd?" he hollered.

"Right behind you."

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Chapter 35

The brief stop they made at Rebel's house to give Gypsy a quick explanation and pick up a few supplies was over quickly, and the brothers were out the door and on their way again in minutes.

"How'd she take it?" Judd asked.

Rebel chuckled. "Like a true McCassey; she grabbed for my gun and tried to talk me into bringing her with us."

"Christ, that's all we need, a short little redhead with a big mouth and lousy aim."

Both brothers laughed.

"On second thought," Judd said, "Gypsy's the perfect secret weapon. We turn her loose in their camp; none of those Renegades will know what hit them."

"We don't need Gypsy, Judd. I have a feeling they've got their hands full with Angel. Something tells me she's not sitting there being a model prisoner."

"Yeah." Judd laughed so hard he was almost doubled over. "Who needs guns and ammo when you've got those two? They're one dangerous combination. I wouldn't want to take them on as a team."

"Let's just hope we get the chance."

Rebel's statement sobered Judd immediately. All the humor left him and he slouched in the passenger seat. He didn't want to think about what could possibly happen to them today, or what could've already happened to Blackie and Angel.

Silent during the entire trip to Cumberland, Judd finally spoke when Rebel passed the new concrete company and exited Route 70. "You know where you're going, bro?"

"There's the front entrance right there." Rebel pointed as he passed the beginning of a narrow dirt road almost completely hidden by overgrown brush.

If that was the front entrance, why did Rebel pass it?
"Aren't you going in?"

"And get shot to death before we even make it to the front door? Use your head, Judd. We're going in the back way."

"There's a back way?"

"No, but there will be when we're finished."

Judd stared at Rebel a minute then went back to slouching in the seat.

"What's with you, man, you nervous?"

Continuing to slouch, Judd turned his head and looked at his younger brother. "Why would you ask that?"

"Because you didn't say two words during the entire ride here," Rebel reminded him. "That's a record."

"Fine. I'm a little nervous. These are the Renegades, Rebel. There's over a hundred of them and only two of us. If you're not a little nervous, then you're as crazy as Blackie."

"Hell, I've got a wife and three kids at home, Judd. I'm not just nervous, I'm scared."

Rebel's admission made Judd's stomach do a violent flip. Never in their lives had Rebel been scared of anything ... at least never that Judd had known about. The fact that his brother, a great leader, the man Blackie called The Pied Piper, was scared, made Judd uneasy. "You're scared?"

"Hell yes I'm scared! Don't think for a minute that I don't know what will happen to us if something goes wrong. I don't want to die and leave Gypsy—to have Raider, Chase, and Jade grow up without a father."

Finally sitting up, Judd twisted himself around until he faced Rebel. "Then why are you here? Jimmy, Kane, or any one of the other boys would've come in your place. No one would've thought less of you for staying out of it for your family's sake."

"I couldn't do that. And Blackie is my family. I wouldn't even have been alive to marry Gypsy and have kids if it hadn't been for him. The old man would've killed me long before I was strong enough to fight back if Blackie hadn't stepped in and protected me.

"Whether he knows it or not, he's going to need our help today. Frank was right. If Angel's dead, Blackie will kill as many men as he can before they bring him down. Shit, he'll go crazy if they've hurt one hair on her head. I want him out of there in one piece, Judd ... even if we have to shoot him ourselves to get him to leave."

Judd knew Rebel was right about everything. Neither one of them would've survived childhood if Blackie hadn't been around to protect them from their father's abuse.

Over the years, Blackie had always turned to Rebel when he needed something, as had Judd. And Rebel had done whatever it had taken to help his brothers. But not once had Blackie needed Judd. This was Judd's opportunity to pay back the brother he'd quietly idolized since birth. He'd do whatever

it took to get Blackie and Angel away from the Renegades.
"So little brother, you got a plan?"

Rebel nodded. "Yeah." He leaned down and reached under the seat. "You ready?"

Judd wanted to ask where the hell Rebel had come up with two policeman's nightsticks, but decided he was probably better off not knowing. Taking the weapon Rebel offered him, he laid it in his lap. "As ready as I'll ever be." Judd raised his fist in the air and waited until Rebel did the same. "No worries, bro. Now tell me your plan and let's get this over with."

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Chapter 36

When Blackie exited Route 70 and turned onto the dirt road leading up to the Renegades camp, an eerie feeling of nostalgia washed over him.

It seemed like just yesterday that he was seventeen years old, hanging out here with Digger and Dragon and Church. They'd had some good times together. And although the Renegades had always been involved in a lot of illegal activity, they'd been a fun, friendlier, more organized bunch back then.

The last time Blackie had been here, he'd just finished up a three-year stint in prison. He'd only known about half the men he came in contact with, and since seven years had passed since then, he was sure he'd know even less now.

Sitting tall and proud on his Harley, Blackie gripped the handlebars tightly as he drove slowly down the dirt road. There were men watching him from the woods. He knew they were there because being a lookout was one of his first duties as a gang member. He'd sit in the woods for hours at a time, rifle poised, finger on the trigger, waiting for intruders. He'd been under strict instructions from King to shoot anyone who entered the property and wasn't wearing Renegade colors.

Nodding to a few of the men he spotted, Blackie continued at a slow, even speed until he reached the clearing and the house came into view.

Positioning his bike for a quick getaway, he left it in one of his favorite parking spots, next to a large maple tree in front

of the house, facing the opposite direction of the rest of the bikes.

Lighting a cigarette as he took in the appearance of the brick, ranch-style house, Blackie noticed that aside from the bushes being taller, the place hadn't changed at all. Knowing there were plenty of men watching him, he didn't bother to reach around and feel for his .357. He knew it was there, knew he could get to it if he needed to. The ammo, tucked safely in the pocket of his leather jacket, pressed gently against his left side.

Approaching the door, Blackie listened carefully. There were no odd noises coming from inside, no sounds of yelling or fighting. As usual, the TV was up loud and there were men laughing and carrying on.

Not wanting to seem anxious, Blackie took his time and calmly reached for the door knob. The familiar scent of stale cigarette smoke hit him the instant he walked inside; taking him back to a time he'd felt welcome here.

Stepping into the foyer, Blackie turned his head to the right and scanned the room full of men watching TV, searching for familiar faces. The few men he recognized did nothing more than nod to acknowledge his presence, as if the last time they'd seen each other had been yesterday, instead of seven years earlier. He nodded in return and stepped to the left, entering the kitchen.

What he saw caused his heart to stop.

Face down and dazed, with her forehead resting on the small square kitchen table, was Angel ... in that goddamn flannel shirt of his. The hair on the entire left side of her head

was crimson; a six inch trail of blood oozing slowly across the table.

Blackie's first instinct was to run to Angel and pull her into his arms. But knowing that was exactly what his enemy expected him to do, he restrained himself; doing nothing more than leaning over and pressing two fingers on her neck to check if she was breathing. Finding a good, strong pulse, he breathed a silent sigh of relief and rubbed the top of her head gently, as if he was doing nothing more than stroking a cat.

Standing back up to his full height, Blackie had just started toward the living room when he heard a voice behind him. "So ... The Devil rides again."

Blackie didn't need to see the man standing behind him to know who it was. Taking one last, long drag on his cigarette, he turned around slowly. Tossing the butt onto the linoleum floor, he crushed it with the heel of his boot and released the smoke from his lungs. "I never stopped ridin', Prince. I just stopped comin' out here to visit you."

The corners of Prince's mouth curved upward, as if he was trying not to smile. "Always a sarcastic son of a bitch. King liked that about you."

"Yeah? Well, he hated it about you."

"There were a lot of things King hated about me, Devil. But that didn't matter much in the end, now, did it? I killed him fair. There were witnesses here to see it."

Wishing Prince would hurry up and get to the point, Blackie forced himself to turn off his emotions and ignore Angel. He didn't want to give Prince the opportunity to catch him off

guard. So even though it was killing him that Angel was two feet away and needed help, Blackie knew that the, I-don't-care-that-my-wife-could-be-bleeding-to-death act he put on was beginning to get to Prince. The man was fidgety, making Blackie wonder if he was on something. "Congratulations, Prince."

Prince ignored Blackie's comment. "You should've killed me when you had the chance, Devil."

"And why is that?"

"Because now that I have you here, I'm going to kill you instead."

"You think so, huh?"

"Don't be so fucking smug, Devil. I got you here, didn't I?"

"No, someone else got me here by killin' Digger, burnin' down his bar, and snatchin' my wife. What's the matter, Prince, you too good to do your own dirty work, or just too lazy?"

Prince lunged forward and shoved at Blackie's chest. "Fuck you, Devil! I'm gonna waste you! And when I do, that tight little piece of ass over there," he motioned to Angel, "will be all mine."

It took all his self-control, but Blackie remained calm. Prince was losing his cool, which was good. The angrier he became, the more careless he'd be, making the task of taking him down quicker and easier.

Looking at Angel for the first time since Prince had come into the room, Blackie shook his head. "I don't know, Prince. She don't look too good. If you want a piece of her, you

better get rid of me quick. She could probably die anytime now."

Bypassing Blackie, Prince stepped toward Angel. Laying a hand on her shoulder, he shook it hard, causing her to moan. "You don't know what the fuck you're talking about. There's not a damn thing wrong with her."

Hiding his relief, Blackie shrugged. "If you say so."

Prince looked at Blackie with hatred burning in his eyes. "You ready to be sent to hell, Devil?"

"As ready as I'll ever be, asshole. Name your weapon."

"Skin on skin, Devil. Nothing but plain old fists."

A fist fight? Did Prince actually think Blackie was dumb enough to fall for that? It had been a long time since he'd been involved in a fight with a fellow gang member, but not so long that he didn't remember that differences were never settled with fists. Knives or guns were always the weapons of choice.

"Fists it is," Blackie said, and extended his arm toward the door, "you lead the way."

Appearing to be proud of himself for apparently fooling Blackie, Prince turned his back and walked out the door.

Taking advantage of the moment, Blackie took a switchblade from his pocket and quickly cut the ropes binding Angel to the chair. After closing the blade and putting it back in his pocket, he grabbed Angel's shoulders and shook forcefully in an effort to bring her around. She opened her eyes immediately, which widened when she saw Blackie.

Hoping she'd stay quiet, Blackie instantly put a finger to his lips and disappeared out the door.

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Chapter 37

The sight of Blackie standing in front of her was such a relief that Angel had to keep herself from crying out. She didn't know how he'd managed to get inside the house or where he was off to, but she'd gotten the point when he told her to be quiet.

Her head pounding from whatever Prince had hit her with, Angel was dizzy, and knew she wouldn't be able to make it far if she tried to run away. Resting her head on the table again, she closed her eyes and listened for raised voices, grunts, a gunshot, anything to tell her what was going on outside.

But there was nothing.

She knew Blackie would do his best to kill Prince. That was a given. But it had been a long time since Blackie had anything to do with the Renegades. What if no one here knew him? What if they all ganged up on him at once? Blackie was right at home in combat, well skilled at both shooting a gun and fighting with knives. But he'd never be able to take on all the men at the camp. If they decided to attack him, he'd never make it out alive.

Knowing she had to do something, anything, to help him, Angel gritted her teeth and sat up. Her head swam with dizziness, and she had to close her eyes to fight off the wave of nausea that swept over her.

"Don't try to move," someone suddenly whispered.

When Angel looked to the side to see who it was, the large man with a dragon tattoo was standing behind her. "What—"

"Don't try to talk, either." He leaned down and effortlessly lifted her out of the chair. "I'm Dragon," he told her as he started to leave the kitchen. "Don't be afraid. I'm here to help you."

"Wait!" Angel said quickly. "I forgot something!"

Dragon closed the distance between them and the table in two long strides. Reaching down, Angel grabbed the articles about the cop Blackie had murdered, along with the pictures. Folding them into a wad, she stuffed it into the breast pocket of her flannel shirt. "I'm ready now."

Dragon nodded his approval at what she'd done, then carried her out of the kitchen and down the basement stairs. "Just incase you were wondering, Blackie and I go way back. I also knew your brother."

At the mention of Digger, Angel felt a stab of pain in her heart. "Where are we going?"

"There's a tunnel at the back of the basement leading out to the woods. I'm gonna leave you somewhere safe, then circle around and help Blackie. Prince ain't playin' fair." He winked at her then and said, "I'm just gonna even up the odds a little."

With her arms locked around Dragon's neck, Angel hung on as he walked her through the long, dark tunnel. When they reached the end, he stopped in front of a thick metal door. "Hold onto me tight," he told her, "I need to unlatch this door."

"I can stand."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm fine. Just hurry. I don't want anything to happen to Blackie while we're down here debating on whether or not I can stand on my own two feet."

Dragon gently set Angel on the ground. Fortunately, the dizziness and nausea had subsided; the only thing bothering her now was a pounding headache.

In three quick clicks, the door was unlocked and opened. Surprised when Dragon swept her back up into his arms, Angel started to protest. "What are you doing?" she asked as he stepped out into the daylight, slamming the door with his foot. "I said I was fine."

Walking briskly toward the woods, Dragon put his hand on the back of her head and pressed it close to his chest; shielding her from objects that could come flying their way. "Well, I decided you're not. The side of your head is covered in blood. And just because you ain't keeled over yet, doesn't mean that you won't. I'm trying to save you, little darlin', not kill you."

Angel didn't have a response to that. She really did feel fine, but Dragon was breaking unwritten rules to help her and Blackie, and she didn't think it was right to give him a hard time.

They came to a stop just over fifty yards from the house, and Dragon set Angel on her feet. She tried to steady herself as she momentarily swayed, but caught Dragon's knowing look and reached for him when he offered his arm.

"It's a good thing you're fine," he commented sarcastically. Angel smiled. She liked Dragon.

"Stay here until someone comes to get you," he instructed, motioning for her to sit down.

Leaning against a tree, Angel looked up at the massive man. "Don't I get a gun or something?"

"What the hell for?"

"What if someone notices me? I need to be able to protect myself."

"There's only a handful of men in this camp who would bother you little darlin', and they're all out front with Prince." He glanced toward the yard then back at her. "I gotta go if I'm gonna help Blackie."

He turned to leave, but Angel grabbed his pant leg. "Wait!" Putting on her best pout, she looked him in the eye. "Please, Dragon, having a gun would make me feel much safer."

Glancing from her, to the yard, and back again, he shrugged. "Do you know how to use one?"

"As well as Blackie."

"Do you promise you'll stay there?" He pointed to where she was sitting. "Right there, and not move?"

Crossing her fingers behind her back, Angel smiled sweetly and lied. "Of course."

"Fine." Dragon pulled a .357, one that looked just like Blackie's, from the waistband of his pants and handed it to her. "It's loaded, but you are NOT to fire that thing, understand? One shot from that gun and the whole fuckin' camp will be out here."

Angel nodded. She felt a stab of guilt for lying to the man who was trying to help her. But he was sadly mistaken if he thought she'd sit around and do nothing while Blackie was in

danger. She was as good a shot, if not better, than most men, and her husband needed her.

Once Dragon was gone, Angel waited until he disappeared back into the tunnel before she began moving closer to the house.

Creeping quietly through the brush, she inched along the edge of the woods until she was only about thirty feet away. Taking shelter behind the thick trunk of an old tree, Angel focused on Blackie and Prince, who were in the middle of the yard taunting and circling each other.

There were a few other men around them acting as if they weren't paying attention, and Angel assumed that they were the ones helping Prince; the ones who were going to ambush Blackie.

Too far away to hear their conversation, Angel closed her eyes and listened carefully, hoping to be able to make out what they were saying.

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Chapter 38

"Come on, Devil," Prince invited, "you can throw the first punch."

Did he think Blackie was that stupid? "That's mighty kind of you, Prince. But this is your thing, so you go ahead."

Blackie knew that the best way to end this quickly was to get Prince riled enough to make a mistake. Teasing the man who hated not being taken seriously was the best way to do it.

"Come on, Prince" Blackie egged him on. "Or are you afraid I'm gonna kick your ass again?"

Prince charged.

Blackie was ready.

When the tall, skinny man had almost reached him, Blackie hunched over, caught Prince around the waist and slammed him to the ground. The rush of adrenaline that surged through Blackie's body when Prince grunted in pain made him feel unstoppable.

Straddling Prince, Blackie leaned down, grabbed him by the shirt, and lifted him to his feet. "Was that fun, you son of a bitch?" Blackie asked through clenched teeth.

Without giving Prince a chance to answer, Blackie let go, pushed him back, and slammed his right fist into Prince's gut. Just before he doubled over, Blackie punched him in the jaw.

That's when the first gunshot split the air.

Leaving Prince where he lay, Blackie sprinted to the side of the yard and dove for cover behind a large boulder.

Whipping out his .357, he took aim at the eight men on the side of the house who were firing at him. When he stopped to reload, two men ran out of the woods, knelt beside him, and began shooting at the enemy.

Blackie was having a hard time believing what he was seeing. How the hell did Rebel and Judd get into the camp? And what were they doing dressed in colors; official blue denim Renegade vests?

When they ceased fire, Blackie looked from one brother to the other. "Where did you two get those clothes? Better yet, what the hell are you even doing here? I told you boys to stay home."

"Since when have we ever done anything you told us to do, big brother?" Rebel asked as a bullet hit the boulder, causing all three of them to duck. "We came here to give you a hand—which you obviously need—and we borrowed the vests from a couple of the lookouts at the edge of the property. Who, by the way, are resting right now. But they're each going to have a hell of a headache when they wake up."

As more gunfire erupted, the brothers huddled behind their shelter, waiting until there was a lull in the action. Then, standing side by side, all three opened fire on the remaining Renegades. The five men fell in a matter of seconds.

"What the hell happened to Prince?" Judd asked. "He disappeared."

"He's in the house."

Curious about who was behind them, all three McCassey's turned. Rebel and Judd were speechless when they saw a grin spread across Blackie's face. "Dragon," Blackie said as he

extended his hand to the man crouched in the dirt, "it's been a long time, man."

Dragon grabbed onto Blackie's hand and pulled him into a one armed hug. "Hell, Blackie, there ain't never a dull moment when you're around."

"Yeah, well, this is one time I woulda settled for a little less excitement. Hey, these are my brothers, Rebel and Judd."

Dragon shook Judd's hand. "Good to meet you, man."

"Same here."

Turning to Rebel, Dragon extended his hand and nodded in recognition. "So you're the Pied Piper. I hear you're one hell of a leader, man. The Renegades wanted to recruit you back about fifteen years ago, thought you'd make a good replacement when King retired. But The Devil here," he motioned to Blackie, "threatened to kill us all if we went anywhere near you."

Blackie didn't know what to make of the look Rebel gave him. It could've meant that he was surprised Blackie had spoken so well of him. Or maybe he was shocked Blackie had protected him from the gang's influence.

"All this reminicin' is great, Dragon, but we'll have to finish later. My wife is inside. I gotta get her."

"Don't worry, man, she's fine," Dragon said as casually as if nothing was wrong. "I took her out through the tunnel and left her behind a tree on the side of the house. Don't worry, though, she promised to stay where she was if I gave her a gun for protection."

Blackie's eyes widened. "And you believed her?"

"Yeah, man, why not?"

"She probably told you she was fine, too, didn't she?"

Dragon looked confused, but shrugged. "Damn if that ain't exactly what she said. You know your wife pretty well."

"Too well. You can bet your ass she ain't where she's supposed to be."

Dragon's expression immediately turned serious. "Then you might want to go find her before Prince decides to come back outside. I got a feelin' he ain't done fightin'. Not only that, he clocked the side of your wife's head pretty hard and she was swayin' on her feet."

"Goddammit!" Blackie swore. "I shoulda left her tied to that chair. Where'd you say you left her?"

"Over that way." Dragon motioned toward the house. "Not more than fifty yards from the tunnel door, restin' against the tree where we used to take target practice. Remember?"

Blackie nodded and quickly reloaded his weapon. He knew Angel wasn't waiting for him at the tree, and just hoped he was able to find her before things got out of control. "I'll be back in a minute," he told Rebel. "Stay put and keep your eyes open."

"We'll cover you, Blackie, go."

Blackie double checked his weapon, scanned the yard, and started toward the side of the house. He'd only gone a few steps when five men, including Prince, opened fire. Blackie dove to the ground and belly crawled back to the boulder. "Fuck! Where the hell did they come from?"

Rebel and Judd returned fire while Blackie interrogated Dragon. "How many men are in that damn house?"

"It wasn't much more than twenty," Dragon told him. "But you boys have already taken care of about half."

"If I'd known Prince was still that popular, I woulda brought more ammo."

"He ain't. Chances are he fed those guys a line about bein' ambushed by outsiders. You can bet your life on the fact that they don't know they're firin' at The Devil. Ain't none of them would cross you, man," he said, shaking his head. "Not one."

"I'm almost out of ammo," Judd announced.

Blackie swore under his breath. "How you doin, Reb?"

"I'm running low."

"Dragon, you packin'?"

"I was ... until I gave my .357 to your wife."

Blackie knew a lot of swear words, but not one of them was bad enough to describe what a loaded gun in Angel's hands meant.

Just then, a barrage of bullets flew in their direction, forcing the four men to crouch low in order to protect themselves. "We're sitting ducks out here unless we fire back, Blackie!" Rebel shouted. "I've got enough ammo to take out five if I'm dead on. Judd?"

"Yeah, bro. I've got enough for three. Blackie?"

Blackie checked the magazine of his gun. "Five!"

"We don't have a choice, Blackie," Rebel hollered over the noise. "We need to stand up and take some of them out!"

"All right, boys, I'm ready when you are. Be accurate," Blackie instructed, "and save a round or two each ... just incase."

Leading the charge, Blackie stood first, followed by Rebel. They'd each taken out three men a piece by the time Judd joined in. He got two Renegades with two bullets before ducking behind the boulder again. "I only got one round left," he told his brothers.

"I have two," Rebel announced.

Blackie shook his head. "I got one."

Rebel tucked his gun into the pocket of his jacket, then reached down and unfastened the sheath on his belt, removing his Bowie knife. "We're going to have to finish this one by hand, boys."

Simultaneously, Blackie and Judd reached down and pulled out their own knives.

Man it was good to have brothers. And although Blackie wasn't crazy about putting either one of them in danger, he knew there was no way they'd make it out of the camp alive if they didn't take out some of the men shooting at them. "Let's do it."

When who was left of the Renegades ceased fire, the McCassey brothers stood, ready to attack. Taking the lead, Blackie walked in front of Rebel and Judd, headed toward the house. Prince was in there somewhere, and Blackie wasn't leaving until he was dead.

When they were halfway there, five more men, lead by Prince, emerged from the house. "You're a dead man now, Devil!" he yelled as he raised his gun and pointed it at Blackie.

Before the McCasseys had time to jump for cover, a shot rang out from somewhere behind the trees. The Renegades

looked surprised, telling Blackie that the men hadn't known there was a sniper in the woods.

Whoever was out there wasn't protecting the gang, that was for sure.

An instant later, Prince yelped in pain, dropped his gun, and cradled his right hand. "Ahh!"

Blackie didn't need to see the invisible sniper to know who it was. When Renegades shot, they shot to kill. The sniper's shot had hit Prince in an area of his hand that would make it impossible for him to hold a gun, but hadn't done enough damage to kill him.

Angel had told him once that she never wanted to take another life. Which is how he knew she was the one who'd shot Prince. She was the one who had just saved Blackie's life.

Sprinting toward the boulder, Blackie, Rebel, and Judd retreated. All three dove behind it at the same time, landing inches from Dragon.

"Hoo-wee, Blackie! Whoever that was just saved your ass! Lousy shot, though. It only hit him in the hand."

"Wrong," Blackie corrected. "It was a perfect shot. Angel hit just where she was aimin'. She don't like killin'."

Dragon's eyes grew wide. "That was your wife?"

"Yeah," he said flatly, "that was my wife."

"She's a good shot."

"You're goddamn right she is. But I gotta go get her before Prince and his boys figure out where she is."

"You'd better hurry. It ain't gonna take them long."

Just as Blackie was ready to go after Angel, another shot rang out; this time it was just to the left of where the previous one had come from.

Another man yelled out in pain.

"She got that guy in his upper thigh," Rebel announced. "Smart girl; she's on the move."

"She's smart all right," Blackie admitted. "Too damn smart for her own good. She shoulda stayed hidden like Dragon told her to."

"If she had, you'd be dead."

"No kiddin', Judd. But I ain't dead, am I? And now there's three guys out there with guns and plenty of ammo who're gettin' ready to hunt down my wife. We got four bullets between the three of us. Four! That ain't good. If I can't get to Angel before Prince does, he'll kill her."

"Why don't you let her come to us?" Rebel suggested after she fired another shot. "She's moving this way." After a quick peek around the boulder, he said, "That one got it in his shoulder, by the way."

Damn! What the hell was he going to do? Blackie wasn't about to cower behind a rock while his wife defended him. Not only that, Prince could discover her at any moment and send the two unharmed men he had left into the woods after her. Blackie couldn't let that happen. He wasn't going to let anyone else hurt his wife.

"Judd, I want you to go into the woods after Angel. I'm gonna create a diversion to distract Prince and his two men. That should give you enough time to get her back here."

"No!" Rebel and Judd said in unison.

"They'll shoot you dead where you stand, Blackie," Rebel told him. "You want Angel to see that?"

"There ain't no other way, Reb."

Another shot.

Another cry of pain.

"She got another one," Judd announced. "And that sounded close. She can't be far away."

Blackie had had enough of sitting around debating. He stood, removed his knife from its sheath, and pointed at Judd. "Go find Angel and bring her back here. Rebel?"

Disapproval on his face and disgust in his voice, Rebel looked up at Blackie from his seat on the ground. "What?"

"Stay put." Before Rebel had a chance to respond, Blackie's left arm shot out, grabbed Rebel, and pulled him up just high enough for Blackie's right fist to make hard contact with the lower side of Rebel's jaw. His younger brother's head snapped back and he fell to the ground, unconscious. "Sorry, little brother, but I can't let anything happen to you. Gypsy needs a husband, and my nephews and niece need a father."

"He's going to kill you for that," Judd remarked.

"Better him killin' me than him gettin' killed."

Blackie leaned down and slapped Rebel's face, making sure he wasn't hurt too badly. When Rebel groaned, Blackie turned his attention to Dragon. "Keep an eye on him, will you?"

"Yeah," Dragon said, sounding as if he was in awe of what Blackie had just done to his own brother.

"You better pin him to the ground before he wakes up," Blackie warned his friend, "he's a fighter."

And with that, Blackie was gone.

* * * *

Seeing that her shot had hit its mark, Angel watched the man grab onto his shoulder and fall to the ground.

There were only two men left.

One was unhurt, the other was Prince. He'd disappeared into the house and reemerged just before she'd fired her gun, his right hand wrapped in what looked like a towel.

Angel knew it was only a matter of time before the gang members came after her, which is why she was trying to make her way to Blackie and his brothers.

It had occurred to her that the reason they were no longer firing was that they were probably low on ammunition, which was why she was doing her best to take out as many of Prince's men as she could.

A rustling in the bushes caught Angel's attention, and she turned her head to see Judd making his way toward her. The relief she felt at seeing a familiar face came as a surprise. She'd been preoccupied worrying that something was going to happen to Blackie and concentrating hard on trying to help him, that she hadn't had time to be scared.

Now that someone was there to help her, exactly what she'd been doing and how much danger she was actually in, finally sank in.

Grateful for her brother-in-law's presence, she couldn't wait to hand the gun over to him.

Judd had almost reached her when someone popped out from behind the tree and wrapped his left arm around Angel's

neck. In his right hand he held a switchblade, which he pressed against the side of her face. "Give me the gun!"

Angel saw Judd freeze. They made eye contact, and he nodded slightly, telling her to surrender her gun. She raised her arm slowly, holding the weapon in the air, and waited for the man to grab it. When he tore it from her hand, she tried to take a deep breath, the arm around her neck choking her.

Her captor chuckled and tucked the gun into the waistband in front of his pants. "Just wait until Prince hears we were being shot at by a girl."

Angel opened her mouth to tell him off, but caught a warning look from Judd and closed it.

"You!" the man shouted at Judd. "Get over here."

Angel watched Judd closely. He waited just a moment before slowly walking forward. Wearing a look of defeat, Judd appeared to be giving up. But Angel knew her brother-in-law better than that. She was sure he was just waiting for the right time to retaliate. And when it came, he'd strike faster than a rattlesnake.

"Out there," said the gang member, motioning toward the yard.

Once Judd was a few feet in front of them, the man holding Angel removed his arm from around her neck and grabbed a handful of her hair. "Move," he ordered.

When they exited the woods, the first thing Angel noticed was that Blackie and Prince were rolling around in the yard fighting. She could hear their grunting and heavy breathing from across the yard. When Prince got in a lucky shot to Blackie's gut, causing him to double over, Angel ignored the

iron grip her captor had on her hair and screamed for her husband, "Blackie!"

"Shut up!" yelled the man holding her.

But the sound of Angel's voice had distracted Blackie. And in the split second his attention was away from Prince, Prince reached out and grabbed a gun that was lying on the ground. The weapon had been partially hidden by one of the men Angel had shot, and was there for the taking.

The instant he had a firm grip on the gun, Prince yelled, "Do it!"

Angel watched Prince intently and didn't realize the order was being given to the man holding her. She'd been concentrating on watching what was going on with Blackie and Prince, that she didn't feel any pain from the blade. It wasn't until the sensation of warm blood flowing down her neck got her attention that she realized that the man holding onto her had sliced her throat.

Sharp, stinging pain immediately followed, but Angel's adrenaline kicked in and she was able to ignore it. Terrified that Prince was about to shoot Blackie, she yelled, "No!" at the same time she turned and reached for her captor's gun.

By the time she'd focused and aimed her gun at Prince's heart, he had his aimed at her as well. Out of the corner of her eye, Angel saw Judd turn in her direction, heard Blackie yell for her to take cover, but she tuned them both out. Concentrating on Prince, Angel squeezed the trigger, getting her shot off a mere second before he did.

Suddenly realizing that the man was no longer holding her, she dropped the gun immediately. Weak from loss of blood,

she tried to dive out of the bullet's path, but wasn't fast enough.

Angel felt searing pain as the slug seemed to slam into her left shoulder, and she fell backward into the hard-packed dirt. The cold ground beneath her, which only added to the unbearable pain in her neck and shoulder, suddenly began to vibrate. Only vaguely aware of what was going on around her, Angel thought she heard someone calling her name.

Blackie. She needed Blackie. Why wasn't he there? Had he been shot, too?

Desperate to see him, Angel tried to open her eyes, but her lids felt like they weighed a hundred pounds apiece. Unable to muster the energy to lift them, she gave up and tried calling out to him. But her mouth just didn't seem to want to work. No matter how hard she focused, she couldn't get a single word past her lips.

Faint voices drifted into her mind, but Angel couldn't determine if one of them was Blackie's. The sounds were muffled, as if they were all speaking in slow motion, and she wasn't able to tell one from the other.

Violent shudders suddenly seized her body. Something was draped over her and warded away the cold, but her body had a mind of its own and wouldn't stop shivering. The pain in her shoulder and neck began to fade away.

Death was just as peaceful as she imagined it would be...

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Chapter 39

While Blackie paced back and forth in the waiting area at Washington County Hospital, Rebel and Judd sat quietly, anxious for any news on Angel's condition.

Finally, Blackie sat down across from Rebel and pulled a pack of cigarettes from his jacket pocket. He placed one in between his lips, but before he had the chance to light up, Rebel reached out and snatched it. "You can't smoke in a hospital."

"What else am I supposed to do? Do they just expect me to sit here calmly?"

"Yes."

"She's been back there for hours. What the fuck is takin' so long?"

"Take it easy, man. She was messed up pretty bad."

Blackie looked up, his eyes revealing just how worried he was about his wife. Rebel understood exactly what his brother was feeling.

After Blackie's right hook to the jaw put him out, Rebel came to just in time to witness Angel's throat being slashed. It'd be a long time before he was able to get the sight of that out of his mind. And if he lived to be a hundred, he knew he'd never forget watching Angel, with blood gushing from her wound, grab the gun away from her captor, distract Prince to keep him from shooting Blackie, and fire a bullet into his heart.

When Prince's bullet struck her shoulder and she flew backward, crashing to the hard ground, Rebel could've sworn she was dead.

"They could at least let me know what the hell is goin' on. They won't even let me back there."

Rebel chuckled, caught the warning look Judd threw him, and ignored it. He figured a little razzing would repay Blackie for slugging him earlier. "Have you seen yourself?"

Blackie turned on him with a deadly glare. "What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

"Go look in the mirror, Blackie. You're twice the size of every one of those doctors, the clothes you have on are covered in blood, and you're wearing gang colors. The expression on your face is deadly, man. To tell you the truth, you're scaring the shit out of me. Lose the colors and the attitude, and maybe someone on the staff will feel brave enough to talk to you without feeling the need for protection from an armed guard."

"Well, you don't look no better," Blackie said with a half-hearted grin. "Incase you forgot, all three of us are dressed alike."

"Yeah, but Judd and I aren't anywhere near as terrifying as you. That wild mane of hair on your head isn't doing anything to help your cause, either. And speaking of that," Rebel said, rubbing his jaw, "you ever slug me again, I'll scalp you."

"You had no business puttin' yourself in danger like that, Rebel! I told you that from the beginnin'. You got a wife and kids who need you."

Rebel knew that knocking him unconscious was the only way Blackie could've kept him from getting involved in the fight. Rebel had only been out for a minute, but he understood why his brother did what he did. Even though Rebel and Judd were thirty-four and thirty-five, Blackie was still playing the part of the protective older brother. He'd only been looking out for Rebel's family.

Thirty minutes later, a doctor finally came out to talk to them.

"Mr. McCassey?"

Blackie jumped to his feet. "Yeah?"

Rebel saw the doctor's eyes widen, and had to stifle a smile as the man took two steps backward as Blackie approached him. After clearing his throat several times, he was finally able to speak. "Your wife is out of surgery. We have a top-notch plastic surgeon on staff, so the scarring on her throat should be minimal."

"What about the rest of her injuries?"

"The wound in her shoulder looked worse than it actually was. The bullet didn't do anything more than graze the skin. Everything else was just minor cuts and scrapes, which have all been cleaned and bandaged."

"Thanks."

"Your wife is one lucky woman, Mr. McCassey. She's fortunate she didn't lose those babies."

When the color drained from Blackie's face, Rebel looked at Judd, who shrugged.

"What?"

"It's common for miscarriages to occur when a woman's body experiences as much trauma as your wife's did today," the doctor explained, "especially in the first trimester."

The look of utter shock on Blackie's face was priceless. Apparently, he hadn't known Angel was pregnant.

"The first trimester? What the fu—"

Rebel's hand shot out and covered Blackie's mouth. "I think what my brother is trying to ask, doctor, is how far along is she?"

"Seven, maybe eight weeks. Sometimes it's hard to tell with twins."

Removing his hand so Blackie could speak, Rebel stayed close, just incase. "Twins?"

"Mr. McCassey," the doctor said slowly, "did you know your wife was pregnant?"

"No."

The doctor smiled, "Does she?"

"I ... don't know."

"Well, she's resting comfortably in a private room, so you can see her when you're ready. Go to the nurse's station at the end of the hall and they'll direct you to her room."

Obviously too stunned to speak, Blackie sat gingerly on the edge of a chair and buried his head in his hands. Winking at Judd, Rebel motioned for him to move closer. The brothers sat down across from Blackie.

"I've been looking forward to the day I become an uncle," Rebel said to Blackie cheerfully, "but I have to admit, you weren't the brother I thought would make me one."

Blackie lifted his head. "A baby."

"Babies," Rebel corrected. "The doctor said you're having two."

"You mean Angel's having two," Judd teased. "Blackie can't have babies."

"Will you two shut the hell up? I heard what the doctor said."

"Then what's the problem?" Rebel asked.

"I can't be a father. Angel ain't even supposed to be able to be a mother. She was told she couldn't have children."

"Why can't you be a father?"

"For the same reason you wanted me to see myself in the mirror, Rebel. Look at me!" Blackie held his arms out to the sides so Rebel and Judd could get a good look at his torn, bloody clothes. "I ain't fit to be responsible for someone else's life. Look at what happened to Angel today. She was almost killed because of shit that I got myself involved in over twenty years ago."

Rebel wasn't following. "So?"

"So ... who the hell knows when somethin' else from my past is gonna come back to haunt me? I can't expose innocent kids to that."

"None of that matters, bro," Judd spoke up. "You protected Rebel and me from the old man; you took a lot of beatings meant for us. There were a hundred times that bastard probably would've killed one, or both of us if you hadn't stepped in. You fought for us when we weren't strong enough to fight for ourselves. You'll be a good dad. You'll keep your kids safe because you'll love them."

Both men turned to stare at Judd.

Rebel had never heard him speak so highly of their older brother. He knew Judd admired and looked up to Blackie, but he'd never spoken his feelings aloud.

"Hey, bro, don't look at me that way."

"What way?" Blackie asked.

"Like ... you want to hug me."

Blackie made a face and pretended to be disgusted. "Judd, I'll beat your ass before I hug you. I'm sure I owe you a poundin' for somethin' ... a certain incident at the garage with a bucket of cold rainwater comes to mind."

Rebel leaned in close and rested a hand on Judd's knee. "You want me to hug you instead?"

Judd jumped up and tackled Rebel, who fell from his chair and onto the floor. Blackie was laughing at them until one of the doctors walked over and cleared his throat.

Blackie reached down, grabbing each of his brothers by one of their arms, and lifted them into the air. "Get the hell off the floor. Christ, you ain't ten years old no more."

After shoving them into separate chairs, Blackie pointed a finger at them. "I'm goin' to see my wife. You boys behave yourselves while I'm gone."

Rebel and Judd saluted their older brother. "Yes, sir."

Before leaving, Blackie stood silently, staring at Rebel and Judd. His features softened and his expression became serious. "It's good to have brothers," he said. Without waiting for a reply, he turned and walked away.

* * * *

Angel was sleeping when Blackie entered her room.

Sitting in a chair next to the bed, he remembered the first time he'd watched her sleep—at the cabin on Ten Acres. Her relaxed features had made her look much younger that day, just as they did today. The only difference in her appearance now was that her neck was wrapped in a white bandage.

Blackie hadn't truly known Angel then. He'd always admired her as a person, but now, after all they'd been through, he'd come to realize the depth of her love and loyalty. Blackie admired that more than anything. Angel had not only saved his life, she'd also been willing to die for him.

When Angel finally stirred and opened her eyes, Blackie reached for her hand. "Hey, Angel Face," he said, "how you feelin'?"

She stared at him for a moment, as if not quite believing he was sitting in front of her. "Are we dead?"

Blackie chuckled. "If we are, then I guess I'm gonna have to spend eternity lookin' like this." He held his arms out at his sides, the same way he'd done for his brothers earlier, allowing Angel to get a good look at him. "I had to wait hours for someone to tell me how you were doin'—Rebel said my appearance was scarin' the doctors away."

Angel smiled weakly. "I like the way you look."

"Why don't that surprise me?"

"Because you know me so well."

"I guess that means one of your next questions was gonna be where this was, huh?" Blackie held up his old blue and white flannel shirt, covered in dirt and blood, and watched Angel's smile grow and spread across her face.

Her eyes filled with tears and she reached for it with her right hand. Blackie shook his head and refused to give it to her. "It's filthy, Angel. I'll hold onto it until you get outta here. You shouldn't be around a lot of germs since you just had surgery. Hell, I probably shouldn't even be anywhere near you."

Angel's eyes widened in alarm. "Blackie, I don't want you to go!"

"Easy, I ain't goin' nowhere. Here," he said, and removed the string from around his neck that held the bullet from the .38 Special, placing it in her right hand. "You hold onto this until I can get the shirt washed."

Angel nodded and closed her palm tightly around the necklace. Just like the flannel shirt, Blackie had a feeling his body had seen the last of the crude piece of jewelry. He knew Angel would be wearing it the next time he saw her. And once she had it on, she'd probably never take it off—which made him love her even more.

"Thanks."

"It don't take much to please you, does it Angel Face?"

"Not when it comes to anything that has to do with you." After a moment of silence, she whispered, "I thought Prince was going to kill you."

"He almost killed you."

"Did he ... hurt you?"

Blackie shook his head. "You know I'm too mean to get hurt."

"I killed him," she said tentatively, "didn't I?"

Blackie nodded. "Yeah, you killed him."

"What—"

"No worries," Blackie interrupted, "Dragon's gonna take care of cleanin' up the mess—he owes me one from a long time ago. He also wants you to autograph his gun when you get better—said he ain't never seen a woman shoot like you."

Angel nodded but remained quiet.

"You didn't do nothin' wrong, Angel. You took a man's life to save mine. Did you hear me?" Blackie leaned forward and caressed her cheek. "You saved my life."

"I didn't want you to die, Blackie," she said, her voice quivering. Blackie wanted to stop her, tell her he didn't need an explanation, but he had a feeling she needed to get it out.

"When I left Hagerstown, I was going to shoot Willie Ramsey. But after the Renegades took me, I realized how wrong I was for thinking that way. I never should've left. I'm sorry."

"It ain't your fault, Angel. They woulda found a way to get to you whether you left or not."

Blackie spent the next thirty minutes sitting just inches from Angel, filling her in on everything that had happened. He told her about the bar, about things he'd done in the past, how he became a member of the Renegades, and why Prince wanted revenge. "I'd just about left that life behind by the time I married you. I'm sure I have a few enemies left out there, but I ain't gonna let them get to you, Angel Face, I promise."

"I don't care about what you did in the past, Blackie. I know what kind of person you are now, and that's all that

matters. That's why I took the article and pictures from the Renegade's camp. I know you're not that man anymore."

"There's somethin' else I gotta tell you."

"What is it? What's wrong?"

"Ain't nothin' wrong, Angel. You're ... I mean, we're..."

Why the hell was he having such a hard time saying it?

"You're pregnant."

Angel's eyes widened and she tried to sit up, but Blackie held her down. "You ain't supposed to move."

"A baby?"

"Two, actually. The doctor said you're havin' twins."

"Twins? No," she said, shaking her head in disbelief.

"Blackie, I can't have children."

Enjoying her shock, he smiled. "Well, apparently you can, Angel Face. And they're comin' sometime in July."

"Oh, my God! I can't believe it!" She looked at him with wonder. "Why are you so calm?"

"Calm?"

"Yes, Blackie, calm. You never wanted, or expected, to be a father. Now you're going to have two kids. Why aren't you upset?"

"I was ... at first," he said, hoping she'd appreciate his honesty. "I figured that I'm the last person on Earth who should be fatherin' children. But my brothers made me see it a different way."

"How?"

Blackie told her about their conversation. "I realize now that I took care of Rebel and Judd when they were younger because I loved them. They annoyed the shit out of me and

sometimes I felt like I wanted to drown them in the creek, but I did love them. And Judd was right, I took beatin's meant for them because they were little and couldn't handle the old man's constant abuse. I could.

"I'll love and protect our kids, Angel, I promise."

"I don't think I can do it, Blackie. I don't know anything about babies."

"No worries." He smiled and winked at her. "I know lots."

Fresh tears formed in her eyes as he leaned in and kissed her forehead.

"I love you, Blackie."

"I love you, too, Angel Face. Now get some rest."

"Will you be here when I wake up?"

He nodded. "I'll always be here."

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Epilogue

Seven months later

"Okay, Angel, it's time to push," Blackie instructed during her next contraction.

"I can't!"

"Goddammit, Angel, push!" Blackie yelled.

"No!"

Blackie shoved the phone into his Aunt Rose's hand and angrily scooted his chair back. Standing up, he walked to the side of the bed. "Goddammit, Angel, these babies are comin' whether you want them to or not. You can lay there doin' nothin', but they'll come out a hell of a lot faster and easier if you push!"

"Stop yelling at me, Blackie, this hurts! Ahh!" she yelled as another contraction wracked her body.

Blackie took hold of her hand in silent encouragement, allowing her to squeeze the life out of it until the contraction passed.

Then he began yelling at her again.

"Look, it was your bright idea not to tell anyone you were in labor until it was too damn late to go to the hospital! Now it's stormin' so bad outside that no emergency vehicles can be dispatched until the wind ain't blowin' a hundred miles an hour.

"I'm gonna have to deliver these babies, Angel—and thank you very much for that, by the way," he said sarcastically.

"So please, for Christ's sake, do what I ask before that nice, and extremely tolerant 911 operator hangs up on us!"

"Ahh! Blackie!" Angel reached for him as another contraction tore through her. "I ... can't ... do ... this!"

Still holding her hand, Blackie leaned in closer and spoke calmly. "Listen to me, Angel. You can do it. Do you hear me? You're tough, and you're a fighter. You've survived much worse than givin' birth to two little babies."

"Little? Why don't you try squeezing something the size of a watermelon out of something the size of a marble?"

He winked at her and shook his head. "No thanks, Angel Face, havin' babies is women's work. Us men ain't tough enough to handle that kind of pain."

Furrowing her brows, Angel started to tell him off. "Bullshi—" but another contraction hit her and she reached for him again. "Blackie!"

It killed Blackie to see his wife in such pain. Exhausted, drenched in sweat, and crying, Angel looked absolutely miserable. "I'd take all your pain away if I could, Angel, I swear. But we both know that ain't possible. The best I can do is make sure these babies get here safely. And the sooner that happens, the sooner you'll feel better. Are you ready?"

"Y-yes."

"All right. Places everybody, let's do this."

Blackie went back to the foot of the bed and took the telephone from Rose. Judd, who'd moved out of the way so Blackie could comfort his wife, climbed back up to the head of the bed and lifted Angel upward, supporting her from behind. Rebel and Gypsy each took hold of one of Angel's legs.

Blackie listened carefully to every instruction the 911 operator gave him, then handed the phone back to Rose. "I'm gonna run and wash my hands one more time, Angel Face. I'll be right back."

"Hurry, Blackie, here comes another ... one. Ooh!"

Blackie was back in seconds, telling Angel to push again. When he saw the head of the first baby, he looked at his aunt. "What do I do now?"

Rose took instructions from the woman on the other end of the line and relayed them to Blackie. Three pushes later, a baby boy slid into his hands. "The first one's a boy!" he announced.

Placing the baby in a blanket his Uncle Frank held, Blackie used the sterilized scissors and cut the cord. Then he stood and went to Angel, leaving Rose to take care of what needed to be done before the second baby could be delivered.

Kissing Angel softly, he took the washcloth Judd had been using to wipe the sweat from her forehead and dabbed her face. "You're halfway there, Angel Face, and you're doin' great."

"I'm tired, Blackie, I can't do this anymore."

"I know you're tired. But you have to, just one more time."

"Here comes another ... one."

Blackie ran into the bathroom and scrubbed his hands once more.

"All right, Angel, here we go. Get ready to push!"

The second baby was much easier to deliver. With one push, the tiny baby girl slid into her father's hands.

Frozen in place, Blackie stared at the small bundle, unable to believe that he had a daughter.

"Well," Judd said from behind Angel, "what is it?"

"It's a ... girl."

* * * *

Later that evening, after the paramedics had arrived and transported everyone to Washington County Hospital, Blackie was sitting at his wife's bedside holding his son and daughter.

"What are we gonna call them?"

"I was thinking about calling our son after his dad."

Blackie looked up at Angel and gave a stern, "No."

"Why not?"

"Because one Blackie Ace McCassey in this world is enough, Angel. Please."

"Then how about Robert?" she suggested. "It was Digger's name."

Amused, Blackie looked at his wife. "I didn't know Digger had a real name."

"Not many people did. What do you think?"

Blackie looked down at his sleeping son and smiled at the soft, light curls peeking out from underneath the baby's cap. The sight reminded him of how Digger's hair had looked under the Washington Redskins hat he wore every Sunday during football season.

Digger—one of the best friends Blackie ever had.

Somehow, Robert just seemed like too ordinary of a name for someone so unique; just as it had been for Angel's

brother. "I think maybe we should stick with Digger," Blackie said, still staring at the baby. "It fits him."

"Can we use Ace for his middle name?"

"Ain't there somethin' else you like better?" he asked, not wanting the sins of his name to be passed onto his son.

"What was your dad's name?"

"Lester."

Oh well, you can't win 'em all. "Ace it is."

Standing carefully, Blackie placed little Digger in his bassinet. Still holding his daughter, who was wide awake and staring at him with a pair of McCassey royal blue eyes, Blackie sat down again. "Think they'll stay this blue?" he asked Angel.

"I've never met a McCassey with any other color."

"She looks like a Lily to me." Blackie looked up at Angel.

Angel smiled. "It's pretty. I was hoping you'd want some say in what we named her. Lily what?"

"Lily Kate."

"But that's my—"

"I know it's your middle name, Angel Face, and I like it."

Interrupted by a knock, Blackie turned and saw Rebel, who was holding Jade, in the doorway.

"Sorry to interrupt, but they're about a hundred people in the hall waiting to see those babies. Are you up to some visitors?"

When she noticed Blackie, Jade squirmed to get out of Rebel's arms.

"It looks like there's one visitor who can't wait," Angel said. "She can come in, Rebel."

"I appreciate that. If I try to drag her out of here without letting her kiss her Uncle Blackie, her screams will get us busted for sure—since she's not even supposed to be up here."

Angel smiled. "How'd you sneak her up?"

"I did a little fast talking." Rebel winked at Angel and cleared his throat. "If anyone asks, she's your daughter."

Blackie laughed and rolled his eyes. "Jesus, Rebel, you could talk a damn drunk out of his last beer."

Rebel laughed and set Jade on her feet, then ducked out of the room.

Dragging a pink receiving blanket behind her, Jade toddled over to Blackie and raised her arms in the air.

"Hey, little darlin'. You want to come up?" Blackie asked.

"Up," Jade said, smiling.

Blackie placed Lily in her bassinet and lifted Jade into his lap. The little girl offered him her blanket, which he took, hugged, and draped over his shoulder. "Thanks for sharin'." He kissed the top of her head, which was now full of the same fiery red curls as Gypsy's. In return, Jade grabbed a tiny fist full of Blackie's long hair, snuggled against him, and stuck her thumb in her mouth.

"You sure are good with her," Angel remarked. "I hope I'm half as good with our kids as you are with Jade."

"You'll do fine, Angel. If us McCassey boys can figure out how to take care of babies, so can you."

"I guess."

"No one knows what they're doin' when they first start raisin' kids, but they learn. Hell, look at Digger. He didn't

know a damn thing about raisin' a kid when he took you in. He told me himself that he made mistakes. But in the end, he knew what was best for you. He knew what would make you happy."

"Are you talking about us?"

"That's exactly what I'm talkin' about, Angel. You were angry when Digger gave you the ultimatum of gettin' married or losin' the bar, but look how it turned out."

"How do you think he knew you were what I needed?"

"He obviously knew you a hell of a lot better than you thought."

Angel reached out to him and he took her hand in his. "Do you think we'll always be this happy?"

He grinned. "I don't know, Angel Face. Ask me again when our kids are sleepin' through the night."

When Angel smiled in return—her greenish-gray eyes once again dancing with mischief—Blackie felt warmth spread through that cold, dark heart of his.

He knew he'd never be anywhere close to perfect; moonshine tasted too good, long rides on his Harley were too relaxing, and fooling around, fighting with his brothers and cousins was just too much fun to give up.

But none of his faults seemed to matter to Angel. She loved him just the way he was, never trying once to change him.

And he loved everything about her; right down to the fact that she was still fearless, mouthy, and on a good day, could outshoot him in target practice.

They were made for each other.

The McCassey Brothers Trilogy Megabook
by Lauren N. Sharman

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About the Author

Lauren Sharman, who was voted the #1 BEST ROMANCE AUTHOR in the 2006 Annual Preditors & Editors Reader's Poll, has been creating characters and writing short stories since she was a little girl. But it was her love of reading that finally inspired her to write novels. At home in Maryland, she and her husband have two amazing kids, and share a passion for classic cars, music, and steamed crabs.

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In addition to The Devil's Candy (The McCassey Brother's Trilogy: Book 2), her other, award winning releases from Whiskey Creek Press include:

Growing Up Little, a mainstream fiction w/ romantic elements (May 2006).

#3 BESTSELLER at Whiskey Creek Press, June 2006.

Top 10 finisher in the 2006 Annual Preditors and Editors Reader's poll.

"Her Shadow": a short story in the Hate Anthology (August 2006).

#9 BESTSELLER at Whiskey Creek Press, September 2006.

No Worries (The McCassey Brother's Trilogy: Book 1) (October 2006)

#1 BESTSELLER at Whiskey Creek Press, December 2006.

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by Lauren N. Sharman

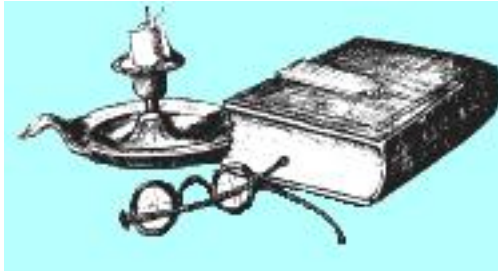
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DUSTY ROSE

by

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Growing Up Little

No Worries (The McCassey Brother's Trilogy: Book 1)

Witnessing her mother's murder put a label on Gypsy Lance that few people overlooked. Raised in foster homes, she spent her childhood yearning for love and acceptance. Nearly penniless, she arrives in Hagerstown, Maryland looking to put down roots and outrun a past she fears is about to catch up to her...

Blue-collar, bad boy Rebel McCassey knows what it's like to try and escape your past. No longer the hellion he once was, he's never been able to shake his family's bad reputation. When he finds Gypsy lost in the woods, her unconditional trust and refusal to judge him by his infamous last name touch Rebel in a place he didn't know existed ... his heart. When the demons chasing Gypsy are caught lurking in the shadows, Rebel vows to keep her safe, even if it means slipping back into his old ways...

The Devil's Candy (The McCassey Brother's Trilogy: Book 2)

Behind Angel Shelby's dancing eyes and mischievous smile, lie the razor sharp tongue and fearless attitude that have helped her conceal painful secrets. However, they aren't enough to save her this time—as she's issued a shocking ultimatum.

Nicknamed, The Devil, Blackie McCassey's violent past keeps most people exactly where he likes them ... at a distance. Sacrificing his freedom to repay an old debt, he agrees to marry Angel in name only, watch over her, and play peacemaker in the uncivilized bar she runs. Along with unexpected happiness, marriage brings surprises. Once wild and reckless, Blackie suddenly finds himself in the unfamiliar position of keeping someone else out of trouble ... his wife. When a murder occurs, Blackie's forced to face his past one last time, risking his life to put an end to the chaos disrupting their lives. Unfortunately, victory comes at a price...

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Dedication

~~For sisters everywhere.~~

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Acknowledgements

Bobbi, Ronnie, and Sarah, thank you for rescuing Judd. Without the three of you, he wouldn't have survived long enough to be in his own book.

Mom, Dad, Bobbi, Sarah, and Shannon, thanks for dropping everything to read the manuscript on such short notice. Your opinions and suggestions were extremely helpful.

Family and friends; you guys know how important you are to me. There are bits and pieces of all of you in each of the characters I create—perhaps that's why I feel so attached to them.

Joey, Tanner, and Chloe ... as always, I love you.

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Prologue

Hagerstown, Maryland, 1978

Chaos erupted the instant the front door crashed violently against the living room wall.

"Dusty!"

Relieved to hear her older sister's voice, eighteen-year-old Dusty Zamora came to her senses enough to answer.

"Jessie!" she yelled as loud as the hand over her mouth allowed.

As her sister flew into the room, gun drawn, Dusty bit the hand covering her mouth as hard as she could, forcing her enormous attacker to release his hold. With barely enough time to roll out of the way, Dusty covered her head just as the first of five consecutive, deafening blasts from Jessie's .357 Magnum echoed through the room.

Just inches from Jessie's target, Dusty jerked and stiffened as the warm blood of her attacker splattered her face; her body heaving as she fought the urge to vomit.

When everything was quiet, she looked up.

Followed by their two other sisters, Alex and Benni, Jessie was the first one to reach her. "Dusty?"

"I'm okay," she said as Jessie grasped her upper arm and pulled her to her feet.

Taking in the bloody scene on the floor, Dusty could hardly believe her younger sister, Courtney, was dead. Next to her lay their mother's ex-boyfriend, Earl—the bastard; the well-deserved victim of Jessie's perfect timing and flawless aim.

"What do we do now?" Benni asked.

"We get the hell out of here," Jessie told them, using an old T-shirt that had been lying on the sofa to wipe some of Earl's blood from Dusty's face.

"What about Court?"

"She's dead, Benni, there's nothing we can do."

"But—"

"But nothing!" Jessie's temper exploded. "We've got to get out of town before Sheriff Johnson discovers what went on here! Earl was a friend of his, and if he catches us, he'll find a way to charge us all with murder and make sure we spend the rest of our lives in prison."

"I don't want to leave her, Jessie!"

Jessie shoved Benni—who was as close to hysterics as Dusty had ever seen her—toward the hallway. "You don't have a choice! I'm the oldest and we do what I say! Grab a small bag and pack only what you can't do without. Go! You've got two minutes; all of you."

With shaking hands, Dusty took the trash bag Alex offered her and scrambled to toss in a few shirts, two pair of jeans, and some clean underwear; she didn't own anything else worth holding onto.

When the sisters had hastily packed what they could, one by one, they filtered out the front door.

"Where are we going?" Dusty asked.

Jessie never hesitated before replying, "To The Renegade's camp."

Dusty should've known. A certain member of the Renegades was who Jessie always went to when she needed something. "How will we get there?"

"Let's go to McCassey's Garage. Blackie will get us out of town."

And get them out of town he did.

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Chapter 1

Hagerstown, Maryland, October, 1988

Dusty Zamora rolled into town on an Indian summer afternoon hot enough to make the devil fry.

Ironically, The Devil was one of the people she'd come to see.

Hopefully, he had the information she needed.

Slowing her Harley Davidson Fat Boy down to the posted 30mph speed limit, Dusty cruised through the center of town, taking in the scenery as she headed toward her destination. Smiling in spite of herself, she was happy to discover that not much about their hometown had changed in the ten years since she and her three sisters had left.

Had she not been in such a hurry, Dusty would've taken time to stop somewhere and clean up; wash the travel dirt from not only her body, but her trademark long, silky and thick, blue-black hair as well. Hanging just past her shoulders in two braids, she could almost feel the grit that had embedded itself during her long trip. One quick touch to the top of her head told her that the bandanna she'd tied there was filthy as well.

Dusty also would've put on an outfit that made it look a little less like she made her living working the street corner. She was dressed completely in black leather—including her motorcycle boots—the chaps covering her skintight blue jeans fell almost to her ankles. More than anything, the matching top that covered no more of her upper body than a bra, was

going to make it difficult for anyone to pay more attention to her words than her clothes.

But she didn't have time to mess around with trivial things like her appearance. She'd come to Hagerstown for one reason and one reason only; a shower and change of clothes would have to wait.

When the red brick building with the sign reading, McCASSEY'S GARAGE, finally came into view, Dusty smiled at the scene before her: six men dressed in sleeveless, polyester, navy blue mechanics coveralls were on the side of the building tossing around a football.

The McCassey brothers and their cousins.

Slowing the bike, Dusty downshifted as she watched Rebel, the youngest of the three brothers, catch a pass and sprint across the lot for a touchdown. Part-owner of the garage since he was eighteen, Rebel had always been the go-to guy when one of his family members was in trouble; finishing a hell of a lot more trouble than he started.

From a distance, Rebel looked the same. Somewhere around six foot three, his broad, muscular body had always been something fine to look at.

Walking over to Rebel and offering him a high five was his older brother, Judd. Happy to see that the ten months separating them was apparently no longer a fuel for their raging sibling rivalry, Dusty was amazed by how much the brothers now looked alike. Nearly the same height and weight, the only thing—other than the softball-sized skull and crossbones tattoo on Rebel's left bicep—that distinguished them as individuals was their hair: Rebel's had always been

shoulder length and jet black. Judd's had lightened a little over the years, and his fluffy, little-too-long, loose and unruly curls were now dark brown.

Completing the round of high fives was the boys' oldest brother, Blackie. Six feet seven the last time she'd seen him, Blackie didn't look like he'd gotten any taller, but his body was much more muscular. A constant weightlifter since the age of ten—mostly so he could defend himself and his brothers against their father—Blackie looked like he easily weighed three hundred pounds.

Spending a combined total of almost thirteen years in prison, Blackie, she'd heard through mutual friends, was bigger and meaner each time he'd been released. His long, thick hair, which was the same color as Judd's, was down to the middle of his back now. Dusty wondered vaguely whether he'd cut it even once since the last time they'd seen each other.

A former member of The Renegades—the outlaw biker gang she and her sisters had ridden with on and off for the past ten years—Blackie, with his dark fu man chu mustache, still looked the part. He'd been given the nickname, The Devil, when he joined the gang at the age of seventeen, and had not only lived up to, but well surpassed his bad reputation.

Which is why he was the one she'd come to see.

For now.

The other three men she recognized were the boys' cousins, Brady and Kane, and their uncle, Jimmy. Most of the guys were between seven and twelve years older than her,

but they'd all grown up together, and she'd gotten to know them very well through her sisters.

It was good to see so many familiar faces.

It was good to be home.

Turning into the front parking lot, Dusty pulled to the side, parking the bike next to a black GMC tow truck—Rebel's, if she remembered correctly.

Shutting off the engine, she put down the kickstand and stood, leaning the bike to the left and turning the wheel just a hair, making sure the bike was balanced before letting go of the handlebars.

Swinging her right leg over the bike, Dusty raised her hands in the air and stretched her weary body. Traveling through the night hadn't been easy, but had been necessary. The answers she hoped Blackie could give her were a matter of life and death.

* * * *

Judd McCassey caught up to his cousin Brady and shoved him out of bounds, clearing the way for Rebel to run past them and score a touchdown in the makeshift end zone.

While heading over to high-five his brother, Judd caught sight of a small rider on a very large, loud Fat Boy pulling into the garage parking lot. The rider's outfit more than gave away the fact that she was a woman, and left little to the imagination.

"Hey, Blackie," he said when his oldest brother came over and stood next to him, high-fiving Rebel, "she a friend of yours?"

"Ain't no friend of mine, little brother," Blackie told him. "Angel would kick my ass—better yet, shoot it—if I was hangin' around with girls who looked like that while she was home takin' care of the twins. Maybe this woman's lookin' for the only McCassey brother that ain't married yet."

Knowing Blackie was right about at least one thing, Judd laughed. His sister-in-law, Angel, was as tough as any man, and probably a much better shot. She and Blackie might be twelve years apart, but they were a perfect match. Most importantly, they kept one another in check, which meant that so far, they'd been doing a good job of keeping each other out of trouble in the little over a year they'd been married.

As far as this girl looking for an unmarried McCassey brother, he had his doubts.

"Let's check it out," Rebel said as he used his upper arms to wipe the sweat from one side of his forehead, then the other.

Judd watched his younger brother run a hand through his sweat-soaked hair, then, without bothering to check if anyone was behind him, Rebel began walking to the front of the building.

Curious himself, Judd followed. At thirty-five, Rebel might be one of the youngest of the core group of McCasseys, but he was smart, and had always been the unofficial leader of their large family. Judd knew without asking that most, if not all of their uncles and cousins would follow Rebel into any situation, no questions asked. His two young sons, four-year-

old Raider, and three-year-old Chase, were already showing signs of being exactly like their father.

As they rounded the building, Judd got a much better look at the woman. She'd parked the bike and was sitting on the bed of Rebel's tow truck with her legs dangling over the side, watching them, he was sure, through her dark sunglasses.

Her eyes may have been hidden, but the large, fading bruise on her left cheek was out in the open for them all to see. As they got closer, Judd also noticed her two very visible scars.

A small, jagged scar on her neck—which looked as if someone had tried to cut her jugular and missed—sent chills up his spine. The other one, a giant burn running the length of her right arm, was just as bad. Surprisingly, she didn't seem to have any tattoos ... a well-known trademark of an outlaw biker.

This girl, whoever she was, looked as though she'd been through something much worse than hell.

His brothers and cousins had obviously noticed the same thing, which is why none of them let loose with any whistles, cat-calls, or sexist comments as they normally would've done when they came upon a female acquaintance dressed the way this one was. Despite their horrid reputations, none of them would ever harass a woman they didn't know.

"I never thought I'd see the day when there'd be six speechless McCassey men standing in front of me. Especially you two," she said, pointing to Brady and Kane. "What's the matter? You all forget what a woman looks like?"

That voice ... Judd recognized it. The last time he'd seen the girl it belonged to, she was eighteen years old and sneaking out of town in the middle of the night ... and she'd looked a hell of a lot different. It was her, though. Judd would've known her anywhere. "Well, I'll be goddamned," he said in a surprised whisper, "Dusty Zamora."

Turning in the direction of the voice, Dusty removed her sunglasses—revealing the complete remnants of her black eye—and set them next to her. Smiling, she slid off the tow truck. "Well, it's nice to know that at least one of you recognized me."

Surprised when she extended her arms toward him, Judd didn't hesitate to step forward and pull her close. Breathing in her scent—which consisted mostly of well-worn leather and the outdoors—took him back to a time in his life he would never forget. Out of all five Zamora sisters, Dusty had always been the one he liked best. She was eight years younger, but their age difference had never mattered to him. They'd hung out in a lot of the same places and around many of the same people since they were young.

After swinging her around in a circle, Judd set her on her feet and stepped back to take a better look at her. Dusty's beauty had always fascinated him. Her high cheekbones and silky, straight, blue-black hair might be the only features she'd inherited from her full-blooded Cherokee Indian father, but they gave her a unique look. Dusty's dark hair was a sharp, striking contrast to her cream-colored skin, and set off her blue eyes; so pale that sometimes they looked white.

"Damn, it's good to see you! Where the hell have you been the last ten years?"

Dusty backed away a few steps and reached for her sunglasses, replacing them. "You don't want to know."

"Yeah," Blackie interrupted in a stone-cold voice, "we do. Where've you been, Dusty, and where are your sisters? Jessie ain't never left you alone. Never."

It wasn't until Blackie mentioned Dusty's oldest sister that Judd remembered just how strong of a friendship Blackie and Jessie had shared. Jessie had always been just as wild as Blackie, usually getting away with a lot more because she was a girl.

Eying him up, Dusty tilted her head to the side; obviously forcing the smile she gave him. "Christ, Blackie, aren't you even going to say hi first?"

"Hi, Dusty," he said quickly. "Where the hell are your sisters? And what are you doin' ridin' in here on that thing?" he asked, pointing to the bike. "A Fat Boy is a little big for you."

"Oh, that doesn't belong to me."

Judd smiled inwardly when Blackie raised both eyebrows. "Then who does it belong to?"

Dusty shrugged and said, "The guy I stole it from," as casually as if she'd said, 'a friend.'

"You're on the run?"

"Yeah," she said much more seriously. "It's a long story, though. You boys have time?"

Blackie nodded and motioned toward the three open bay doors leading to the inside of the garage.

"I have to get something first; I'll be there in a minute."

As the rest of the boys headed inside, Judd remained still, watching as she strode to the motorcycle, reached inside one of the black leather saddlebags, and pulled out a roll of bills. On her way back, she stopped next to him.

"It's really good to see you, Judd. You married?"

"Nope."

"Seeing anyone special?"

He shook his head. "No one to speak of."

Judd saw just a hint of the old Dusty when she grinned, stood on her tip toes, looped her arm around his neck, and pulled him down low enough to be able to touch his mouth with hers; giving him the wildest kiss he'd had since the last time she'd done that—and more—to him ... ten years earlier.

When they parted, she let go, licked her lips, and smiled. "Mmm ... you haven't lost a thing."

Not quite sure what kind of response she was looking for, he did nothing but offer her a smile in return.

"Speechless twice in one day? Come on, Judd, you can do better than that."

"I don't know what to say, Dusty. I'm still recovering from the last time you did that to me."

"Well then," she said seductively, "I'll take that as a compliment." With a wink, she brushed past him and walked inside.

As he watched her go, Judd shook his head in an effort to clear it. Just like the McCasseys, wherever the Zamora sisters were, trouble wasn't far behind.

Following Dusty inside, Judd got the distinct feeling that they were all headed down a dark, dangerous road.

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Chapter 2

In the corner of the garage next to the office, Blackie and Rebel were sitting in metal chairs at the same square card table that had been there the last time Dusty was.

As soon as Brady and Kane spotted her, the two of them headed out the door without saying goodbye. Jimmy—uncle to all the boys, but somewhere around Rebel's age—headed out, too. "I'm going out to pick up some parts," he told her. "I'll see you later, Dusty."

She thought it was odd that the three of them would leave ... until she got a look at the expression on Blackie's face.

A warrior at heart, Blackie had been battle-ready from the day he was born.

He knew there was something going on, and Dusty's guess was that she had about five seconds to volunteer the information before he shook it out of her.

When she and Judd were finally seated at the table, Dusty, who was sitting to Rebel's right, handed him the wad of bills. "When my sisters and I showed up here looking for help ten years ago, you gave us a thousand dollars. Jessie promised to pay you back with interest, and there it is."

All four of them were silent as Rebel counted the money. "Dusty, there's two thousand dollars here," he said, trying to hand half of it back to her. "I don't care about the damn interest. The thousand dollars is fine."

Dusty shook her head and pushed Rebel's hand away. "Jessie said you were to have it, so take it." When he made

no move to comply, she lowered her voice and looked him in the eye. "Please."

Apparently understanding her plea, he nodded, rolled up the bills, and stuffed them in the side pocket of his coveralls.

Relieved he wasn't going to argue with her, Dusty relaxed a little. "You don't know how good it is to see you guys."

Blackie didn't seem interested in small talk. "Who're you runnin' from?"

Dusty sighed. In all her twenty-eight years, she'd never come across a more frightening, intimidating man—and she'd been around dozens of them. "I'm looking for Jessie," she said, watching Blackie's reaction. "Has she been here?"

"No," he said suspiciously, "I ain't seen Jessie since the three of us snuck you and your sisters outta town. Is she supposed to be here?"

"Sort of. We had some trouble down in southern Virginia a few weeks ago with a local gang called the Drifters."

"I've heard of them," Blackie acknowledged. "They've gotten to be a pretty big bunch over the past few years."

Dusty nodded. "To get away, Jessie and I had to split up. Before we went our separate ways, we set three different meeting places. If we didn't catch up with each other at any of them by today's date, we agreed to meet here."

"Christ, Dusty, I thought you all were ridin' with the Renegades. What happened?"

"We left the Renegades when King died. He was a good, fair leader. But after Prince killed him and took over, well, you knew that man. He was greedy as hell. And careless. King, I

would've followed anywhere; Prince, I wouldn't follow into the grocery store."

Blackie chuckled without humor. "Who are you ridin' with now?"

"We still ride with the Renegades every once in a while, but we mostly stick to ourselves. No one owns any of us," she told the brothers, wanting to make it clear that neither she, nor any of her sisters, had ever been anyone's bitch.

Blackie let out a long, low whistle. "So you girls have been on your own since just a few years after you left town? That's a rough life," he said, eyeing her scars. "I thought you'd have left it behind by now."

She had left it behind ... for the most part. She and all her sisters had ridden with the Renegades for a while after leaving Hagerstown. But then Dusty's life had taken a sudden, unexpected turn. She'd ridden with the gang on and off since she was eighteen, but hadn't been an outlaw biker during that time. She'd only become one recently ... very recently.

She wasn't crazy about anyone thinking she'd been living a life of crime; but for their sakes, it was better to let the McCassey brothers believe what they wanted.

She'd like to leave her current life behind and start over, but she didn't even know if she had the courage to take that first step ... a step she hoped to take while she was here.

"Old habits, Blackie, you know?"

He nodded, obviously knowing how hard it was to change something that had been a part of your life for so long.

"What about Alex and Benni? Are they supposed to meet here, too?"

At the mention of her other two sisters, Dusty once again felt the nagging sadness she'd unsuccessfully been trying to bury. She shook her head and glanced at her scarred arm. "Benni died in a fire a couple years ago. Alex wound up on the wrong end of a .357 a while back."

Blackie's eyes widened and his face took on a hard look. "Jesus Christ, what the hell happened?"

Should she tell them the whole story?

No, she couldn't.

If Dusty told them exactly what was going on, the brothers would jump in head first to try and help her. She didn't want them in that kind of danger.

"It's just Jessie and me now," she said, ignoring Blackie's question.

"What happened?" Blackie demanded. This time, he looked as if he really would shake the information out of her if she didn't tell him what he wanted to know.

"There's a guy—someone we've known for a long time—who's always had a thing for Alex. We hadn't seen him in years, but six months ago, we ran into him in a bar. He wanted to take her for a ride, but she turned him down and we left.

"We thought that was the end of it, but he dogged our heels for months, constantly harassing Alex. She finally tried to put him in his place by pulling a gun and insulting him in a bar packed with a bunch of the Drifters. He wasn't wearing

colors, so we had no idea that every guy in the place was a friend of his."

Dusty paused to take a deep breath to try and get her emotions under control.

Blackie, however, had no patience. "And?"

"And he pulled a gun and shot her first. The instant Alex went down, Jessie pulled her own gun and shot the guy in the head. After that, all hell broke loose. I caught a bullet from a .9 millimeter here." She stood and pointed to her hip, then gingerly sat down again. "I got lucky that it only nicked the bone. Still hurts sometimes. Jessie caught two in the leg."

Dusty noticed the disbelief on both Rebel and Judd's faces. But Blackie, who she knew was all too familiar with the kind of life she was describing, just looked like he felt sorry for her.

She hated that and didn't want to be pitied ... didn't need to be.

"We holed up at a friend's house for three weeks," she continued. "Five days ago, we headed out to catch up with a few of the Renegades we heard were nearby; your friend Dragon was with them," she told Blackie.

"Halfway there, we stopped at a bar called Thunder Ground, and ran into a handful of the same bunch we got into it with the night Alex died. The guy Jessie killed had a brother who wasn't too happy about his kin being taken down by a woman. The two of us got away, but split up to try and shake them off our trail. Only a few of them came after me, so I'm assuming the rest stayed with her.

"Something must've happened for her not to be here. I'm starting to get the impression that's what she wanted."

"You think she's comin'?"

"I did," she told them, her shoulders slumping in defeat. "Now I'm not so sure. She went north and I went south, so I had to double-back to get to Hagerstown. She should've beaten me here by at least half a day."

Picking up the cigarette lighter on the table in front of him, Blackie began absentmindedly flicking it. "What are you gonna do?"

"I'll hang out here a few days and see if she shows."

"What about the stolen bike?"

She shrugged. "What about it?"

"Is its owner gonna show up lookin' for it?"

"Not unless he miraculously recovered from the bullet I put in his thigh last night. From the damage I saw in the rearview mirror, he shouldn't be able to ride anything for a while."

Blackie looked at her and tilted his head. "Are you packin', Dusty?"

Looking at him as if carrying a gun was no different than carrying a wallet, she answered, "Of course, aren't you?"

"No."

Blackie McCassey without a gun? Wow. She knew he was on parole, but that had never stopped him from messing around with firearms before. Dusty was literally shocked into silence.

"I'm married with kids, Dusty. Every gun I own, except the few I had transferred into Angel's name, are up at Ten Acres. I don't carry one no more."

Dusty smiled as she thought about the ten acres of property—which had been officially dubbed Ten Acres long ago—that had been in the McCassey family since their great-great-great grandfather, Patrick McCassey, won it in a poker game in 1832. The land had never been developed, but there was a cabin in the middle of it where the McCassey brothers and their cousins stayed during hunting season. It was always sort of a guy place, so even though Dusty had been on the property several times, she'd never been to the cabin.

Dusty had heard from Dragon that Blackie had married Angel Shelby, Dusty's best friend. With everything she had on her mind, she'd forgotten. "Congratulations, by the way. Dragon told me he'd seen you two." Then, remembering that Angel had been shot trying to protect Blackie, she added, "Sorry I wasn't there."

"Angel's fine," he assured her as though he could read her thoughts.

"Dragon told me about Digger, too," she said quietly, "He was a good man. He didn't tell me you had kids, though."

"We didn't know she was pregnant when we saw him. She had twins, one of each."

No wonder Blackie didn't carry a gun anymore.

Shifting her gaze to Rebel, she acknowledged his marital status as well. "I read about you and Judd in the paper. You married the girl you rescued, right?"

He nodded. "Her name's Gypsy. We have three kids, all about to have birthdays. Raider will be five, Chase four, and Jade two."

"Yeah, I heard," she said, hearing the sadness in her own voice. Apparently, she'd been wrong when she thought not much had changed. Two of the roughest, toughest men she'd ever known were now husbands and fathers. They may not ever be considered decent men as far as society was concerned, but she knew they were good people. Right now, she felt like they were too good for her. "That's really great, Rebel. I always knew you were going to do something great someday."

"Getting married and having kids isn't a major accomplishment, Dusty, it's just a part of life."

"Yeah, well, it is to me."

Changing the subject before the brothers could say anything else, Dusty asked Blackie where he and Angel were living.

"Her house," he said. "You ought to stop over. She'd love to see you."

Dusty nodded and stood. "Tell her I'll be by sometime tomorrow," she told him, knowing full well she wouldn't show. It was far too dangerous for Blackie's family for her to go anywhere near them.

"Where you goin'?"

"I have a couple things to take care of. It was good seeing you boys."

Blackie stood abruptly and held out his hand. "Give me your gun."

"What?"

"Your gun, Dusty. Give it to me. Now."

Out of the corner of her eye, Dusty noticed Judd was watching with interest as she and Blackie stared each other down. Wondering if he was going to step in and take his brother's side, she continued to stare silently.

Allowing another few seconds to pass before relenting, Dusty finally raised her right leg and planted her foot on the metal chair. Lifting the cuff of her jeans, she withdrew a massive, silver-handled .44 Magnum from the holster attached to her boot, and handed it to Blackie.

He raised a brow as he emptied the magazine and chamber. "Gun's a little big for you, ain't it?"

"I can handle it," she said, defiantly.

After unloading the gun and dropping the ammunition into the back pocket of his coveralls, Blackie gave a slight nod and handed the weapon back.

Dusty had plenty more ammo and Blackie probably knew it. But his silent warning hadn't gone unnoticed. She was welcome at the garage; her loaded gun wasn't.

"See ya," she said, and turned to go. Just before reaching the open bay door, Dusty heard footsteps behind her. All three of them are back there, she said to herself. What do they want now? Don't they know that walking away is hard enough without having them follow?

When they all reached the motorcycle, Dusty turned around just in time to see Blackie squat down and inspect the gas tank.

"I don't think I have to tell you that ridin' around on this stolen bike is an invitation for trouble. Look here," he said, pointing to the underside of the tank where the initials BDJ

were etched inside a red circle. "It's branded. I'm sure you know that only high-rankin' gang members mark their bikes, and that senior officers are the only ones who use color. No matter how bad you hurt that guy, Dusty, he's gonna be lookin' for this. And you can bet your ass he ain't gonna be doin' it alone."

Dusty winced inwardly at her careless mistake.

She'd had to make a quick getaway the night before, and had hopped on the closest bike. Who knew the gigantic man she'd stolen it from was probably the leader or second lieutenant? Thank God she'd taken the time to dump his saddlebags and pick up her own. Keeping his stuff would've brought on a whole other set of problems as well.

She couldn't afford to be spotted, let alone spotted on that bike. Turning to Rebel, she asked a bigger favor than she had a right to. "You know somewhere I can stash it?"

"How about if we dump it?"

Dusty shook her head. "The guys I ran into last night are part of the bunch Jessie and I are running from. Even though it was only a small group of about ten, they know who I am and where I'm from. It's not going to be long before they show up here looking for me. I can't let them spot me—especially on that bike—until I find out what happened to Jessie. Then ... I may need to bargain with it."

The expression on Rebel's face told Dusty he seemed to understand that she might now have to trade the gang member's bike for Jessie's life ... or her own. Aw hell, who was she trying to kid? If those guys found her, there was no chance they'd listen to anything she had to say. After last

night, they'd be out for blood. The thought that she'd probably be long dead before she could open her mouth to mention making a bargain sent an ache straight to her heart.

All she could hope for now was that her sister showed up before the Drifters did.

"We'll store it down in the pit," he told her, referring to the fifteen yard long area at the back of the garage that was ten feet underground. Dusty remembered that the guys had always stored tools and old tires down in the extra space. She also remembered that when they rolled a tool cabinet or two over the bulkhead leading down there, it was well hidden enough that one would never know the room existed.

That was one load off her mind ... at least for now.
"Thanks. With any luck, Jessie will be here in a few hours. I'll get the bike from you as soon as I can and dump it myself. It's a big risk for you to keep it too long."

"Since you're leaving," Rebel said, "what do you want us to do if Jessie shows up?"

Dusty leaned down and unfastened the saddlebags. "Just tell her I'm here," she said, slinging them over her left shoulder. "She'll know where to find me."

"That's it?" Judd asked, as if he expected her to invite them all to go along.

"That's it," she responded casually, looking from one brother to another, her gaze lingering on Judd a second longer than the others. Turning away, she took just a few steps and turned around again. "Do me a favor, will you?"

"What?" Rebel asked, seeming to be the only one who could find his voice.

"Wait until after I leave to start talking about me; I have really good hearing."

There was only silence as she turned away again. No chuckles, no jokes, and no one making an attempt to follow her. Although it saddened her to leave the McCassey brothers behind, it was only temporary. If Judd hadn't taken her hint, she'd be back.

Stopping at the edge of the parking lot, Dusty kept her back to the men as she glanced down the main street toward the sound of an approaching tractor trailer. Sticking out her thumb, she held it high to attract the attention of the driver. Stopping almost directly in front of the garage, the man behind the wheel motioned for her to get in.

Dusty walked in front of the truck and around to the passenger side. After opening the door and placing her saddlebags on the floor, she climbed up into the seat, not allowing her gaze to drift anywhere else but straight ahead.

She knew what the brothers were probably thinking, and couldn't bear to see the disappointment on their faces.

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Chapter 3

Judd was shocked as he watched Dusty climb into the cab of the passing tractor trailer. It wasn't until the truck had pulled away and was completely out of sight that he was able to speak. "What the hell just happened here?"

His brothers looked as confused as he felt.

"I don't know, little brother," Blackie said. "But if I had to guess, I'd say Dusty Zamora is in a hell of a lot of trouble. And from what she said, so is her sister."

"Do you think Jessie'll show up?"

Deep down, he knew what Blackie's answer was going to be, but Judd still felt sick to his stomach anyway when his brother shook his head.

"Do you think she's alive?"

"Not if the brother of the guy she killed caught up with her."

"Goddammit!" Judd had known all five of the Zamora sisters their entire lives. Jessie and Alex had always been closer to Blackie, but Benni and Dusty, even though they were a lot younger, had been good friends with him and Rebel. Their youngest sister, Courtney, had been close to his cousin, Flynn.

Wild and unsupervised, the Zamora sisters had no trouble keeping pace with Judd, his brothers, and cousins. It never mattered what they were getting themselves into, the sisters never shied away from anything.

Jessie and Alex had been keeping company with a couple of the Renegades since they were young teenagers, which is why when the sisters showed up at the garage in the middle of the night all those years ago, Blackie had taken them to the biker gang's camp midway between Hagerstown and Cumberland.

The girls had been a big part of Judd's life for a long time. Now, with the exception of Dusty—and possibly Jessie—they were all gone.

He wished he didn't know how to feel about that, but the sense of loss was almost overwhelming.

"What now?" he asked Blackie.

"Now," Blackie drawled, "we get this goddamn bike outta the parkin' lot and into the pit before anyone else sees it. It ain't gonna be very much fun for the three of us if the Drifters come ridin' into town and find it here."

The three brothers were exhausted and drenched in sweat by the time the stolen motorcycle had been taken down the concrete steps and loaded into the pit.

"I don't think we should mention that bike to any of the boys," Rebel suggested, referring to their uncles and cousins who also worked at the garage. "It's hidden well enough that even if they went into the pit looking for something, they'd never see it. The less they all know the better."

Blackie and Judd each nodded in agreement.

"What do you think Dusty's been up to all these years?" Judd asked no one in particular.

Rebel shrugged. "No good, from the looks of her."

Judd didn't know why, but for some reason, his brother's statement struck a nerve. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Rebel lifted a brow, but didn't come back with a smartass comment. "Were you just looking at the same girl as Blackie and me? Dusty's been through hell, Judd. She's been shot, sliced open with a knife, and her right arm looks like someone used it to put out a fire. And those were just the scars we could see. God knows what other kinds of scars she's got."

Knowing Rebel wasn't just talking about physical scars, Judd tried not to think about what Dusty had been through the past ten years.

Rebel picked up the pack of Marlboro's sitting on the table and lit one, offering a cigarette to each of his brothers. After inhaling and releasing the smoke, he focused on Judd. "Dusty isn't the same girl she was at eighteen, Judd. I have a feeling that the people all of those girls were, died the night they left here. The minute we dropped them off at The Renegades camp, each of them was reborn as someone ... something ... else."

"Damn," was the only thing Judd could think of to say.

Backing his chair away from the table, Blackie stood.

"Where are you going?"

"Into Rose's office to make a few calls," he told Judd, walking away from the table. "But first I'm gonna call Angel and tell her what's goin' on. She'd wanna know about this."

Yeah, Judd thought, she would. Angel and Dusty had been best friends growing up. The two girls were a lot alike, but there'd always been something softer—more vulnerable—about Dusty. She'd hidden her emotions well, but Judd had

caught a glimpse of her sensitivity a time or two. He'd always believed there was a lot more to Dusty than she'd let on ... which was probably why he liked her so much.

"You still have a thing for her, don't you?"

Rebel's voice drew Judd from his thoughts. "What?"

"Aw, come on, Judd! I saw the look on your face when you realized who Dusty was."

"Fuck off, Rebel! I was just as surprised to see her as you all were."

"Judd, you and I are brothers. I haven't spent just about every day of the last thirty-five years around you without picking up on a few things. You want to know a little something about yourself?"

Judd threw out a sarcastic, "Do I have a choice?"

Rebel ignored his question. "You're a very bad liar where women are concerned, my brother. You've had a thing for Dusty since she was a teenager. Don't waste your breath denying it, either."

Not quite sure how to respond, Judd gave Rebel the dirtiest look he could come up with. His brother was right, of course. But back when Judd had started thinking of Dusty as something other than just someone he hung out with, he'd been twenty-four and she was only sixteen. They were both wild and out of control in those days, and he was sure she'd had her share of sexual partners by that time; but at his age, having sex with someone that young was where he drew the line.

But what happened on her eighteenth birthday—the night before she and her sisters left town—had been unforgettable, leaving him with more questions than answers.

Judd hadn't missed the way Dusty's gaze had lingered on him just before she left. Had she been trying to tell him something? Did she want him to come after her? He wished to hell he knew.

"You look like you're ready to go after her," Rebel told him.

"You're goddamn right I'm ready to go after her! More than likely, she's going to get herself killed if someone doesn't step in to watch her back."

"Then go. That look she gave you before she left here was an invitation if I've ever seen one."

So Rebel had noticed it, too. If anyone else had mentioned that, Judd would've thought they were giving him a hard time. But not Reb. His brother may be younger, but Rebel was one of the smartest men Judd knew. He was a leader and people respected him. Not only was he a good judge of character, he could also read someone and tell you what they were going to do before they made a move to do it.

If Rebel saw the same thing Judd thought he'd seen, then maybe it really had happened.

Maybe Dusty really did want him to follow.

"She could've been staring at me for a whole other reason." Although he had no idea what that reason could possibly be.

Rebel lifted a brow and smirked.

"All right," Judd said, backing away from the table, "good, great, she wants to see me. I just hope to hell she doesn't

change her mind before I get there, and blow me away with that .44 when she hears me coming; you know she's got more ammo than what Blackie took from her. I've survived two gun battles in the last five years without a scratch, fighting everyone from the old town sheriff to the Renegades. I'd hate like hell to be taken out now ... by a damn girl."

Rebel backed his chair away from the table and stood next to Judd. "That damn girl is up to her ass in trouble, Judd. Being female and riding with an outlaw biker gang isn't an easy life; especially when you don't 'belong' to anyone ... which Dusty made clear that she doesn't.

"She's smart, and obviously a lot tougher than she was as a teenager. Her reaction was slight when Blackie pointed out the brand on that bike she stole, but Dusty knows she made a mistake ... something I get the feeling she doesn't do very often. You have to be alert day and night when you live the kind of life she does, and she's probably kicking herself for fuckin' up. Dusty would probably never admit or show it, but she's scared, Judd."

"Scared of what? From the look of her, she's experienced it all. I don't know what's left that she could be afraid of."

"Well, how about having to face an angry biker gang all by herself? Or facing the rest of her life without Jessie, the only family member she has left? She's twenty-eight, man, and you know what kind of life she's probably been leading for the past ten years. What do you think she's going to do if Jessie's dead? Dusty may be tough, but she's not tough enough to be out there riding on her own. You know as well as I do that she wouldn't last a week."

"You're right," Judd admitted. "I have to find her," he patted his pockets in search of his truck keys, "talk to her. Find out exactly what the hell is going on. Something tells me there's a whole lot more to her story. If I get the chance, I plan to tell her that we'll give her as much help as we can."

"You know how she can be, Judd, you think she'll go for that?"

Remembering how independent the Zamora sisters had always been, Judd doubted Dusty was going to appreciate the offer of help. "Yes. No. Hell, Reb, I don't know. It'd be just my luck that she takes it the wrong way."

"Then maybe you shouldn't say anything."

"Oh, I'm going to say something. Dusty needs someone to watch out for her. But I don't mind telling you that that heavy, silver handled .44 she keeps in the holster attached to her boot scares me a little. So does the memory of exactly how perfect her aim has always been. She's a crack shot. I hope to hell my offer doesn't piss her off."

Pushing his chair under the table, Judd snatched the pack of cigarettes lying on the table and shoved them, along with the lighter, into the side pocket of his coveralls.

Rebel chuckled.

"Laugh it up, little brother," Judd said as he headed for the door, "you're gonna feel like shit if she gets angry and blows me away."

"Just stay out of her line of fire."

"Oh yeah, that should be easy."

Laughing so hard he had to sit down again, Rebel tried to ask a question, but Judd was tired of talking. He wanted to find Dusty before dark ... for more reasons than one.

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Chapter 4

Judd knew he should've tried here first.

Kicking himself for having wasted a better part of the last three hours searching for Dusty, Judd cautiously and loudly, made his way into her old house.

Normally, he wouldn't have gone out of his way to make such a racket, but knowing Dusty was armed and not afraid to shoot, he didn't think it'd be a good idea to sneak up on her.

The house she and her sisters were raised in had been abandoned for ten years. No more than two miles from where Judd and his brothers grew up, the Zamora's small, three-bedroom rancher was barely visible behind the overgrown weeds and brush that had taken over the front yard.

Holding the large flashlight he'd taken from his pickup truck, Judd decided not to turn it on, allowing the light from the full moon to guide him toward the house.

"Goddammit!" he swore when the rotten wood of the dilapidated steps cracked and gave way under his weight. Deciding it'd be safer to skip them; Judd took his chances and jumped up onto the front porch. The combination of dried leaves and broken glass littering what was left of the sagging porch crunched under his feet, making his goal of not-so-quietly announcing himself, very easy.

Stopping at the threshold, Judd finally turned on the flashlight, gently pushed open the wooden front door, and shined his light into what he imagined had once been a neat,

clean kitchen. Everything in the room was covered in thick layers of dust, but with the exception of a few opened cabinets and an overturned chair, the contents seemed to be intact.

Turning left, Judd walked down the hall toward the bedrooms. Finding all three doors closed, he backed away and left them alone.

He was almost to the living room when he heard the all-too-familiar click of a gun being cocked, followed by the sound of a deafening blast. A clay pot that had been sitting on a shelf less than a foot from his head exploded. Judd hit the floor just as several pieces rained down on him.

What the hell?

"Take one more step and you're dead," a slurred female voice warned.

Judd stayed low, but tilted his head toward the sound of the voice. "Dusty?" Had she taken a shot at him?

"Judd?"

"Jesus goddamn Christ, Dusty! What the hell are you trying to do, kill me?"

He could've sworn he heard her chuckle ... which kept him right where he was ... on his stomach, flat on the floor, out of her line of fire. "Sorry, I didn't mean to shoot. Guess my trigger finger was happy to see you."

It almost sounded like ... was she drunk?

"Is it safe to get up now, or do you want another shot at blowing my head off?"

She chuckled again. "Oh, you can get up. I need a minute to reload, anyway."

Judd got to his feet and shined the flashlight into the living room. He finally spotted her sitting on the floor in the corner. Leaning back against the wall with her legs stretched out, she was fumbling with a handful of ammunition as she tried to load that damn .44. Not wanting to make any sudden moves, he kept his cool and stood still, taking in a scene that he could only describe as unbelievable.

Although Dusty was still wearing boots, the leathers she'd had on earlier had been replaced by a clean pair of blue jeans and black sleeveless shirt. The bandanna was gone, and she'd unbraided her hair, leaving it hanging long, halfway between her shoulders and the middle of her back.

The black leather saddlebags sat at her feet, and in her left hand, she held a half empty bottle of Southern Comfort.

Lifting the bottle to her lips, Dusty took a long drink of the light colored whiskey. With her hand still around the neck, she rested the bottle between her legs and focused her attention on him. "So you found me," she slurred, "took you long enough."

Knowing that the only thing more dangerous than a drunk woman was a drunk woman with a gun, Judd tried to think of something to say that wasn't going to make her angry. "I was going to look here first, but figured this was the last place you'd be. Guess I was wrong."

Dusty set the gun down beside her and raised the bottle to her lips, taking another quick swig. "Guess so," she said, adding, "want some?"

Taking that as an invitation to come closer, Judd turned off the flashlight, gently sidestepped the furniture, and took a

seat on the floor next to Dusty. Leaning his back against the wall, he reached over and took the bottle from her. He wasn't a whiskey drinker anymore—preferring beer, or occasionally a little of Blackie's secret recipe moonshine—but he wanted to get her talking, so he took a long drink. Judd grimaced as the fiery liquid burned his throat, remembering why he no longer drank hard liquor.

"I can't believe this place is still here," she said, staring straight ahead. "I thought the county would've torn it down by now."

"I don't think anyone's been out here since you girls left. It was always pretty well hidden, especially now with all the overgrowth."

Judd couldn't see her, but felt her nod.

Silence hung heavy between them as he tried to think of what to say. Be patient, he told himself, just be patient. She invited me here, so she obviously has something to say. If I'm patient, she'll volunteer the information.

"Did your mom really marry your dad when she was fifteen?" Dusty asked.

The odd question surprised him.

Judd didn't like to talk about his parents. His mother had been a good woman, but he hated to remember the losing battle she'd constantly fought in an effort to take care of and protect not only herself, but her sons as well. As for his father, Judd liked to believe that if he didn't think about him, then maybe, eventually, he'd be able to convince himself that the son of a bitch never existed.

But since he figured Dusty's question was probably leading somewhere, he answered. "Yeah."

"I heard it was her father who forced them to get married," she began, "that he found out she was pregnant and searched for your father until he found him harvesting corn in your granddaddy's fields. He dragged them to the courthouse and they had a shotgun wedding on a Thursday afternoon. Is that the truth?"

"That's the way the story goes. They fought all the time. He beat her as much—sometimes more—than he beat my brothers and me."

"So they didn't like each other?"

"I don't think they even really knew each other, Dusty. My brothers and I think he probably met her, got her drunk on moonshine, then forced himself on her. My father always thought she trapped him into marriage, but there's no way. She'd just turned fifteen when they got married, and was still fifteen when she had Blackie."

"I'm surprised they didn't have any kids during the four years between Blackie and you."

"She had two miscarriages during that time. Probably because he was beating on her every time she turned around. After Rebel was born, he never touched her again sexually."

"How old were they when they died?"

"She was thirty-two, he was thirty-seven. Why all the questions?"

He felt her shrug. "I don't know; just curious. You know something, Judd? You and your brothers had a worse home life than my sisters and me. But you all got past it and made

good lives for yourselves. My sisters and I took the wrong road."

"Yeah, our lives are good—now. But it's only been in the past five years or so that we've really settled down. Rebel's wife, Gypsy, had a lot to do with that. She brought us even closer together; especially since the four of us lived together in my parent's old house the first year Rebel and Gypsy were married. She taught us a lot about what it means to be a family; how to appreciate what we had ... each other."

"I really made a mess of my life, didn't I, Judd?"

Getting the feeling she wasn't really looking for an answer, he stayed quiet.

"I wanted to be a writer when I was a little kid. Did I ever tell you that?"

A writer? "No."

"Funny," she said, reaching for the whiskey and taking another drink, "now that I'm too old to make something of myself, I have enough material to write more books than could fill a library."

"Twenty-eight isn't old, Dusty."

"I never even finished high school. I left town just after my senior year started," she told him, her voice laced with regret, "and I never went back to finish."

"Me neither," Judd told her, remembering his fifteenth birthday—the day he forged his father's signature on the papers allowing him to drop out of Hagerstown High School.

"Yeah, but for as much trouble as you've been in over the years, you were always smart enough to hang around your home. You've got family here; a good job, too. Do you

remember the night of my eighteenth birthday, Judd? Do you ever think about it?"

Every day of my life. "Of course I do."

"I'd been waiting years for that moment."

He was surprised to hear her admit that. "Years?"

"Damn right," she said with a serious chuckle. "I'd been doing everything I could since I was sixteen years old to get your attention."

She had? "I was twenty-four then, Dusty, they could've thrown me in jail for doing nothing more than touching you."

"The threat of being thrown in jail never stopped you from doing what you wanted, Judd."

That was the truth. Just like Blackie, the more dangerous something was, the more severe the consequences, the more attractive it was to Judd. He trolled for trouble in those days ... and would've found more than his share had he made a move on a sixteen-year-old girl.

Judd felt the heat of her touch through his jeans when she laid her hand on his thigh. "I've missed you, Judd. There's so much I have to tell you," she slurred, "things I should've told you a long time ago."

Things she should've told me a long time ago?

What the hell does that mean?

Should I even bother to ask?

Wondering whether or not her words were a hint, Judd decided not to push his luck. Up until this point, she'd been talking freely. He was afraid she'd shut up completely—or turn her gun on him—if he accidentally said the wrong thing. "There's no reason you can't come home, Dusty."

Dusty laughed, but there was no humor in her voice. "Actually, right now there are about ten, and they'll be here looking for me soon. I screwed up, Judd," she admitted, and he could've sworn he heard her voice quiver.

"I don't know what happened. I'm never so careless. But when I walked into that bar last night looking for Jessie and saw some of the guys we were running from, all I could think about was getting away. There were so many bullets flying that I was lucky not to get shot.

"When I reached the parking lot, I jumped on the closest bike, ditched the saddlebags, and took off. Seems like a waste of time, now. I'm as good as dead if those guys roll into town before Jessie does. They would've shown up here looking for me, anyway, but now they're extra pissed off because of that bike I stole. If my sister's dead and I hang around here too long, I'm dead, too."

Dusty leaned over and laid her head on his shoulder. "I can't die, Judd," she whispered. "I have to be back in Virginia soon. I have a promise to keep."

Judd had only seen this soft, vulnerable side to Dusty once before—on that one, incredible night he hadn't been able to get out of his mind for ten years—and figured that now was as good a time as any to make his offer. "No worries, Dusty. Me and the boys will help you any way we can."

"No!" she sat up and yelled, taking him by surprise. "Don't you dare say those words to me, Judd McCassey!"

"What?" He was shocked that she'd turned on him so quickly. "What'd I say?"

"I don't want to hear you tell me, 'no worries'! I know what those words mean. Whenever you and your brothers or cousins say that to each other, it means you're watching each other's backs. I don't want you watching out for me!"

Angered by her refusal to accept their help, Judd yelled back. "Why the hell not? I thought we were friends."

"You and I are more than friends, Judd; we always have been. That's exactly why I don't want you to help me."

Thoroughly confused, Judd turned in her direction. It was so dark that all he could see was her silhouette, but it was just too weird staring straight ahead and yelling when she was sitting to his right. "What?"

"You and your brothers mean too much to me. I can't let you take that kind of risk."

"We just want to help."

When Dusty laughed that time, she actually seemed amused. "I appreciate the offer, Judd, I really do. Especially since you probably thought I'd blow your head off for suggesting I couldn't take care of myself."

The humor in her voice allowed him to relax ... a little. "Was it that obvious?"

Dusty picked up the whiskey and offered it to Judd, who took a drink. When he handed it back to her, she drank the last swallow and tossed the bottle across the room, not speaking again until they heard the pop of busting glass. "Nah, but I know you. Not a single thing ever scared you about challenging or crossing another man. But when it came to women, you used to put on your bad boy face and give them a hard time right off the bat ... before they could do it

to you. Females have always scared you to death, Judd McCassey. I'd be willing to bet that that offer of help didn't originally come from you. My guess is that it was Rebel's idea."

It pissed him off that she thought he needed Rebel to tell him what to do. "Guess again, girl. My little brother may be a very smart man, but believe it or not, I'm perfectly capable of coming up with my own ideas every once in a while."

"So he didn't tell you to offer to help me?"

"No, he didn't."

"You don't really expect me to believe that, do you, Judd?"

"Right this minute, Dusty, I don't give a damn what you believe." He really didn't. "It sounds like you could use some help, and I'm making an offer from me and my brothers to be there if you need us. I ... we don't want to see anything happen to you, that's all. Let us help."

"You already did, Judd ... ten years ago. I'm experienced enough now to handle my own problems. I'll admit that I may be in a little over my head this time, but this is my trouble and no one else's. Your brothers are family men now. They've got no business risking their lives to solve a problem I created for myself."

"What about me?"

"You'll be a family man someday, too. You just don't know it yet."

"That's not what I meant, and you know it. Let me help you."

Dusty's speech was becoming more slurred. It was obvious the whiskey was beginning to affect her; she was no longer

moving her head or making hand gestures. She was still talking, though, albeit slowly. "Do you know what happened here, in this very room, on that fateful night, Judd?"

He knew enough, but had a feeling he was about to learn a lot more. "Dusty, don't."

Ignoring him, she began talking, her voice just above a whisper. "It was no secret that my mother's ex-boyfriend, Earl, was a miserable sleaze. The two of them had broken up a few years earlier, but he knew my mother had moved to Frederick with her new husband, and that my sisters and I were living here alone.

"He was always real touchy-feely when he lived here, and had tried something with all five of us girls at one time or another."

"Dusty—"

"We'd been out fooling around at Digger's Bar earlier that night," she said, ignoring him again, "remember?"

He remembered.

"Blackie had just been released from prison and Angel was back in town, so Digger let us all stay a half hour past close, and gave everyone free drinks.

"Benni, Courtney, and I got home at three o'clock in the morning; Jessie and Alex were a few minutes behind us, walking with you and your brothers. We didn't turn on the lights when we came in, so none of us saw Earl sitting on the sofa. We'd changed the locks several times, but somehow, he kept getting in.

"As we walked by, he reached out and grabbed my wrist, pulling me into his lap. His hands immediately went to my

breasts. When I screamed, Benni ran to turn on the lights and Court grabbed onto my other arm, trying to help me pull away. We tried to fight him together, but he was too strong and got a hold on Court that I couldn't break.

"Benni flew out the door to find Jessie, and I did what I could to distract Earl and keep him from hurting Court until Jessie and Alex could get here. But he caught me off guard and got in a good punch, knocking the wind out of me. In just the few helpless seconds I was on the floor trying to catch my breath, he ripped off Court's clothes and threw her on the sofa. By the time I was able to move, he'd started raping her.

Judd didn't want to hear anymore, but Dusty kept talking, giving him no choice but to listen to the horror of what happened that night.

"I was so horrified that I froze," she continued, "the next thing I knew, Earl pulled a gun from somewhere—I don't even know where he had it stashed—and shot Court in the head. Just like that, she was dead. It was my fault, Judd. I hesitated, and my sister paid the price."

"It wasn't your fault, Dusty."

"You don't know that!" she fired back, "you weren't there!"

"You're right, I wasn't. But I do know that you would've done something to help Court if you could've."

"But I didn't, and I could have! All I had to do was move; shove him off balance to make him drop the gun."

"He would've picked it up and found a way to hurt you, too, Dusty. You couldn't have won that night. Earl was obviously here to harm you girls, and wouldn't have left until

he'd done what he came to do. You and your sisters were lucky he didn't kill all five of you."

"I screamed when he pushed her limp body to the floor. That's when he reached for me," she said, her voice cracking. "One of his hands was over my mouth, and the other was tearing at my shirt. That's when Jessie came running through the door. She had a gun that Blackie had given her and shot Earl five times."

Judd felt sick. He'd never known the exact details of that night. All he'd ever heard was that Jessie had killed their mother's ex-boyfriend after he'd killed Courtney. Judd and his brothers had just gotten back to the garage that night when the Zamora sisters had shown up, Dusty and Jessie covered in blood. They'd refused to tell anyone exactly what happened, saying it was for the McCassey's own good in case the police questioned any of them.

"I won't let you help me, Judd; it's too dangerous."

"Dusty, if you knew some of the things my brothers and I did to help Gypsy and Angel—"

"I know all about it," she said, telling him that thanks to Blackie's old friends, Dragon and Church, she'd kept up with what the McCasseys had been up to over the years. "All three of you were lucky you weren't killed."

Wondering why Dragon and Church hadn't let them know how Dusty and her sisters were, Judd stayed quiet and waited for her to finish.

"You can't help me."

"Why not?"

Judd didn't miss Dusty's momentary hesitation, but before he had a chance to call her on it, she'd started talking again.

"Because I said so! I am not going to let you die protecting me or watching out for me, or whatever the hell you boys call it when you say, 'no worries'!"

"Dammit, Dusty!"

"Don't yell at me!" she shouted, slurring her words so much that it would've been hard to understand what she was saying had he not known her so well. "I'm doing this for your own good!"

She was really starting to piss him off. "I'm a grown man, Dusty," he told her, using every bit of self-control he had in him not to lose his cool. "I don't need you making decisions for me."

"And I don't want you helping me! I don't need you!"

Making an effort to storm out of the room, Dusty got no further than her feet before losing her balance. Through the moonlight streaming in one of the windows, Judd saw her teetering shadow coming toward him. Reaching out, he caught her around the waist and guided her into his lap.

"Let go of me." But even as she protested, Dusty settled herself against him, wrapping her arms around his waist and resting her head on his broad chest.

Not knowing exactly what to do, Judd wrapped his arms around her body and held on tight. When he felt her grip tighten on him, felt her snuggle closer, he knew he'd done the right thing. The question he had now was ... what did he do next?

* * * *

Dusty had been waiting ten years to be held in Judd McCassey's arms again. She'd dreamed of this since the one and only time they'd gone to bed together. Now that it was finally happening, it figured that her head was so fuzzy from the whiskey that she was finding it hard to concentrate.

She really had been on her way out of the room when she lost her balance. She'd tried to shift her weight and fall in the opposite direction, but Judd had reached out and caught her.

She'd had every intention of fighting him, telling him to let go, get his hands off and not touch her. But once his rugged, masculine scent had gotten her attention, there was no turning back. She would've been happy to lay here pressing herself against the safety of his body forever.

But that was impossible.

She had an important promise to keep.

She had to find Jessie and get back to Virginia.

Lying in silence, Dusty was trying to organize her thoughts. But the sweet smell of whiskey on Judd's breath, combined with the slow, steady rhythm of his heartbeat through his T-shirt, was making it very difficult.

But she didn't care.

Being held in Judd's arms was heaven.

This was exactly the way she imagined spending what could very well be her last hours on Earth.

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Chapter 5

Holding Dusty felt as perfect now as it had ten years ago.

Judd had tried to bury his feelings for her when she'd left town, but it hadn't worked. No other woman he'd been with since had measured up to her.

Each time he'd tried to forget her, the image of the way she'd looked sound asleep against his chest after they'd had sex on her eighteenth birthday, popped into his mind.

Getting back to the problem at hand, Judd wondered what was going to happen if Jessie never showed up.

What if the Drifters did?

He loved Dusty just as much today as he did the day he realized he was in love with her. She may not want his help, but he didn't give a damn. She was going to get it.

"Dusty?"

Silence.

"Dusty Rose?"

That got her attention. As she stirred, Judd smiled and remembered the game of truth or dare he'd overheard her playing when she was ten. He'd learned her middle name that day, and when she found out, had continuously hassled him until he finally told her his.

"I'm awake, Judd Dolan."

He winced at the name he shared with his bastard father. "You remembered that, huh?"

"It's a hard name to forget."

Although her speech was still slurred, Judd wondered if Dusty was thinking more clearly. She almost had to be in order to remember his middle name was Dolan. For the life of him, he couldn't imagine why his mother had partially named him after his father.

"What are you going to do until Jessie shows up?"

"Hmm, lay low," she whispered. "I can't afford to be seen when the Drifters ride into town; at least until I find out what happened to Jessie. The whole gang isn't after me, just a handful of losers who have nothing better to do than chase two women all over the countryside. Actually, I doubt half of them would venture out of Virginia, so I'm probably only looking at five idiots instead of ten. But they're dangerous enough."

"What the hell is, 'at least until you find out what happened to Jessie' supposed to mean?"

"It means I can't hide from those guys forever, Judd. I'm going to have to face them at some point. They live in Virginia, and I have to go back there."

"Why? Why do you have to go back?"

"I told you, I made—"

"A promise," he interrupted sarcastically, "I know. Can't you keep that promise from here?"

He felt her shake her head. "No. And that situation is a problem we have to deal with, too. But it's going to have to wait."

Judd closed his eyes and replayed her statement in his mind. Did she say, we? Did she mean him? I haven't seen her

in ten years. What could we possibly have to deal with together?

"Look, Judd, I'm not stupid enough to think that there isn't a chance my sister could be dead. The trouble we ran into was bad. I wasn't lying when I told you I'm lucky to be alive after what I've been up against. Maybe Jessie wasn't so lucky."

As they talked, Dusty made no move to get away from Judd, and he made no move to let her.

"Don't say things like that, Dusty."

"I have to. The reality is that people die when they make mistakes in these situations. Last night, I made a big one. If I hadn't taken that Drifter's bike, there might've been only one or two guys who cared enough about what happened to the guy Jessie killed to come after me. I could've handled them on my own.

"I can't get you involved in this, Judd," she told him, her voice now barely audible. "I won't. You mean too much to me."

He meant too much to her? What the hell did that mean?

Don't pay too much attention to what she's saying. She's drunk and sounds like she's about to pass out. She won't even remember this conversation in the morning.

"I'm already involved, Dusty."

"No you're not," she argued.

"Yes I am! You showing up at the garage today got us all involved."

When she didn't respond, Judd thought maybe she'd realized he was right and was trying to think of something to

say. After a few more minutes of silence, he decided she'd probably passed out. "Dusty?"

No answer.

"Dusty?"

Yup, she was out.

Sighing, Judd contemplated what to do next. He didn't want to leave Dusty alone, but spending the night on the floor of a pitch black, abandoned house that was probably crawling with God knows what, wasn't a very attractive option.

He was tired and wanted to sleep in his own bed.

Dusty could probably use a good night's sleep as well; she was going to hate herself in the morning for drinking all that whiskey.

His decision made, Judd thought it'd be best to make two trips out to his pickup truck. One with Dusty, the other with her saddlebags.

Sitting up slowly, Judd unwound Dusty's arms from his waist, putting one of his arms under her legs, and the other around her middle. Standing up, he carefully made his way through the living room and toward the front door, stepping over what he could see, and praying he wouldn't trip over what he couldn't.

When they reached his truck, he balanced Dusty's weight against his chest and opened the passenger side door. Thanks to the half a bottle of whiskey she'd drunk, Judd knew there wasn't much of a chance of waking her up. Still, he held his breath when she moaned and stirred as he slid the .44 from the holster attached to her boot. He hadn't realized she'd put it away after taking the shot at him, but there was no doubt

that she wasn't going to be too happy when she woke up and found the gun missing. He didn't want to take the chance of her waking up, being confused, and pulling it on him before realizing who he was.

Once he'd laid her on the front seat and made sure she wasn't going to roll onto the floor, Judd went back inside for her saddlebags. After picking them up, he slung them over his left shoulder and took one last look around the house, searching for anything else Dusty might've brought in.

When he was confident he had all her things, he went back outside and set the black leather bags in the bed of his truck.

As he was climbing into the cab, Judd stopped short when he heard a low, thunderous sound.

Motorcycles.

Jumping inside, he jammed the key into the ignition and started the powerful diesel engine. No longer worried whether or not he was going to wake Dusty, Judd turned on the headlights, shifted into first gear, and pushed down on the gas pedal with his booted foot. If the people on those motorcycles were who he thought they were, he needed to get away from the house fast.

Just as he pulled out onto the road, Judd spotted five single headlights coming toward him.

Five Drifters ... just like Dusty had said.

If almost running into the bikers wasn't bad enough, Dusty had begun to stir. Just as the motorcycles were close enough for their low-beams to light the inside of his truck, she attempted to sit up. Having no other options, Judd did the only thing he could think of to keep the bikers from spotting

her; he put his hand on the top of her head and shoved her back onto the seat. "Get the hell down!"

She fought him, trying to twist away so she could sit up, but Judd used his strength to force her back down. Unfortunately, as she was moving, her body had shifted toward the front of the seat and her head slammed into the dashboard as she went down.

"Shit!" Judd swore as he momentarily glanced at her still form just before looking in his rearview mirror and spotting the Drifters patches on the back of the rider's jackets. "Dusty?"

When she didn't answer, he knew she was out cold.

Well, she was probably better off.

And Judd was certain that he was.

If Dusty had been conscious, there was no doubt in his mind that she would've pitched a fit for what he'd just done. It wasn't like he gave a damn, though. She obviously needed help. She'd known the Drifters were going to come looking for her, and had been accurate when she said it would probably be five of them.

Had they found her sooner than she expected?

Had she gotten drunk on purpose because she figured she'd be dead before the end of the night? And if she had, why had she wanted him there?

Pushing from his mind the thought of what would've happened to both of them had he not decided to leave the house, Judd turned on the CB, switching it to channel thirty. "Break three-oh."

After a few seconds of static, he repeated, "Break three-oh."

That time, someone picked up. "Go ahead, break."

"Reb, is that you?"

"Yeah. Judd?"

"It's me."

"Did you find what you were looking for?"

"I found it. I'm heading back to work now. Can you and Blackie meet me there?"

"We're still here. What's your twenty?"

"I'm about two miles out. Open one of the bay doors for me, I'm pulling in. See you in five."

"Ten-four."

* * * *

The middle of the garage's three bay doors was open when Judd arrived, allowing him to pull right in. Still dressed in their mechanics coveralls, Blackie and Rebel walked out of the office and met him at the truck.

"Where's Dusty?" Rebel asked through Judd's open window.

Judd leaned back against the seat and jerked a thumb to his right indicating to his brother where to look for Dusty.

"Sleeping?" he whispered.

Judd shook his head. "Out cold. She accidentally hit her head on the dashboard. Combined with the half a bottle of Southern Comfort she swallowed, I don't think she'll be waking up anytime soon."

Rebel winced. "She's gonna have a hell of a headache in the morning."

"Ain't that the truth."

Looking more than a little concerned, Rebel backed away from the truck so Judd could open the door.

"Give me a minute to take her upstairs. I'll meet you in the office."

Walking to the other side of the truck, Judd opened the door and scooped Dusty into his arms. He took a moment to examine the bump where she'd hit her head, deciding it was no big deal when he didn't see any blood or immediate bruising.

Carrying her up the metal stairs, Judd walked the length of the hall, passing both the bathroom and fire escape before coming to a stop at the door to his small studio apartment.

Turning the knob, he let himself in and went straight to the king-sized bed, laying her on top of the covers.

"I know you're going to hate me for this," he told Dusty, who was still out and probably couldn't hear a word he was saying, "but it's for your own good. You may not want my help, but it's too damn late to go back now."

After pulling her boots off, Judd set them on the floor next to the bed and debated whether or not to put a blanket on her. Since it was fairly warm out and she was fully dressed, he decided just a sheet would be fine. Taking one out of his bottom dresser drawer, he unfolded it and covered her.

Before turning out the light, Judd stood by the bed and took a good, long look at Dusty. Other than her longer hair and the physical scars she bore, his old friend hadn't changed

much. Her youthful look may be gone—the hard life she'd been living the past decade erasing the childish expression he remembered so well—but the rest of her was the same. Despite the scars and fading bruises, she was still one of the most beautiful women he'd ever seen.

Before leaving Dusty to sleep, he made sure the .44 was still tucked into the waistband of his jeans. There was no doubt in Judd's mind that Dusty was going to spit fire when she discovered it was missing, but he didn't want her to wake up confused and come out shooting.

After one last look to make sure she was all right, Judd left the apartment, quietly closing the door behind him.

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Chapter 6

"Dusty still out?" Blackie asked when Judd entered the office.

He nodded, then reached behind his back, removed Dusty's gun, and laid it on Rose's desk. "Yeah, but she's fine."

Digging in his side pocket, Rebel pulled out a pack of Marlboros. After putting one between his lips, he offered the pack to Blackie, who took it, withdrew a cigarette, and passed it to Judd. "Where'd you find Dusty?"

"Her house." He nodded toward the cigarette. "I thought you were trying to quit."

"I am," Rebel said before taking a long drag. "What'd you find out? Did she tell you anything?"

"Yes and no."

"Quit fuckin' around, Judd," Blackie ordered, "this ain't no game."

Turning his head toward Blackie, Judd squinted and allowed his stare to bore right through his older brother. "Lay off, Blackie! I'm not playing a game."

"Then tell us what you know before I beat it outta you!"

Confused by Blackie's intense irritation, Judd decided to blow it off. He was irritated himself ... but for a completely different reason.

"She was pretty lit by the time I found her," he told his brothers, "but I got an earful before she passed out. She asked a bunch of questions about Mom and Dad, which was strange. Then said she couldn't believe that the three of us

had a tougher home-life than she and her sisters, yet we turned out better."

During the next ten minutes, Judd relayed to his brothers everything Dusty had told him; including the story of exactly what happened the night the girls left town.

"Damn," was all Rebel said. Blackie didn't have to voice his thoughts. The look on his face said enough.

Rebel stared at him intently. "Did you tell her we'll help any way we can?"

"Yeah. Turned me down flat, too."

Since he half-agreed with her, Judd decided not to tell his brothers the reason she'd turned him down. Dusty was right; Blackie and Rebel were family men. Their business was taking care of their wives and children, not putting themselves in danger. There was no telling them that, though. To avoid an argument, he let it go ... for now.

"She's gonna need someone to watch her back. Messin' with angry bikers ain't somethin' anyone ought to be doin'. If they find her, they'll kill her as sure as I'm standin' here."

"She knows that, Blackie," Judd said in Dusty's defense. "She also knows she screwed up. I'll tell you what, that girl is smart. She told me she thought that maybe only five of them would come after her, and damn if I didn't pass five Drifters no more than a second after I pulled away from her house. I'm assuming that's where they were headed. If I'd waited another minute to get her out of there, there's a good chance we'd both be dead."

"Goddammit!" Blackie shouted as he kicked a chair across the office.

"What the hell is your problem?"

The expression on Blackie's face was so deadly that Judd took a step back. When he did, he bumped into Rebel, who looked as though he'd known Blackie was about to explode.

"My problem, little brother, is that you were right. Had those guys found you and Dusty in that house, they'd have killed you both. It don't matter that you didn't have nothin' to do with stealin' that bike. You were with her, which, to them, makes you just as guilty."

Finally, it hit him. Judd couldn't believe he'd missed it. Blackie's expression and the lethal tone of his voice were two things Judd had seen and heard a lot of while growing up. They always made an appearance the instant their father went after any of them.

Blackie hadn't had much use for him and Rebel when they were little. Their raging sibling rivalry, fueled by the mere ten months that separated them, had been the cause of constant bickering until they were teenagers. Judd remembered their older brother telling them several times to stay the hell away from him when they were fighting.

That aside, Blackie was always the first one to jump to their defense when not only their father—but anyone—gave them trouble. He'd been fiercely protective of his younger brothers. Judd believed the only reason he and Rebel had survived their father's wrath was because Blackie had cared enough to watch out for them.

Even though he and Rebel were thirty-six and thirty-five years old, respectively, Blackie had yet to stop playing the role of big brother. That moment was when Judd realized

Blackie wasn't really angry, he was worried ... worried someone was going to hurt his little brother.

"Did they see you?"

"I'm sure they did, Blackie. They passed right by my truck. I was able to push Dusty down when she tried to sit up, so she was out of sight by the time their headlights lit the inside of my truck. I doubt any of them paid much attention to me."

"Are you sure about that?"

"Yeah, bro, I'm sure. I didn't see a single brake light when I looked in my rearview mirror. They weren't interested in me."

"Good. But until we find out exactly what's goin' on, I want you to leave your truck here inside the garage. If any of those bikers spot and recognize it, they could start askin' questions we ain't got answers to."

"You can drive the tow truck," Rebel offered.

"Do you really think that's necessary?"

"Yes!" both Blackie and Rebel said in unison.

When Judd looked at them like they were being just a little too cautious, Blackie got fired up once again. "I don't think you realize what kind of trouble Dusty's in, Judd! It's gonna take some doin' to keep that girl alive, and I got the feelin' she ain't gonna make it easy."

"That's the truth," Judd agreed. "Dusty's bound and determined to find out what happened to Jessie. I don't think anything the three of us say or do will keep her from searching for her sister." Turning to Rebel, he said, "This isn't going to be the way it was with Gypsy. You told her to stay in the garage in case her father was lurking around town looking

for her, and except for the time she went with me to pick up lunch, she did as she was told. That won't work with Dusty. You know her. She's about as likely to stay put as one of us would be if the others were in trouble."

"So what do we do?" Rebel wanted to know, "let her go? Follow her? What?"

The three brothers looked at each other. Judd spoke first. "Someone's got to go with her. If she goes out on her own, they'll kill her for sure."

Blackie suddenly put a hand in the air, signaling for Judd to stop. "Hang on, little brother. Before anyone follows anyone anywhere, why don't you let me make a few phone calls first thing in the mornin'. There're a couple guys who owe me a favor or two; we may be able to take care of this mess before it gets too outta hand."

Judd jumped out of his chair, sending it flying backward. "No way!" He was not letting either one of his brothers put themselves in danger. "Dammit to hell, Blackie—"

Blackie cut Judd off before he went any further. "Goddammit, Judd, don't even start that, you-have-wives-and-kids-who-need-you bullshit. I've told you before, what I do ain't up to you," he paused and rose slowly, facing Rebel across the desk, "either of you."

"What about Angel?" Judd reminded him.

"Before we get to Angel, what about you? Why the hell are you so damn interested in Dusty?"

Why should he be forced to try and explain what he felt for Dusty, especially to Blackie?

"So that's the way it is," Blackie said knowingly; a slight look of surprise on his face, "you've still got somethin' for her, ain't you?"

Christ, he knew, too?

When he didn't get a response, Blackie chuckled from deep in his throat. "Well, even if you're still head over heels in love with her, you ain't gonna be able to save her all by yourself. You're gonna need help. And I didn't beat the old man's ass time and again for hasslin' you all those years just so you could get blown away by some pissed off gang member. I'm in whether you like it or not."

As much as he didn't want to see anything happen to his brother, it was a relief to know Blackie was going to be by his side. Still concerned, Judd repeated his question. "But what about Angel?"

"What about her, man? Dusty's her best friend. She went ballistic when I told her what was goin' on. She wanted to drop the babies off with Aunt Rose and come down here."

Both Judd's and Rebel's eyes widened. When someone she loved was in trouble, their sister-in-law was the first one to grab a weapon and run to the rescue. "How'd you get her to stay home?"

"I didn't," Blackie told Rebel. "She's at your house now, probably talkin' Gypsy's ear off. I told her it was too dangerous to come down here and promised to call when we found out more."

"Who knows when that'll be?"

"Well, it better be soon, Judd, because Dusty's gonna be in a shit load of trouble if them Drifters get the jump on us."

After a slight pause, Blackie looked at Rebel and added, "You ain't gotta be a part of this, you know. Me and Judd can handle it."

Rebel smirked. "I'm sure you can. But I didn't spend too-many-years-to-count running interference and bailing your asses out of trouble, to let you two dig yourselves a hole you can't get out of." Making a fist, Rebel held it out in front of him. "I'm in."

The other two raised their fists and touched Rebel's. It was something the brothers had done since they were little, a silent way of saying all for one, and one for all. They all whispered, "No worries," simultaneously, then backed away from each other.

"Well," Blackie said, looking at Judd, "someone better go rouse Dusty ... we got a lot of talkin' to do."

On his way up the metal stairs, Judd wondered if he should've mentioned to his brothers that Dusty said there was another problem; a problem that apparently the two of them were going to have to handle together.

But she'd been vague; not volunteering any more information beyond her original statement. If Judd did decide to mention it, he knew Blackie would interrogate him, wanting hardcore details—details that Judd didn't have.

Feeling as though he was too old to be yelled at by his big brother, Judd decided to keep the information to himself ... for now.

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Chapter 7

Rolling onto her back, Dusty raised her hands above her head and stretched, reveling in the feeling of the soft sheets against her skin. Believing she was dreaming, she hugged the pillow close to her chest and snuggled against it.

Seconds later, her eyes flew open.

Tossing the pillow aside, she bolted upright. Ignoring the shooting pain in her head, Dusty looked around the dark room. Where am I?

It wasn't until she reached over to turn on the small lamp sitting next to the bed and saw her boots on the floor that she realized she was still fully clothed. When light finally lit the tiny studio apartment with beige colored walls, Dusty knew she was in the room above McCassey's garage where Rebel used to live.

How the hell did I get here?

Oh, that's right. Judd had found her at her house. They'd finished off the whiskey and spent a long time sitting on the floor talking. The last thing she remembered, they were arguing about whether or not he and his brothers were going to help her.

That was out of the question.

Years ago, before they'd all calmed down, before Blackie and Rebel had wives and kids, Dusty would've gladly accepted their help. The McCassey boys were as tough as they came. Even as a young kid, she'd never been afraid of anything when they were around. The three brothers and their cousins

had always looked out for Dusty and the other girls. Whenever they'd needed help, which really wasn't that often, the boys were right there.

This time, Dusty was going to have to handle the trouble on her own. Not only did she and her sisters bring this on themselves, it wasn't fair to involve anyone else, especially people she loved; people who had a lot more to lose than she did. If the McCasseys found out the identity of the man Jessie had killed, then they'd know immediately who was after Dusty and her sister.

She had to keep that information from them.

If she revealed too much, all their lives would be in danger, too.

Dusty couldn't afford to have anything happen to Judd. He needed to stay alive—just in case she didn't.

Judd was probably going to hate her for not coming to him in the first place. But that was a chance she was going to have to take. Dusty had been young and in love at the time, and had foolishly believed the lies fed to her by someone from their past.

But first things first. She was safe from the problem for the moment, so talking to Judd could wait a few days. She needed to find Jessie.

Realizing Judd had probably brought her to the garage after she passed out, Dusty wondered why he wasn't in the apartment with her. The digital clock on the nightstand said it was almost four in the morning.

Where could he be?

Still feeling the effects from the whiskey, Dusty pushed the sheet out of the way and reached over the side of the bed to pick up her right boot. Smiling when she felt the empty holster, somehow, Dusty had known that her gun wasn't going to be in it. Blackie had warned her not to come around the garage with a loaded weapon, and Judd had taken every precaution to make sure she remained unarmed. Sure that her .44 had tagged along with Judd, Dusty wasn't going to bother searching the room for it.

After pulling on her other boot, she went to the kitchen sink and washed her face with cold water. Dusty had no idea what time she'd passed out, but had a feeling she'd been sleeping for a good few hours.

Using a paper towel to dry her face, she tossed it into the small, plastic trashcan to the left of the sink when she was finished. There was no mirror in the apartment, so Dusty settled for bending her head upside down, fluffing her nearly poker-straight hair with her fingers, and flipping back up. Hoping she looked halfway decent, she opened the door with the intention of searching for Judd and his brothers. If Judd was hanging around downstairs in the middle of the night, then there was a good chance that Blackie and Rebel were, too.

Wherever one McCassey brother was, the other two were never far away.

Deep male voices stopped Dusty cold just before she reached the metal stairs. All three brothers were in Rose's office talking, undoubtedly, about her. She wasn't able to hear their entire conversation, but did pickup a few words.

Her name was mentioned several times, as well as the words, 'help', and the phrase, 'no worries'.

Damn! They'd probably already formed a plan.

Well, they couldn't help her if they couldn't find her. So, even though she still needed to talk to Judd, Dusty decided it'd be a good idea to disappear for a while. The McCasseys were good men; men who'd gotten their lives together and deserved to enjoy what they'd worked so hard for. Dusty would be damned if she was going to be responsible for ruining a good thing someone else had just because she'd never have it herself.

Jessie knew all Dusty's old hiding places, so if she did make it to Hagerstown, she'd know where to look...

* * * *

Judd could tell by the looks on his brother's faces that they knew something was wrong. "She's gone," he told them.

In his size fourteen boots, Blackie crossed the length of the office in three long strides, stopped directly in front of Judd, and put his hands on Judd's shoulders. "What the fuck do you mean, she's gone? Where the hell is she?"

"Get your goddamn hands off me, Blackie!" Judd spat, pushing his brother away. "I don't know where the hell she is! She was gone when I walked into the apartment."

"Did you check the fire escape?"

Judd nodded. "Of course I did! I'm not an idiot! That was the first place I looked ... after the bathroom. The locks haven't been touched. However she left, it wasn't down those stairs."

Looking confused, Blackie turned to Rebel who, out of the three of them, had lived in the apartment above the garage the longest. "Is there any other way outta there?"

"You mean other than climbing out the window? No."

"What do you think she did," Blackie asked, "crawl down the side of the damn buildin'?"

Judd had been wondering that himself. "It's not that far from the window down to the soda machine; twelve, maybe fourteen feet. She could've tossed the bags out first, jumped on top of them, then jumped to the ground."

"That's crazy. Why would she leave?"

"Read this." Judd unfolded the note he'd found on his dresser and handed it to Rebel, who read it aloud.

Hi guys—

I'm sorry for getting you involved in something that's not your problem. I really screwed up this time, but this is something I have to fix on my own.

I know you want to help and I appreciate it. But other than Jessie, you boys are the closest thing to family I have left; just the thought of something happening to one of you, well, I don't want to think about it.

I'm going to wait a few days in case Jessie shows up, so I'll be around. Please don't come after me.

P.S.—I left a sealed envelope in the top drawer of Judd's dresser. If something happens to me, please give it to Rebel.

I'll be in touch—

Dusty

"Don't that just beat all?" Judd was still fuming about the last statement in the letter. "Rebel. Dusty and I are the ones

with a past, and she leaves a note for Rebel. Just what the hell is that about?" Turning to Rebel, he asked, "Do you know something I don't know?"

Rebel grinned, crossed his arms in front of his chest, and tilted his head; his obvious self-confidence disturbing Judd to the very core of his being. "I know that you're more likely to fly off the handle and do something stupid before thinking. Just like he is," Rebel stated, motioning to Blackie.

From a few feet away, Blackie suddenly yelled, "Goddammit!" Kicking another chair, he then balled his hand into a fist and let it fly, making contact with the office wall and leaving a gaping hole in the sheetrock.

Judd glanced at Blackie, then back to Rebel.

"See?" Rebel said arrogantly.

Only a few times in his life had Judd ever seen this side of Blackie. He was obviously angry that Dusty had gotten away from them. But there was something else there, too ... worry. Whether it was because Dusty was Angel's best friend, because the Drifters were in town and bound to find her, or just because she was an old friend, Judd didn't know. What he did know was that he was just as upset as Blackie—for completely different reasons—and hoped like hell his brothers wouldn't notice.

"That girl is as good as dead if we don't find her," Blackie said to no one in particular. "She has no idea those bikers are in town."

"She's hiding from us, too, Blackie," Rebel reminded him. "She won't be walking down the street in broad daylight

because she doesn't want to be spotted. Dusty's obviously pretty savvy. She'll stay out of sight."

"Sure, for now. But what happens if and when Jessie does show up? Them bikers will be watchin', and the minute them two girls let their guard down, it's over."

A heavy silence hung in the air as each of the brothers seemed to be taking in what Blackie had said.

Taking Judd by surprise, Rebel asked him what he wanted them to do.

"Why would you ask me? Blackie's the one who has experience with this shit."

When Rebel wordlessly cocked his left brow, Judd figured out that his brother knew Judd's feelings for Dusty were still as strong as they'd always been.

Since his brothers—Rebel, mostly—had always been in charge of calling the shots, Judd felt a little out of place suddenly being in the position as the go-to guy. Instead of coming up with an elaborate plan, he simply stated the obvious. "We'd better find her," Judd told his brothers. After glancing at the clock, he added, "But it won't do us any good to look now. It'll be daylight in a few hours; she's probably already holed up somewhere. We're going to have to search at night."

"Then we should all get some sleep," Rebel suggested. "Good thing the garage is closed today, I'm too damn tired to work. Come on," he said to Blackie, who looked as bad as Judd felt, "ride with me. Angel and the babies are still at my house, and she's going to need you when she finds out what's going on now."

Silently, Blackie nodded and strode out the door.

"Why don't you come, too?" Rebel offered.

Judd considered his brother's invitation. Finding out most of the Zamora sisters were dead had really made him think. After everything they'd been through and every dangerous, violent thing they'd done; he, Blackie, and Rebel had always escaped with nothing more than minor injuries. Judd had never realized before just how lucky they were. He needed his brothers, but tonight, he needed to be alone. He needed to be at the garage in case Dusty came back.

"She's not coming back, Judd."

Judd whipped his head up and stared at Rebel.

"Dusty doesn't want to be found, man. She won't be back here tonight, if at all. Come home with us and stay in your old room. We'll get some sleep and start searching for her at dusk."

Rebel was right. Dusty wouldn't have taken her saddlebags and jumped out of a two story window if she was planning to come back. "Let me get some clothes, I'll meet you in the parking lot."

Rebel handed Dusty's note to Judd, who folded and tucked it in his back pocket. "Half your wardrobe is still at my house, Judd. You don't need anything from here."

His brother was right about that, too. Judd had been living above the garage for a year, but had never completely moved out of his room in the basement of Rebel and Gypsy's house.

Judd hesitated, sighed, and gave in. "Let's go."

After taking just a few steps, Judd felt Rebel's hand on his shoulder. "There's something else, isn't there? You didn't tell us everything."

Judd should've known Rebel would guess. Nothing gets by him.

"Judd?"

"Dusty said something to me at the house earlier. It was just in passing, but it meant something, I know it."

"What'd she say?"

"She told me there was another problem. One we have to deal with."

"We?" Rebel questioned. "Meaning the two of you?"

"That's what it sounded like to me. But I didn't question her about it because I was afraid that if I pissed her off, she'd quit talking. She never said another word about it before she passed out. But I don't like this, Reb," Judd said with a shake of his head. "It makes me more than a little uneasy that there's something else going on that none of us know about."

Rebel ran a quick hand through his hair and sighed. "Well, we won't know what it is until we talk to Dusty, and we can't do that until we find her. Let's get the hell out of here and go get some rest. We'll deal with this mess when we're not too damn tired to think straight."

Judd glanced at the open bay door, almost as if he was expecting Blackie to stride back inside and yell at them for taking too long. He wasn't looking forward to admitting to his older brother that he'd purposely left out an important bit of information.

"He doesn't need to know right now," Rebel said, surprising Judd.

How the hell did he do that? "Damn, Rebel, what are you, a mind-reader?"

"No. But even as much as I want to go home and crawl into bed right now, I'd hesitate, too, if I'd lied to Blackie. Dealing with him when he's angry is bad; dealing with him when he's angry and tired is worse. For the time being—at least until Blackie gets some sleep and is in a better mood—Dusty's other problem is between you and me."

"Thanks, bro."

Rebel nodded and stepped forward, looping his arm around Judd's shoulders. "Come on, man, I'm asleep on my feet."

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Chapter 8

Trudging through the dry brush, Dusty suddenly remembered how much she used to hate walking through the woods on Ten Acres alone.

When they were all younger, this had been a great place to hang out. A small part of Antietam Creek ran along the corner of the property, and they'd swam, partied, and hung out there dozens of times. The reason she didn't like walking alone there in the dark was because there was always a McCassey cousin—usually Brady or Kane—waiting behind a tree to jump out and scare her.

Tonight, though, she was all by herself ... at least she hoped she was.

Shifting her saddlebags from one shoulder to the other, Dusty continued searching for the McCasseys' hunting cabin. Deer season was still a good month away, so the chance of any of the boys being there now was slim. She figured she'd hole up there during the days, and go out at night looking for Jessie.

The sudden sound of a snapping twig under her feet brought a loud noise from somewhere above her head, causing Dusty to jump. "It's just an owl," she said out loud in an effort to distract herself from the nighttime noises.

The funny thing was, during the past ten years, she couldn't remember being scared of anything; probably because she couldn't afford to be. Since leaving town, Dusty had always done what she needed to do to survive.

Here, roaming the same woods she had all those years ago, Dusty felt like a kid again. Silently wishing for her sisters, she cursed herself for not replacing the batteries in her flashlight when she had the chance. Whoever said it was darkest before the dawn had been right on.

On the brink of becoming extremely uneasy, Dusty felt a great sense of relief when the shadow of the cabin finally came into view. Stopping at the front door, she set her saddlebags on the ground and reached into the spout at the end of the gutter, hoping the McCasseys still kept the key in the same place. Although she'd never been to the cabin, she'd heard them mention a time or two that's where the key was.

Feeling for the small hook, Dusty was glad when her fingers came into contact with the key. Carefully removing it, she unlocked the deadbolt and replaced the key immediately.

Locking the door behind her, Dusty coughed as she inhaled the hot, stuffy air. Knowing the cabin had no electricity, she felt her way through the darkness looking for somewhere to lie down. When she hit something that felt like a cot, she set her saddlebags on the ground and sat down.

Digging to the bottom of one of her bags, Dusty pulled out a small 9 millimeter pistol. The chances of anyone discovering her were small; no one trespassed on McCassey land. But it didn't hurt to be prepared ... just in case. Gripping the gun, she lay down on the cot and closed her eyes, tucking her hands under the pillow.

Doing her best not to think of what kind of critters she was sharing the cabin with, Dusty drifted into an exhausted sleep.

* * * *

As Judd watched Blackie trying to console his wife, Angel, he was wracking his brain trying to come up with places where Dusty could be hiding.

It was late afternoon, just a bit cooler than it had been the previous day, and he, Blackie, and Rebel were getting ready to search for Dusty.

"Blackie, please!" Angel begged. "She's my best friend!"

"I know, Angel Face, but you can't go. This ain't a game of hide-and-go-seek we're playin' here. Messin' with a rival biker gang ain't somethin' to be taken lightly. It's too dangerous for you to go. I need to be able to look for Dusty and watch my brothers' backs. Havin' you there would be too distractin'. We'd all be in more danger because I'd be too worried about you to give the situation my full attention."

Although Angel was by far the toughest, most fearless woman he'd ever met, and as good a shot as Blackie, Judd had to agree with his brother on this one. Not even the twelve years experience Angel had bartending and breaking up fights in her brother's bar—which was one of the roughest places around before it burned down—was enough training for what they might run into tonight.

"Blackie, please!" she pleaded again.

Judd watched Blackie shake his head. His firm, "No!" put a quick end to the disagreement.

Angel was obviously not happy, and Judd fully expected to hear fighting words come from his little-too-mouthy sister-in-law. But when Blackie opened his arms, she remained quiet and went to him willingly. Gathering his wife close, Blackie's

huge frame nearly swallowed Angel's entire body. He kissed the top of her natural, platinum blonde hair, and whispered, "I need you to stay here with Gypsy and the kids. Knowin' you're safe is gonna make what I have to do tonight a hell of a lot easier. It won't hurt to have someone here who's a good shot, either, just in case."

Judd couldn't see whether or not Angel nodded to let Blackie she understood, but he knew she wouldn't go against Blackie's wishes. Angel, who'd killed her first husband in self-defense when she was seventeen, was smart enough to have a good idea about what might happen if they ran into trouble. In Judd's opinion, she probably wanted to go along because she was just as worried about Blackie as she was Dusty.

When they parted, Angel scooped their almost four-month-old son, Digger—named for Angel's older brother—out of the playpen and carried him into one of the back rooms. Seconds later, she returned for his twin sister, Lily. When she didn't come back, Judd assumed she was feeding them.

It was then that Rebel and Gypsy walked down the hall and into the kitchen. Judd watched as his brother brushed at one of Gypsy's stray, fiery red curls, then leaned in and said something to her in a low voice. She nodded, and Judd turned away with a slight amount of yearning; wondering if he'd ever be as happy as his brothers.

But since most of the people in Hagerstown were still terrified of him—some even crossing to the other side of the street when they spotted him—it wasn't easy to find a woman he liked enough to hope she'd give him a chance.

It had never bothered him much because Dusty was really the only woman he'd ever wanted; even though up until yesterday morning, he never thought he'd see her again.

A few minutes later, just as the sun was beginning to set, Blackie walked into the kitchen. "It's cloudin' up a little out there; it'll be pitch black tonight. We better make sure those flashlights have fresh batteries. You boys ready?"

Judd was ... until he stole a glance at Gypsy, who looked like she wanted to cry.

This wasn't right.

His brothers had no business putting themselves in this much danger. "You know," he said, "I found Dusty by myself last night. There aren't too many other places she could be hiding. You boys should stay here; I'll find her and bring her back ... if she doesn't shoot me first."

"No!" Gypsy said loud enough to surprise them all. "You can't go out there alone, Judd. The three of you need each other. Go," she said, shooing them toward the living room where their gear was. "All of you. And do it now, before I realize what I just said."

Dressed from head to toe in black, the three brothers first looped the sheaths holding their Bowie knives onto their belts. Next, they tucked loaded .357 Magnums into the back waistbands of their jeans.

"Are you sure you have enough ammo?" Gypsy asked.

"We're going to look around for a while, then stop up at Ten Acres to get more," Rebel told her. "Don't worry, darlin', we'll be fine. Keep the CB on channel thirty; I'll be in touch."

"I will." Gypsy wasn't crying yet, but there was no doubt in Judd's mind that the tears were going to flow the minute he and his brothers were out the door.

After Rebel kissed his wife's forehead, he turned to his brothers. "You boys ready?"

"Let's do it," Blackie said.

And with that, they walked out the door.

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Chapter 9

The sun had been down a good hour when Dusty decided it was dark enough to venture out.

Since the moon had been full the night before, tonight's new moon, along with the clouds that had rolled in just before dusk, gave her the perfect cover. As long as she stayed away from the few buildings and parking lots with bright lights, she knew she'd be able to roam around town with little chance of being seen.

The first place she needed to go was her house. It was risky, she knew. The guy that was looking for her and Jessie knew where she lived, so most likely her house was going to be the first place they looked.

But when she'd been at her old home the night before, Dusty hadn't been able to bring herself to take a good look around; it held too many memories, good and bad, that she wasn't ready to deal with.

Last night, just being there had been enough.

She didn't have time to go through the house with a fine-toothed comb, but there were a few things she needed to find, things she hadn't realized meant so much to her.

Hopefully, it wouldn't take too long; she had no time to spare.

It didn't take long to walk home. Thirty minutes after leaving Ten Acres, she was roaming around the house she'd grown up in.

Armed with a flashlight, Dusty opened the door to the bedroom she'd shared with her younger sister, Courtney. Although stripped of the linens, their beds were in the exact same places they'd been ten years ago. The shelves on the wall that had once been white were now covered in dust and cobwebs, their contents filthy.

Standing on her bed, Dusty reached up and ran her hand along the top shelf. When it came into contact with a small, round, baby food jar, she was so surprised it was still there that she withdrew her hand immediately, as if she'd been burned. Seconds later, she slowly reached again, this time closing her hand around the jar and lifting it off the shelf.

Holding the flashlight between her chin and chest, Dusty used both hands to open the jar. Her eyes filled with tears the instant she saw the five silver rings; jewelry she and her sisters had made when they were kids, each ring inscribed with a name using the point of a nail. Touching each one, Dusty traced over the names with her finger: Jessie, Alex, Benni, Dusty, and Court.

Closing the jar, Dusty jumped off the bed and went to the desk. Opening the center drawer, she dug through the papers and pulled out an envelope. Quickly checking its contents, she breathed a sigh of relief when she saw the pictures of her family that she'd tucked away for safe keeping.

Last but not least, Dusty opened the bottom drawer of the desk, expecting to find the small box she kept in the back. It was gone. "Oh no!" she said out loud, and shone her flashlight over the debris on the floor, frantically searching.

Finally spotting the box, she squatted down and picked it up. Empty.

"Damn!"

Now on her hands and knees, Dusty picked through the scattered personal items she'd treasured as a child. Unable to find what she was looking for, she started throwing the big items to the side, hoping it was buried under something.

Knowing her time was running out, she picked through a few more of the items on the floor: shoes, open books, a few articles of clothing ... but she couldn't find it. Then, as she stood to leave the room, a small piece of metal reflected against her light.

There it was.

Smiling, Dusty bent down and picked up the cheap, blue, plastic cigarette lighter.

Judd's lighter.

The one he'd let her borrow when she was fourteen years old because her book of matches had gotten wet.

They'd been at one of the McCasseys' bonfires behind their grandfather's barn that night. She had been trying to light a small, separate fire, but the wet matches weren't working.

"Here, try this," Judd had said, and tossed her the lighter. "Just give it to me later," he told her when she'd tried to return it, "I'll use my brother's."

She never got a chance to return it that night. When things had begun to wind down, she'd gone in search of him, but Rebel told her that he'd already left. Dusty had known she could've just given the lighter to Rebel, but also knew that

keeping it would be a great excuse to seek out Judd the following day, so she'd stuffed it into her pocket.

Just the thought of having something that belonged to the man she'd been in love with since she was in elementary school made her stomach flip every time she looked at the lighter. Knowing it was cheap and something he'd probably stolen anyway, Dusty had eventually decided to keep it.

At the time, Judd had been twenty-two. He probably hadn't looked at her as anything other than some girl he'd grown up with; a girl who, at just fourteen, was a well seasoned partier more comfortable hanging out with people in their twenties than those her own age.

Dusty tucked the lighter into the front pocket of her jeans, then opened the jar and did the same thing with the rings; tossing the jar to the floor. Being careful not to bend the pictures, she folded the envelope in half and tucked it into her back pocket.

Closing the bedroom door, she walked down the hall and into the living room. It was foolish, she knew, to spend too much time at the house. But one quick look couldn't hurt, could it?

Dusty shined her light on the ceiling so the entire room would light up at once.

What she saw made her heart stop.

Stretching the entire length of one wall, the word, 'gotcha!' in black spray paint had been written by someone, and it had been circled with red.

The Drifters had found her.

They'd already been in her house.

Breaking into a sweat, Dusty reached around into the waistband of her jeans and pulled out the 9 millimeter.

She hadn't heard a single noise while she'd been inside. Were they in the house now?

Knowing she needed to get the hell out of there, Dusty did her best to keep her cool. No stranger to danger, she'd been in worse situations than this.

But never alone.

Get out, she told herself, get out of the house now.

Gun drawn and ready, she ignored the thunderous pounding of her heart in her ears and tip-toed through the room, doing her best to concentrate.

Knowing she was taking a chance of being cornered, Dusty quickly and quietly retreated into her bedroom. If anyone was watching the house, they'd expect her to leave the way she'd come in. They'd never think to watch her bedroom window since the trees outside it were so overgrown.

Hoping she could still fit through the opening, Dusty carefully lifted the sash. Once it was open, she paused and closed her eyes, listening for any sounds of movement. Confident there was no one outside; she shimmied through the window and landed on the ground with a thud. Without bothering to brush herself off, she took off toward Ten Acres at a dead run.

Not until she reached the darkness of the woods did she realize she'd left her flashlight at the house. "Dammit!" she cursed at herself out loud. It had been a long time since she'd had to navigate these woods in complete darkness ... and once again, she hadn't been alone then, either.

After a while, Dusty knew she had to be walking in circles. If she could just find the North Star; she knew that following it would take her along the creek and dump her out in town directly across from McCassey's Garage. But it was so cloudy there wasn't a single star in sight.

Deciding her best option was to find a safe place to spend the rest of the night, she began looking for a large boulder or tree trunk; something that would serve as a shelter in case she was ambushed. But because of the darkness, she wasn't able to see even that.

Sitting down where she was, Dusty bit down hard on her bottom lip, an old nervous habit she'd been unsuccessfully trying to kick for years. She didn't like sitting still, especially when she was probably being hunted. But she had nowhere to go, and didn't want to wander around in the dark for fear of running into someone she didn't want to see.

Closing her eyes, she rested her head against the trunk of a tree and listened to the night sounds. Comforted by the hoot owls and buzzing mosquitoes, Dusty was just beginning to relax when she heard the faint sound of swishing leaves. Thinking it was a raccoon, she didn't panic until the first twig snapped.

Raccoons were too light to snap dry twigs.

Then she heard another one.

And another.

Without listening for more, she stood and turned her head in the direction of the noise, which was getting louder.

When she spotted the glow of a flashlight through the trees, Dusty took off running. It didn't matter that the dried

leaves crunching under her feet were making a racket. Had she stayed in her spot ten more seconds, whoever was in the woods would've found her.

"There she is," she heard someone yell, "get her!"

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Chapter 10

Dusty couldn't see a thing.

Running with her hands out in front of her had kept branches from poking her in the eyes, but not from scratching and cutting her. Praying the men chasing her would lose their way, she ran as fast as she could.

Panting and gasping for air, Dusty stopped a few minutes later.

The sounds from whoever was following her were gone.

Had they given up the chase?

Resting only long enough to catch her breath, Dusty had been walking again for less than a minute when she spotted a large shadow ... the cabin.

Had she not been so afraid of giving away her location, she would've laughed at the irony of finding the place she needed to be after being spotted by the bad guys.

Wary of going inside just yet, Dusty ducked behind a tree near the front door, trying to see if anyone was inside. Crouching low, she listened closely for any signs of movement.

Not hearing anything, she was about to crawl out from behind the tree when she heard a movement behind her. Whirling around, she saw five men illuminated by a single flashlight.

Dusty recognized the face of the man standing just a few feet in front of her very clearly; a shiver crept up her spine as he crossed his arms and stared at her hungrily. The other four

men were harder to see, their faces partially hidden by the shadows. But she had a feeling that had it been lighter, she would've recognized them as well.

"Well, well, well," said the man in front. "If it ain't Dusty Zamora."

Dusty tried to retreat, but backed into the tree she'd been hiding behind.

"Where you goin', Dusty?"

"I—" she started, "aw, the hell with it," she said, and brought her booted right foot up into the man's crotch as hard as she could.

He went down with a mighty grunt, and Dusty started running again.

The other four men followed, catching up to her in the clearing about a hundred yards from the cabin. When she stumbled on a rock, her gun went flying and slid across the ground, coming to a stop next to the trunk of a tree. Before she could go after it, two of the men reached out and caught her by the arms. "Gotcha!" one of them said.

The two men held her still while the one who seemed to have taken over as leader began to talk.

The fourth man hung back, and although his silhouette was all that was visible, she knew it was him. Lousy coward ... he was going to allow the others to do his dirty work.

"Now that wasn't nice of you to run away, Dusty. We just want to talk to you."

"Bullshit," she spat, still breathing heavily. "You don't chase someone down in the middle of the night just to talk."

"Yeah," he said in a voice so evil it gave her chills. "I guess you're right."

When he smacked her across the face, she cried out despite herself.

"You're a stupid girl, you know that, Zamora? None of us really gave a damn about the asshole your sister killed. Fact is; he was more trouble than he was worth. If she hadn't blown him away, one of us eventually would've. We were only chasing you and your sister for fun, and probably woulda left you alone if you hadn't shot Bear and stolen his bike the other night."

Fun? They'd only been chasing her and Jessie for fun? If she hadn't stolen that bike, she wouldn't be in this mess. She and Jessie would've met up at McCassey's Garage like they'd planned, and Dusty would've been able to talk to Judd—hopefully, finally putting her life back together.

Instead, she was now being held captive by pissed-off gang members. Angry at herself for making such a mess of things, Dusty took her frustration out on her captors. "So what are you," she spat, "the posse?"

Expecting a blow that never came, Dusty couldn't understand why the man was so calm.

"No, bitch. I'm just sayin' that you pissed a lot of people off."

They were going to try and kill her ... that much was obvious. Thankful she'd had the opportunity to leave that note for Rebel, Dusty felt a little better about the possibility that she might die.

She was going to fight them, though.

And she was going to hold her head high.

Dusty wasn't going to cry and beg for her life ... it wasn't in her. Instead, she was going to give back whatever she got from them—for her own pride, her sister's, and for what she'd left behind in Virginia.

"Oh yeah?" She laughed in his face. "So what?"

When he went to slap her again, she ducked. "You missed, asshole."

"You goddamn bitch!" That time his open palm was right on.

Ignoring the stinging, she began struggling to get away, but the men holding her arms only tightened their grips.

"Oh no you don't," the leader said. "You ain't gettin' away that easy. You shot Bear and stole somethin' that belongs to him. Now you're gonna pay."

Dusty's only response was to continue struggling. At one point, she was able to pull her left arm free and get in a lucky elbow to the gut of the guy holding her.

When the man who'd been talking grabbed hold of her, he raised his arm and backhanded her across the face. The force of the blow stunned her and she stilled immediately.

"Now, where was I?" he asked sarcastically. "Oh, that's right, I was about to tell you how you're gonna pay for what you did."

Her face still stinging, Dusty swallowed the bile that rose in her throat as the metallic taste blood filled her mouth.

Wishing now that she'd accepted the McCasseys' help, Dusty hurriedly tried to think of a way out of her situation. Four against one were not good odds.

"Ahh!" She cursed herself for crying out in pain as another backhanded slap caught her off guard.

The leader laughed. "I got you with that one, didn't I?"

"N ... no." Was that terror filled voice really hers? Get it together, Dusty, she tried to tell herself. Don't let them see that they're getting to you. Don't let them win.

While the man in the background remained silent, the two holding her arms leaned in and began caressing Dusty's face and body. When she tried to move her face away, one of them tilted his head and brushed rough, dry lips against her neck, his hot, rancid breath causing her gag.

Trying not to get sick, she took a silent deep breath. "That's real manly of you guys ... beating on a woman. How come they're so many of you? Is it going to take all four of you to kill me?"

"Fuck you!" the man standing in front of her yelled. "And you ain't like no woman I've ever met. I've seen you in action, Zamora. You're more of a man than half the guys we ride with."

Did that slime-ball just give me a compliment?

"But since we know you're all female, we might as well have a little fun before killing you. What do you say, boys?"

The two thugs holding her grunted with excitement, causing Dusty to break out into a nervous sweat. She knew they were going to rape her ... or at least try. Staring off into the darkness, she doubted screaming would do any good. It had to be well after midnight, and the chances of anyone being on the McCassey's land, or even near it, were slim to none.

Other than the gun she'd dropped in the clearing, the only thing that might give her a slight chance to get herself out of this situation was the small knife in her front pocket. The blade was old, but razor sharp. If she could just manage to get her right hand free...

Taking a chance that would either help her or get her killed, Dusty raised her foot and brought her boot down hard on the foot of the man who was holding her right arm; hoping it'd surprise him enough to let her go.

"Ah!" he yelled, but didn't release her. "Is that the way you want it to be, girl, because two can play at that game."

When the man jabbed her ribcage with his elbow in return, Dusty nearly doubled over from the pain. Thinking that starting an argument with him may distract him enough to loosen his hold for just a moment, she opened her mouth to speak. Before she uttered a single word, a hand clamped tightly over her mouth. Knowing her time was running out, Dusty became desperate to get away. She tried to scream, but the pressure against her mouth made it impossible.

"Go ahead and try to make noise, bitch. No one will hear you. Your friend in the bushes back there told us that this is private property." Then he gave an evil laugh and said, "So relax and enjoy the ride."

Dusty heard the sound of her shirt being ripped open just seconds before the warm humid air touched her skin. When one of the men unhooked the front of her bra and grabbed her breasts, she began to struggle and fight for all she was worth. Even though her arms were being held behind her,

Dusty moved around as much as possible, kicking and struggling to get away.

"Hold her still, goddammit!"

One of the men holding Dusty suddenly gave her a hard slap to the head. Dizzy and seeing stars, she stopped struggling and started fighting the sudden urge to throw up.

"That's more like it," said the man who'd torn open her shirt. "Now let's see what you've got under these jeans."

When he grabbed hold of her ankles and pulled her feet out from under her, the two men let go and Dusty slammed to the ground, cracking her head on the hard earth. Dazed, but painfully aware she was about to be separated from the rest of her clothes, she ignored the pain in her head and started doing everything she could to get away. Kicking her feet and flailing her left arm was enough of a distraction to allow her to jam her right hand into her pocket and pull out the knife. Using the ground to keep the handle of the knife steady, she pulled out the blade; breathing a sigh of relief when it clicked into place.

Wrapping her entire hand around the handle, Dusty held the knife as tight as she could and brought her arm up, plunging the blade into the side of the man who was about to rip her jeans off.

"Ah!" he screamed.

His wail of pain surprised the other two enough that they stopped and backed away. Taking advantage of being free, Dusty jumped to her feet and leaned over; stabbing the man three more times. She didn't know exactly where the knife entered his body, but his wails—along with the blood that was

now covering her—were enough to tell her that she'd done some damage.

"Help me, you ... idiots," he yelled to the men who'd been holding Dusty.

In the next instant, Dusty was tackled from behind. She fell to the ground with a thud; the crisp brush that scratched her skin, and rough hand that squeezed her left breast, making her painfully aware that she was missing both her shirt and bra.

"I've got you now, Zamora," one of the men said.

"Get off me!" Keeping an ironclad grip on the knife handle, Dusty flailed her arm behind her trying to make contact with one of the two guys that were pinning her to the ground.

By the time she hit one, the guy she'd stabbed had recovered enough to make his way back to her. "Get the hell out of my way!" he yelled to the others. Obviously no longer intimidated by their so-called leader, they ignored him and focused on Dusty.

Doing her best to fight them off, she continued struggling as they rolled her onto her back, exposing her blood covered chest and arms, which were also caked with dirt and leaves.

"I want first crack at her," one of them shouted, telling Dusty that they still intended to rape her.

Using what little energy she had left, she kicked her feet, feeling a hint of satisfaction when her right foot hit its mark and the man who'd just spoken grunted in pain.

Her slight victory was short lived when a fist landed in the middle of her stomach, knocking the wind out of her.

Gasping for breath and powerless to do anything to save herself, Dusty felt her boots being removed, and tried to block out the feeling of the man's hands touching her as he tried to pull down her jeans.

Tears stung her eyes as two sets of hands were suddenly rubbing and groping her body. When she felt a large, rough hand find its way inside her jeans and touch the area between her thighs, Dusty opened her eyes in surprise. Knowing what was coming next, she knew this was her last chance to save herself.

Still holding the knife, she raised her arm and jabbed at the man on top of her. He hollered in agony when the blade made contact with his body. Fueled by adrenaline, she pulled the knife out and stabbed him again. Suddenly, she wasn't just trying to save her own life. She was avenging the deaths of her sisters, the life she lost at the age of eighteen, and the ten years she could've had with the only man she'd ever loved.

Unable to stop herself, Dusty continued until the man reached out and wrapped his blood-soaked hand around her neck and squeezed, cutting off her air. He loosened his grip when she brought the knife down hard into his shoulder, and with a high-pitched, blood-curdling scream, she made the only attempt she could to let someone know she needed help.

Seconds later, the man collapsed on top of her. Still gripping the bloody pocketknife, Dusty shoved him off and rolled out of the way.

Unfortunately, the two men that had been watching her struggle with their apparent leader grabbed hold of her then, and threw her back down to the ground.

"Shut her the hell up!" one of them said.

As one man started to climb on top of her and attempt to spread her thighs with his knee, the other one knelt down and punched her hard in the stomach, knocking the air out of her again. That time, she was completely unable to move.

"I've got something to shut her up permanently." A moment later, Dusty saw a flash of metal reflect in the moonlight.

The man had a knife.

He was going to try and finish the job someone else had started. Only this time, Jessie wouldn't be coming to her rescue.

Pinned under the weight of the man on top of her and unable to breathe, all Dusty could do was watch the knife move closer.

Suddenly, she heard the fourth man, the coward who'd been standing in the shadows, yell, "Hey!" To her surprise, he ran over and began trying to grab her attacker's knife.

After all he'd done to help make her life miserable the past few months; she couldn't believe he was actually going to help her.

As Dusty moved her head to the side trying to suck in air, one of the men turned on the flashlight, lighting the night just enough to allow her to get a good look at her attackers; not at all surprised when she recognized them.

The instant she made eye contact with the fourth man, they both froze. Even in the middle of trying to keep herself from being raped and murdered, Dusty thought about how ironic this situation was. She'd been to hell and back in the past ten years; survived gunshot wounds, a fire, the deaths of her sisters, and faced countless situations she never thought she'd have to deal with.

Now, after all that, she was going to die right here on the very soil where she'd grown up; all because an old acquaintance had betrayed her.

Taking advantage of the fact that Dusty was unable to fight back, the one with the knife raised the weapon into the air and brought it down toward Dusty's throat. The fourth man reacted quickly, swiping his arm and deflecting it away.

The dagger missed its target, but during the melee, someone's foot hit Dusty in the head, momentarily stunning her.

Dusty barely noticed when the weight of her attackers was suddenly lifted from her body. She didn't see the one with the knife, or the fourth man slinking off and disappearing into the shadows.

When she finally opened her eyes and tried to focus on what was happening, she slowly became aware of shouting and grunting in the background. The chaos seemed to go on forever as she lay unmoving in the dirt, listening.

When it was finally over, she heard the faint sound of men's voices. "I took care of the one with the knife," someone said.

"And I got the bastard who was on top of her," another man said.

"There's one over here," a third voice said, "and he don't look too good."

"What about the fourth guy?"

"He took off through the woods. I'm goin' after him."

The pounding of heavy footsteps against the ground disappeared quickly, and all was quiet until Dusty thought she heard someone say her name. Was someone really talking to her? She couldn't be sure. Dizzy and having a hard time concentrating, she listened for the sound again.

When something soft was draped over her bare upper body, she felt grateful for its warmth, not even realizing until that moment that she'd been cold. Pain exploded through her body when a pair of hands slid under her and she was lifted off the ground. Wanting desperately to struggle, she realized the pain in her head made it impossible to move.

"Dusty?"

There it was again. How did those men know her name? Who were they?

"Dusty, can you hear me?"

When the voice finally penetrated her brain, she realized it sounded vaguely familiar. Judd? Or was it Rebel? No, they weren't here. They wouldn't be looking for her because she'd told them not to.

Thinking again that she should've allowed the McCassey brothers to help her, Dusty tuned out the voices next to her because she thought she heard her big sister.

Was she there? "Jessie?" She thought she'd yelled the name, but no one answered her.

Jessie wouldn't ignore her.

Something had to be wrong.

What was happening?

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Chapter 11

"Look here," Blackie said.

When Judd saw his older brother standing in the corner holding Dusty's saddlebags, a great sense of relief came over him. She was here, and she was safe.

Wasn't she?

"Dusty?" he called. "Hey, Dusty, are you here?"

But there was no answer.

The brothers split up and searched the cabin and its surroundings.

Rebel was the one who spotted the gun first. "Check this out." Picking it up, he handed it to Judd.

Hoping there was an easy explanation as to why they'd found Dusty's saddlebags in the cabin and a gun in the clearing, Judd turned to Blackie. "Angel has a 9 millimeter, doesn't she? This could be hers."

Taking the weapon from Judd, Blackie shined his flashlight on the butt, inspecting it closely.

"What are you looking for?"

"Initials. Angel does have a 9 millimeter, but I carved AKM on the butt, and it ain't here. This is someone else's gun."

Judd's heart fell into the pit of his stomach when he took the gun from Blackie and jammed it into the waistband of his pants. "Any of the other boys have one?" he asked, hoping one of his cousins owned a gun he didn't know about.

Deep down, Judd had known what their answers were going to be before Blackie and Rebel shook their heads. The

McCassey cousins were far from perfect, but they were extremely responsible with their firearms. None of the boys would ever be careless enough to leave one lying around, especially outside on the ground. "It's Dusty's, isn't it?"

Neither one of his brothers had a chance to answer because the silent night was interrupted by a blood-curdling scream.

"It came from over there!" Blackie shouted, and all three of them took off at a dead run.

* * * *

Judd was holding Dusty in his arms when Rebel dropped to his knees beside him. "How is she?"

Wishing he knew what the hell had happened; Judd did his best to keep his raging anger at bay and pulled her closer against his bare chest. "I don't know. It's so fuckin' dark out here I can't see a goddamn thing! We've got to get her inside."

As Judd made a move to stand, he stopped suddenly when he felt something warm and sticky smear across his chest.

"What the hell ... what is that?"

Rebel stopped and turned back to Judd. "What is what?"

Stopping to kneel down again, Judd ran his hand over Dusty's face and neck, the part of her body that had been closest to his chest. "Oh, God! Dusty! No!"

Suddenly, his brother was beside him. "Judd, what is it?"

"Oh shit, Rebel, its blood! She's covered in it!"

"Where's it coming from?"

"I don't know. I told you, I can't see anything!"

"Pick her up again, Judd; let's get her to the cabin!"

When Judd got to his feet, he bent his head and whispered, "Oh God, Dusty, I'm so sorry. I never should've let you take off by yourself."

That's when he heard the faint voice. "Judd?"

"It's okay, Dusty. Everything's okay. I'm here."

"The blood—"

"Shh, don't talk."

"Judd, come on!" Rebel yelled.

Dusty flinched at the sound of the loud voice.

"Easy, Dusty, that was just Rebel. Blackie's here, too. We're going to take you back to the cabin and get you cleaned up."

Stopping a few feet in front of the cabin, Judd stepped to the side, allowing Rebel to open the door.

"Set her on one of the cots," Rebel instructed. "We need to get a good look at her."

The bright light coming from the oil lamp in the kitchen forced Dusty to close her partially open eyes and bury her face in Judd's chest.

"Lower the lamp, Reb, the light's hurting her eyes."

When the brightness disappeared, Judd felt Dusty relax. After gently laying her on one of the cots, he reached onto one of the shelves bordering the row of cots and pulled out a clean sheet. Unfolding it, he spread the material over her. Reaching underneath, Judd pulled out the T-shirt he'd taken off and thrown over her the instant he'd noticed she was bare from the waist up. Tossing the blood-soaked, black shirt to the floor, he knelt beside the cot.

Now it was time to get a better look at her.

"Close your eyes, Dusty," Judd told her in a soft, yet tortured voice he didn't recognize as his own, "we need to turn up the lamp so we can see where all this blood is coming from."

"Judd ... stop," she said hoarsely, "it's not mine. The blood isn't mine."

Not hers? "Then whose is it?"

"The guy. The one who tried to ... the one who was pulling at my clothes. I stabbed him."

Stabbed him? "With what, Dusty? I didn't see a knife outside."

Her right hand moved slightly under the sheet, drawing Judd's attention. "Here," she told him. When he lifted the material, he was shocked at the sight of Dusty's bloody hand grasping an equally bloody knife. A knife that looked very familiar.

"Jesus." Judd reached out and pried the knife from her hand. "Come get this, Reb." Holding it in the air, he handed the blade to his brother, who immediately headed to the sink to wash the small weapon. Wiping the excess blood from his hand, Judd turned his attention back to Dusty.

"So you're not cut? All this blood belongs to someone else?"

She nodded. "I'm okay; except that my head really hurts. That guy was trying to take my clothes off. They were going to rape me. No one's touched me since—"

"Who are they?" he asked, cutting her off. Judd wasn't ready to deal with what it sounded like she was about to say. He didn't want to believe she was that devoted to him; that

she hadn't had sex with anyone else since the one time the two of them were together.

"The ones Jessie and I are running from," she said, brushing at the hair that was sticking to the blood on her face. "I knew they'd catch up to me, but I didn't think they'd find me at Ten Acres. I should've known he'd tell them I was probably hiding here."

"He? Who's 'he' Dusty?"

Before she had a chance to answer, the front door flew open and Blackie, covered in sweat, dirt, and blood, came barreling in. Dusty sat up immediately—almost as though she was expecting Blackie to approach her. When she did, the sheet Judd had draped over her slid down, exposing her chest. She reached down and covered herself so quickly that Judd wondered if he'd imagined what he'd seen tattooed on her left breast.

Seemingly un-phased by the fact that Dusty's entire upper body—including her face and hair—were caked in blood, Blackie approached the cot. Stopping directly in front of Dusty, he pointed a finger at her. Judd could tell his brother was angry, but didn't know how much until Blackie spoke.

"You got a hell of a lot of explainin' to do, girl" he yelled.

Judd had no idea what was going on, but he didn't think Dusty was in any shape to be hollered at. "Blackie, what—"

Blackie whirled around and shoved Judd backward. "Shut the fuck up, Judd! Seems your girlfriend left a few details outta the story she told us back at the garage." Turning back to Dusty, he refocused his attention on her. "I don't like to be lied to. So you'd better start talkin'. Don't leave anything out

this time, Dusty. And for your sake, you'd better hope I believe you."

Judd focused on Dusty, who surprisingly, didn't look one bit afraid of Blackie or his threat.

"What the hell is going on?" Judd asked no one in particular.

Without taking his eyes off Dusty, Blackie answered his brother. "That's what I'd like to know, too. I'd also like to know why, when I went after the coward who tried to sneak off through the woods; I discovered that it was Davie Jenkins."

"Davie Jenkins?" Just hearing the name of one of his oldest enemies set Judd's blood boiling.

The McCasseys had been feuding with the Jenkins family since their grandfathers were young. After living in Hagerstown for over fifty years, the entire family had relocated thirty minutes south to the town of Frederick. Judd and his brothers hadn't had any run-ins with the Jenkins since Davie and some others had started in on Judd and a handful of his cousins at Digger's Bar five years earlier; the night Rebel and Gypsy got married.

"What the hell are you doing hanging around with him, Dusty?"

Still clutching the sheet against her chest, Dusty looked from one brother to the other, including Rebel, who'd come in from the kitchen and was standing next to Judd.

"Here," Rebel said as he handed the knife to Judd, who shoved it into the front pocket of his jeans.

As the three brothers waited for an explanation, Judd saw something that had him shocked and speechless ... tears in Dusty's eyes. He'd only seen her cry once, and that had been when she was a little kid.

"I don't hang around with Davie Jenkins," she said, eyeballing Blackie. "His older brother, Tony, was the Drifter that Jessie killed."

"What?" Now that he thought about it, Judd did remember that Tony Jenkins had always had a thing for Dusty's sister, Alex. He'd been after her since they were young, but she'd never wanted anything to do with him. When they were teenagers, he pursued her so aggressively that it got to the point where she couldn't go anywhere alone.

"Jessie killed Tony Jenkins?"

"Tony killed Alex!" she yelled as tears began streaming down her cheeks, leaving streaks as they washed away the blood. "For six months that guy followed us all over Virginia. We couldn't get away from him, and could never figure out why. It wasn't until the night he and Alex died that we figured out he had every Drifter in the state reporting back to him about where we were."

Judd stole a glance at Blackie, who looked like he wasn't sure whether or not he believed Dusty. "Why didn't you tell us yesterday that he was the one after you?"

"I was going to," she admitted, "until I thought about your wives and kids. I know how much you boys hate the Jenkins family. There was no doubt in my mind that once you found out what was going on, you'd all offer to help and wouldn't take no for an answer. I know what it's like to lose someone

you love, and there was no way I was going to put your wives and kids through that."

Judd stepped forward. "I don't have a wife or kids, Dusty, you could've told me."

Dusty shook her head. "No I couldn't. I didn't want Blackie and Rebel to find out, and you don't keep secrets from your brothers. I could never have asked you to do that, either, it wouldn't have been right."

Before Judd had a chance to respond, Blackie began interrogating her again. "You better not be feedin' us a line of bullshit, Dusty."

"I'm not lying, Blackie!" she said, fresh tears forming in her eyes.

"Then explain why Davie ran out of the woods and deflected the knife as that guy was ready to slit your throat. I saw it, I saw him save your life."

"Well what you didn't see was him enjoying the show from the shadows when he thought all they were going to do was rape me! The apparent leader of that little group told me that they didn't give a damn about Jessie killing Tony Jenkins, and that they'd only been chasing Jessie and me for fun. Fun, Blackie!

"They were after me for the man I shot and the bike I stole, and no other reason. Had I not stolen that bike, none of this would be happening."

"Then where does Davie come into play? And why did he stop that man from killin' you?"

"Davie's after Jessie," she answered. "He wants revenge for what she did to Tony. I guess he thought I could lead him

to her ... something I can't do if I'm dead. I'm sure that's the only reason he saved my life. Without me, he has no chance of finding my sister."

"So you think Jessie's alive?"

"I didn't, but I do now. If Davie had already killed her, he would've let that guy slit my throat; if he'd even been here. He probably would've even taken a front row seat."

"So what now?" Judd wanted to know.

Seemingly back to herself, Dusty wiped her eyes and took a deep breath. "Now I get dressed and go try to find my sister. She wouldn't leave me out there alone, and I'm not going to do that to her. Davie's the only one after her—the Drifters hated Tony and don't give a damn that he's dead. Everything's fine now, I can handle Davie on my own."

Blackie sat on the cot across from Dusty and unrolled a pack of Marlboro's from his left shirt sleeve. After lighting up, he looked at her. "Sorry Dusty, but that ain't happenin'."

Judd saw the fire that lit in Dusty's eyes and knew what was coming next.

"I'm not a little girl anymore, Blackie! You can't tell me to stay behind because things are too dangerous, the way you tried to do when I was a kid."

Taking a long drag on his cigarette, Blackie flicked the ashes onto dirt floor and gave Dusty a stone-cold look. "Me tellin' you to stay behind back then may not have worked, but it's gonna work now. If I catch you tryin' to leave this cabin, I'll beat your ass so bad that you won't be able to sit on a bike to go anywhere. You hear me?"

Wondering what kind of reaction she was going to have to that, Judd looked from Blackie to Dusty. He had no doubt that Blackie would do what it took to keep Dusty where he wanted her.

"You can't keep me here against my will, Blackie."

He chuckled without humor. "Oh no?" he said, standing up. "Watch me."

"Blackie!" she yelled as he started to walk away. "What about Jessie?"

"If what you just told me is the truth, than wherever Jessie is, she's safe for now. I got Davie Jenkins tied up out back. He ain't goin' nowhere 'til I say so, and neither are you."

As Blackie headed for the door, Judd remembered the men who had attacked Dusty. "What about the Drifters? What happened to them?"

"I sent them on their way ... along with their bleedin' and probably dyin' friend." He threw a hard look at Dusty. "Once they found out they were messin' with The Devil, they couldn't get outta Hagerstown fast enough. They know I showed mercy by lettin' them live, and that they'll die if they dare to show their faces anywhere near here again."

After cracking his knuckles and taking one last drag on his cigarette, Blackie dropped it to the ground and extinguished it under the heel of his boot. "Our old friend, Davie, ain't gonna be so lucky."

Before turning and walking out the door, he pointed to Judd. "You're in charge of makin' sure Dusty don't go nowhere. If she makes it past this door, your ass is grass. I'll be back."

Out of the corner of his eye, Judd saw Dusty flinch when Blackie slammed the door behind him. "He didn't mean it," Judd said to try and put Dusty at ease.

"Didn't mean what," she asked with a slight hesitation, "that he was going to kick your ass, or mine?"

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Chapter 12

Judd watched Dusty stare at the door for several seconds after Blackie was gone; wondering what she was thinking. He wanted to say something to comfort her, but couldn't come up with the right words.

In truth, Judd could've used a little comforting himself. Blackie was a dangerous man ... always had been. But not once in the twenty-three years since people had started calling him 'The Devil' had he bragged about his nickname, or used his reputation to his advantage.

Tonight, he'd done both.

Why had Blackie gone to such extremes?

Was there something he knew that Judd didn't?

"I think I'm going to take off, too," Rebel said, his words interrupting Judd's thoughts. "Someone needs to keep an eye on him."

"I'm sorry for causing trouble, Rebel," Dusty apologized. "Believe it or not, this is the kind of situation I was trying to avoid. But it looks like if I'd told you guys what was going on as soon as I got to town, this probably wouldn't have happened."

"Maybe, maybe not. But none of this is your fault, Dusty. I know Blackie, and he's not really mad at you, just worried. I have to say, though, I wouldn't want to be in Davie Jenkins' shoes right now. That boy's going to learn a very painful lesson about messing with the McCasseys, and my guess is that it'll be one he won't soon forget. Walk me out, will ya?"

Rebel asked, motioning to Judd. "He'll be right back, Dusty ... stay put."

Once they were outside, Judd closed the cabin door behind him. He knew Rebel had something to say that he didn't want Dusty to hear, so Judd waited until his brother was ready to talk.

"You recognize that knife she had?"

Damn, he should've known that was coming. He'd been more than a little surprised himself when he saw Dusty clutching his old pocket knife—the knife he hadn't seen in ten years. "She and I were ... together ... the night before she and her sisters left town. She must've taken it out of my pocket while I was asleep. I can't believe she still has it."

Rebel crossed his arms in front of his chest and leaned his right shoulder against the trunk of a tree. "I can. Did you happen to see her tattoo when the sheet slipped down?"

The few things Judd had learned about Dusty since she'd ridden back into his life the day before had been surprising ... to say the least. But nothing had surprised him more than seeing his name tattooed on her left breast. "I saw it."

Rebel laughed. "Now are you convinced that her little-too-long glance at you yesterday was an invitation?"

"What's your goddamn point, Rebel?"

"My point is that she's in love with you."

"You don't know that."

"The hell I don't, Judd! No woman tattoos the name of just any man on her body ... let alone her breast."

"That's enough, Rebel," Judd warned.

"You love her, too, don't you?"

"I said ... that's enough."

Rebel laughed again. "Fine." Then he turned away. "I'll see you later."

"Wait! Where the hell are you going?"

"I already told you; someone needs to keep an eye on Blackie. The Zamora sisters have always had a special place in that so-called cold, black heart of his. It's obvious that hearing about what's been going on with the girls, combined with what happened to Dusty tonight, hasn't been easy on him.

"He was gone a long time after we brought Dusty into the cabin. I don't think I have to tell you what he could've done to the guys who hurt her. Not to mention what he's probably doing to Davie Jenkins right now."

"No, you don't." Judd didn't need Rebel to tell him that Blackie could've killed all four of the Drifters, as well as Davie Jenkins. Their older brother had killed before; both when they rescued Gypsy from her father and later that day during a gun battle that had taken place right here on Ten Acres.

"Are you coming back?"

Rebel shook his head. "Not tonight. Blackie was right. After having a run-in with him, none of the Drifters will come back here. The way I see it, as long as we hold onto Davie, Dusty's no longer in danger and free to search for Jessie."

"Do you really believe she's alive?"

"I don't know. For Dusty's sake, I hope so. But if she isn't dead, then where the hell is she? Jessie watched Dusty like a hawk when she was little, and as you and I both know, once a big brother, always a big brother. Blackie still tries to protect

us the way he did when we were young, and chances are, Jessie does the same thing to Dusty. Especially now that their other sisters are gone. She wouldn't leave Dusty alone this long without at least trying to contact her."

Judd thought about what Rebel said and knew it was true. Even though Blackie had needed Rebel's smarts to bail him out of trouble numerous times over the years, Blackie still did everything he could to protect him and Rebel from others that threatened them. More than likely, Jessie was the same way. If she was alive, she'd be here with Dusty now.

"Do you think Jessie not being here has something to do with the problem Dusty said we had to deal with together?"

Rebel shook his head. "I don't know, man, but this is the perfect opportunity for you to find out. Blackie still doesn't know anything about that, by the way, so if there was ever a good time to get that little problem straightened out, it's now ... before he finds out there's something we didn't tell him."

That was the truth. "I'll see if I can get Dusty to tell me what the hell that's all about."

"Good luck. Talking doesn't seem to be one of her strong suits. She's probably going to want to leave and go looking for Jessie," Rebel told Judd, "you know that, don't you?"

He knew. In fact, he half-expected her to be dressed and ready to ride when he walked back inside. "I know."

"Are you going with her?"

"I—"

"Don't tell me the thought hasn't crossed your mind."

It had. "She may not want me to."

Rebel gave Judd a slight shove. "You stupid asshole! Don't tell me you're going to just sit back and let her walk out of your life a second time."

"Rebel!" Judd shouted in his brother's face.

"Judd!" Reb yelled back.

"Hey!"

At the sound of Dusty's voice, both men turned toward the cabin door. "What?" they yelled in unison.

Wrapped in her white sheet, Dusty looked at the brothers and smirked. "Can one of you two bickering little girls tell me where I can find a bar of soap and some aspirin?"

"Get back inside," Judd scolded as if she was a disobedient child. "I'll be there in a minute."

"Judd, I can—"

"Go!" he ordered, not giving her a chance to finish her sentence.

When Dusty turned around and slammed the door behind her, Rebel chuckled and stood up straight. "I think I'll leave now."

Judd threw out a sarcastic, "Great, thanks for your support."

"You don't need me here, Judd. You and Dusty obviously have a lot to talk about, and that won't get done with me hanging around. Talk to her. Really talk to her."

"And just how the hell am I supposed to start the conversation? Um, Dusty, about my name being tattooed on your breast—"

"Works for me, big brother."

"Rebel!"

"I can't tell you what to say! Why don't you start by offering to help her get cleaned up? Give her the soap she asked for and let things go from there."

"Maybe I should just go with you."

"The hell you should! This is the perfect opportunity to find out whether there's really something between you two. You better take advantage of this, Judd, because you may never get another chance. If you let Dusty walk out of your life this time, you might never see her again."

Dammit, why did Rebel always seem to be right? Judd hadn't wanted Dusty to leave Hagerstown ten years ago, but back then, he didn't have a choice. Not only was whatever had been budding between them new, but he never would've asked her to separate from her sisters.

But things were different now. She was all alone—at least for the time being—and he knew she felt something for him. If there was ever a good time to tell her how he felt, this was it.

"Judd?"

Turning to Rebel, he raised his brows. "What?"

"I'm leaving. Blackie and I will be back around noon tomorrow. And for Christ's sake, find out what it is that she thinks you and her have to deal with together, and deal with it before we get here."

"I'll try."

"And whatever you do, don't let Dusty leave."

"I won't. See ya."

"I'll keep the CB on. Holler if you need anything."

Judd turned away from Rebel with the intention of going inside, but hesitated at the front door. Was he really ready to do this?

Surprised when he felt Rebel give him a shove from behind, Judd turned around and stared at him.

"Don't worry, man, dealing with a woman isn't any harder than anything else you've had to deal with."

"Bullshit! Why the hell do you think I've done my best to avoid most of them over the years?"

"Because you were secretly pining away for Dusty. Now get your chicken-shit ass in there before she decides to crawl out the window and you miss your chance."

Judd shrugged him off and took a step forward. "Fuck off."

Rebel laughed. "Yeah, I love you, too. Good luck."

Watching until Rebel had disappeared into the trees, Judd decided now was as good a time as any to talk to Dusty.

Who knew if, or when, they would have another chance.

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Chapter 13

Seething, Blackie paced back and forth through the brush breathing deeply, trying to keep a reign on his temper.

He wanted to hurt Davie Jenkins like he'd never wanted to hurt anyone before ... even some of the low-life bastards he'd fought with in prison.

The Jenkins had messed with the McCassey family one too many times. Blackie had had enough. He was going to put an end to the family feud once and for all ... tonight.

It was going to be a long time—if ever—before Blackie was able to forget the sight of Dusty lying on the ground beaten and half-naked, covered in someone else's blood. Little Dusty Zamora, who, at eight years old, had pulled him aside, climbed into his lap, and made him promise not to let Judd marry anyone else ... because as soon as she was old enough, Dusty was going to marry him herself.

Blackie had made that promise because he'd thought it was funny at the time; good thing for him that Judd hadn't married anyone. He hated the thought of letting Dusty down. She was a good kid. Even now, although she was twenty-eight, he couldn't help looking at her like the scared teenager she was the night he dropped her and her sisters off at the Renegade's camp.

Stopping in front of Davie Jenkins, who was bound and propped up against a tree, Blackie kicked him hard in the side. What he really wanted to do was kill the little bastard. Instead, he decided to torture him for a while.

Grunting, Davie swayed and almost fell over. But Blackie reached out and stopped him, squatting down and shoving him back up against the tree.

"Too bad you ain't never learned your lesson about messin' with the McCassey boys, Jenkins."

"I didn't do nothin' to you, Blackie."

"Bullshit! You've been harassin' Jessie and Dusty. You led those Drifters right to Dusty, and were gonna sit there and watch them rape her! The only reason you stopped that man from killin' her was because without Dusty, you can't find Jessie."

"That bitch killed my brother!"

Finding it more and more difficult to keep his temper in check, Blackie released some steam by kicking Davie again. This time, the man did fall over. Leaving him where he lay, Blackie continued talking.

"Tony deserved to die! He killed Alex Zamora for no other reason than she didn't want to spend time with him! That's real fuckin' manly ... killin' a woman."

"She pulled a gun on him!"

"So what? I've had several women pull a gun on me and I ain't never killed a single one of them. It sounds to me like Tony deserved to die."

"You weren't there, you don't know what happened!" Davie yelled in his brother's defense.

"Well, if I had been, I'd have killed Tony myself and saved Jessie the trouble. No one threatens or disrespects my family and gets away with it ... includin' you."

Davie was quiet as Blackie's last statement seemed to sink in. Blackie had no intention of ruining his life, or the lives of his wife and children, by killing Davie and being sent back to prison. But there was no harm in letting Davie think he was about to die.

After a few silent moments, Davie cleared his throat and, in a much more subdued voice, said, "The Zamora sisters aren't related to you."

No, the Zamora sisters weren't related to the McCasseys. But for all intents and purposes, they had been part of Blackie's family. He and Jessie had been good friends since they were very young. They understood each other better than most people knew. Much like Blackie had done for Judd and Rebel when they were little; Jessie had always looked out for her younger sisters.

Losing Jessie and the rest of the girls ten years ago had been painful for Blackie; more painful than he'd let on. There wasn't a day that went by that he hadn't thought of them, wondered where they were and if they were okay.

"You ain't gotta share blood to be part of a family, asshole. Too bad you and your brothers never learned that."

Davie fell silent once again, giving Blackie the unwanted opportunity to think more about the fall of the Zamora sisters.

What hurt him the most about Dusty was discovering how she'd been living and what she'd been up to. An outlaw biker wasn't who Dusty Zamora had been destined to be. She'd been a cute kid, dogging the heels of her older sisters, always ready and willing to take part in anything they were doing.

Without guidance and a stable home life, she'd taken the wrong road, ruining any chance she had at a normal life in the process.

His anger renewed, Blackie strode over to Davie, leaned down, and wrapped his left hand around the man's throat, pulling him to his feet. Struggling to breathe, Davie raised his hands and grabbed onto Blackie's fingers, trying to pry them away.

"It ain't no use, Davie," Blackie told him through clenched teeth. "I ain't lettin' go."

"You're ... going ... to ... kill ... me," Davie managed to say as he tried to gasp for breath.

"You're goddamn right I am," Blackie told him. The euphoric, calming feeling he was getting from knowing Davie was scared to death was doing its part to keep Blackie from doing the actual deed. "You're nothin' to me, Davie. Simply killin' you ain't gonna be good enough. You're gonna suffer for what both you and your brother have done to the Zamora sisters."

Blackie loosened his grip just long enough to allow Davie to suck in fresh air. After tightening it again, he reached across his body and unsnapped the sheath holding his Bowie knife. Pulling it out with his right hand, he placed the tip of the blade against Davie's temple. "How about if we start by cuttin' that long, greasy hair of yours?"

Without waiting for an answer, Blackie released his hold on Davie, who fell to the ground gasping for air. Wasting no time, Blackie straddled the choking man and grabbed a handful of the hair on top of Davie's head, acting as if he was

going scalp him. "I ain't sharpened this knife in a while; sure hope it cuts all the way through on the first try."

Davie squeezed his eyes shut and yelled as Blackie pulled extra hard on the tuft of hair. He wasn't actually going to scalp him, but he did saw back and forth a few times until the clump of hair came off in his hand. Throwing it to the ground, he repeated the process two more times before he heard his name being called.

"Blackie!"

It was Rebel.

Dropping the last handful of hair onto Davie's chest, Blackie stood, kicked Davie in the groin hard enough to make him pass out, and turned to his brother. "What do you want, Reb?"

"What the hell are you doing? I heard Davie yelling all the way up at the cabin."

"I ain't doin' nothin', Rebel. Just havin' a little fun is all."

Feeling just a little better, Blackie actually smiled when he saw the wide-eyed expression on Rebel's face. "What'd you do, tell him you were going to scalp him?"

Blackie nodded.

"He thought you were going to kill him, didn't he?"

"Damn right that's what he thought; 'cause that's what I told him."

"But you weren't?"

"Hell no. I got a wife and kids to take care of; I ain't goin' back to prison for the likes of Davie Jenkins ... or anyone else, for that matter. But it didn't hurt none to make that

miserable excuse for a human bein' think he was dyin'. Maybe next time he'll think twice before crossin' me and mine."

Rebel looked over at Davie, who was still unconscious, most of his long, blonde hair scattered on the ground. "I don't think there'll be a next time, Blackie. You can bet that once Davie looks in the mirror, or tries to take a piss, he'll finally decide he tangled with our family one too many times."

"Good. But in the meantime, do what you can to rouse that little weasel. We need some information before lettin' him go."

Rebel stepped forward and slapped Davie across the face a few times. By the time he began to stir, Blackie and Rebel had gotten into position; one on each side of Davie, each holding a Bowie knife just inches from his face.

When Davie opened his eyes and saw the blades, his eyes rolled back in his head and he passed out again. Blackie laughed, then gave him one final, hard slap. "Get up, mother fucker."

Blackie and Rebel sheathed their knives, and when Davie opened his eyes this time, Rebel hauled him to his feet. "You're damn lucky I came along when I did, Jenkins. You can thank me for saving your worthless scalp."

"Gee," Davie said, his strained voice laced with sarcasm, "thanks."

"Well, if you're going to be that way ... here, Blackie, you can have him."

Rebel started to shove Davie toward Blackie, but Davie did the best he could to resist considering his feet were still

bound. "Okay, okay! Don't let him kill me, Rebel. I'll do anything. Just tell me what you want."

Rebel released Davie and he fell to the ground, where both McCassey brothers left him.

"We want some answers," Blackie told him. "And you ain't goin' nowhere until we're satisfied you've told us everything."

"Fine, what do you want to know?"

"Who else is after Dusty?"

"I don't know."

Blackie raised his foot and kicked Davie in the stomach.

"Liar!"

"I'm not ... I'm not lying!"

"Then who else is roamin' around these woods?"

Davie shook his head. "I said I don't know!" When Blackie went to kick him again, Davie turned to Rebel and yelled, "I swear, Rebel, if there's someone else after Dusty Zamora, he's not with me."

Rebel put his hand in the air, motioning for Blackie to stop. Reluctantly, he did so.

Stepping back, Blackie watched Rebel grip the handle of his knife, rest the point against Davie's throat, and do what he did best: be the leader any one of them would follow into battle.

"You've been a thorn in my side for longer than I care to remember, Davie. You better hope to God you're telling us the truth, because if you're not, I'm going to help Blackie cut you to pieces, and we'll scatter your body parts all over Ten Acres for every turkey vulture within a twenty mile radius to enjoy."

"I'm not lying, Rebel. Look, Tony was my brother, and either one of you would've reacted the same way I did if someone had taken out one of your brothers. But you know how Tony was. Not a lot of people liked him; even in his own gang. The members of the Drifters who helped me terrorize Jessie and Dusty only did it for fun, because they had nothing else to do. At first, none of them wanted to leave Virginia. So when Dusty showed up in the bar the other night looking for her sister, I started something, making sure that Bear, their leader, got involved. Dusty shot him, and it was just pure luck on my part that she stole his bike, too. I could only get five of the Drifters to come after her, and that was only because I told them I knew exactly where to find her.

"Blackie's a legend," he told the brothers. "Gangs from up and down the entire east coast tell terrifying stories about 'The Devil'," Davie paused and studied Blackie for a moment, "most of which I assume are true. Everyone knows his real name, too, so I left out the fact that this land belongs to him. Whether they wanted to avenge Bear or not, those five guys never would've stepped foot in Hagerstown if they'd known they were going to be messing with 'The Devil'."

"What the hell are you tryin' to say?" Blackie wanted to know.

"I'm saying that after what you did to those men, there's no way in hell they'd come back here. No way. Especially after you humiliated them the way you did. They're probably halfway to Virginia counting their blessings that all their body parts are still attached and they're not dead. They're not

going to bother Dusty or Jessie again. They won't even try to get Bear's bike back."

Surprisingly, Blackie believed him. But something still wasn't right. "Are you sure no one else is after Dusty?"

Davie shook his head. "I swear. Like I said, if someone's after her, they don't have anything to do with me or the Drifters. She and Jessie rode with the Renegades most of the time, and I never heard of anyone having a beef with either one of those girls. When you think about it, a big ass biker would catch a lot of shit for going after a woman ... they'd be laughed out of their gang."

Davie was right. No man was going to take that kind of chance.

"What about my brother, Judd. His name ever come up?"

"Never. I'm telling you, Blackie, no one," he said, bending his head and staring at the rope he'd been tied up with, "with the exception of me, I guess, is stupid enough to mess with you or anyone you care about. It's common knowledge that Judd and Rebel are your little brothers. No one would even think of touching them."

Blackie could tell Davie was telling the truth; he was talking too fast and explaining everything too accurately to be lying. Suddenly remembering Tony and Davie had a younger brother, he asked one more question. "Not even Byron?"

"Hell no!" Davie swore. "And leave him out of this. I haven't even talked to my brother since our two families got into it in Digger's parking lot five years ago."

Blackie nodded to Rebel. "Untie him."

Rebel reached for his knife, and after two quick slices of the rope, Davie was free. Rebel hauled him to his feet and gave him a slight shove backward. Blackie stepped forward then, crossing his arms in front of his chest and giving Davie the most threatening look he could come up with. "Get the hell outta here, Jenkins. If I ever see your face in Hagerstown again, I'm gonna cut your fingers off one by one and shove them down your throat. Understand?"

Wordlessly, Davie nodded, turned, and fled into the woods, leaving Blackie and Rebel staring after him.

Rebel was the first one to speak. "Sounds like you're pretty damn famous."

"Whatever you say, little brother," Blackie said, unimpressed with his own reputation, wishing Rebel would change the subject.

"You believed him, didn't you?"

"Yeah. After he saw what I did to those Drifters, there's no way Jenkins was gonna lie to me."

"Jesus, Blackie, what the hell did you do?"

Something he hoped he'd never have to do again. "Nothin' you need to know about."

Rebel slid his Bowie knife back into its sheath and snapped it closed. "So what now? You think Dusty'll have any more trouble?"

"Hell if I know. As much as I want to believe her, my gut's tellin' me she ain't told us the whole truth."

"I don't get it. Why would she lie?"

"Hell if I know that, either, Rebel. But whoever, or whatever the problem is, must have her scared to death in

order for her to keep lyin' to us ... to Judd. Especially as lovesick as the two of them are over each other."

Rebel laughed. "You picked up on that, too?"

Blackie returned his brother's laugh. "I'd have to have been dead not to."

"Maybe she's protecting him."

"From who? Dusty ain't been around here for ten years. Who the hell could she and Judd both know that would want to hurt him?"

Shrugging, Rebel shook his head slightly. "I don't know, man."

"Well, there's only one way to find out."

Blackie started to walk in the direction of the cabin, but Rebel reached out and stopped him. "I think whatever we need to find out can wait until morning ... it's only a few hours from now anyway."

"Rebel, I—" and then it dawned on him. Judd and Dusty had been in love—even though neither one of them admitted it—for as long as Blackie could remember. They hadn't seen each other in ten years, and were now alone at the cabin.

"Fine, let's go get some sleep. We'll ambush them at dawn."

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Chapter 14

Dusty crawled back onto her cot and wrapped up in the sheet. Full of blood, dirt, and whatever else she'd rolled around in on the ground, she was desperate to clean up.

She'd wanted to wash off and get into some clean clothes before she was too sore to move, but it was too late now. Her side was killing her and her head was throbbing. The rest of her body felt like it'd been beaten with a blunt object.

It was obvious she'd interrupted something between Judd and Rebel when she went outside, so to further avoid bothering the brothers, she decided to wait patiently until one of them came in.

Seconds later, Judd walked through the door ... alone.

"Where's Rebel?" she asked.

"He went to keep an eye on Blackie."

Dusty saw the anguish on Judd's face and wished she knew what he was thinking. Was he mad at her? Worried about his brother? Wishing she'd never come back into his life? "I'm sorry, Judd."

When he looked up at her, his features softened. "Sorry for what?"

He sat down on the edge of her cot, and she was suddenly at a loss for words. She had so much to tell him, yet had no idea where to start.

"What are you sorry for?" he asked again.

"I—"

His royal blue eyes fixed on her, he waited patiently.

Now isn't the time, she told herself, I'll tell him later.

"I shouldn't have come here. You guys were perfectly happy, and in just one day, I've turned your lives upside down."

Ignoring her statement, Judd rose from the cot and went to one of the shelves for a towel, washcloth, and bar of soap. "Are you ready to get cleaned up?"

What? "Didn't you hear what I just said?"

Scowling, Judd turned around and crossed his arms in front of his chest. "Yes, I did!" he yelled, surprising her, "and quite frankly, I'm sick and tired of hearing it! I don't give a damn what kind of trouble you're in, I'm just glad you're alive."

He cared! The joy Dusty felt knowing that Judd was happy she was alive was offset by the fact that she had no idea how to react to that. "Yes."

Obviously confused, he looked at her and squinted. "'Yes' what?"

"Yes, I'm ready to get cleaned up. Can I have the soap, please?"

Rolling his eyes, Judd muttered something about goddamn confusing women and tossed her the towels and soap.

Doing her best not to laugh at his irritation, Dusty bit down on her bottom lip as she waited for him to turn away. When he made no move to leave, she questioned him. "Well?"

Judd shrugged. "Well what?"

"Aren't you going to, you know, turn around?"

"Why would I do that?"

"So I can get up and go wash off. Unless, of course, a free show is the price I have to pay for you boys chasing away the baddies back there."

Remembering that next to nothing embarrassed Judd, Dusty was fully expecting a comeback, and wasn't disappointed.

Crossing his arms again, Judd shook his head slightly in an effort to move his hair away from his eyes, then leaned against the bookshelf. "We slept together, Dusty; it may have been ten years ago, but at the time, neither one of us was wearing any clothes. An hour ago, I found you bare from the waist up. And ten minutes ago, you walked outside—where both me and my brother saw you wrapped in that very same sheet. There are no more surprises; I've seen everything there is to see, Dusty, and now you want me to turn around?"

It sure is good to see him again. Grinning, Dusty tilted her head to the side and nodded. "Yes."

Judd threw his hands in the air and turned his back. "I'm going outside for a smoke. Call me when you're done ... unless you want me to sleep outside, too."

I love him. I love him so much it hurts.

"Well," she said, pretending to consider his comment, "you did save me from a fate worse than death earlier, so I guess that entitles you to one of the cots over there," she said, motioning to the opposite side of the medium-sized room.

Without looking at her, Judd threw his hands in the air and moved toward the door, putting his hand on the knob. "Gee, Dusty, you're all heart."

Sighing seductively, Dusty touched her lips to the fingers on her right hand and tilted it toward Judd, blowing him a kiss he never saw. "Only when it comes to you."

Once he was gone, Dusty set the stuff by the sink and went to her saddlebags, pulling out clean underwear, an old, loose-fitting pair of blue jeans, and a white sleeveless shirt.

Even as sneaky and playful as Judd could be, Dusty knew he'd respect her privacy and not come back inside before she called him. That—and knowing that Judd was standing guard right outside the door—made her comfortable enough to shed the sheet and stand in front of the large tub-like sink bare naked.

After plugging the drain and dropping in the soap, Dusty wrapped her hand around the pump's handle and moved it up and down until water began filling the sink. When she had a few inches, she stopped pumping and submerged the washcloth. Wringing out the excess, freezing cold, soapy water, Dusty began to wash her face.

When the blood and dirt had been scrubbed from her face and neck, Dusty lathered the washcloth with soap and moved onto her chest. As she lifted her left arm and looked down, her tattoo caught her eye. Something she'd had for the past ten years, Dusty was so used to the mark that she hardly noticed it anymore. Sometimes, she even forgot it was there.

Oh, no! Suddenly realizing that even though it didn't shock her when she saw the word 'Judd' tattooed on her left breast, it would shock others who'd never seen it ... especially the man who the name belonged to. All three of the McCassey brothers had already seen her bare chest when they'd

rescued her. So she hadn't really been embarrassed when Blackie entered the room a little while ago and the sheet had slipped to her waist, momentarily exposing her breasts. After covering herself, Dusty hadn't given the incident a second thought.

But she knew someone who had.

No doubt Judd was outside right now trying to come up with an explanation; a reason she'd inked his name on her body.

He'd probably gone through half a pack of cigarettes trying to figure out what it meant.

It was funny to think about the fact that she'd been the cause of putting him so out of sorts—something that probably not many people, let alone a woman—had ever been able to do.

What wasn't funny was that she was going to have to come up with an explanation because she knew Judd, once he was convinced she was okay, he was going to come right out and ask her for one.

Making quick work of washing the rest of her body, Dusty used the bath towel Judd had given her to dry off. Draping it over the washtub next to the cloth, she put on her clothes, shook out her hair, and unplugged the drain.

Opening the front door just enough to see through, Dusty made a kissing noise to get Judd's attention. "You can come in now."

Tossing away his cigarette butt, Judd blew smoke rings and looked at her. "Took you long enough," he said mockingly. "I was only giving you another thirty seconds."

Backing away from the door so he could enter, Dusty returned to her cot and gingerly sat down, her body twice as sore now as it had been earlier. "I didn't know what you wanted me to do with the sheet, so I wadded it up and put it in the sink."

"I'll just toss it," he told her, picking up the sheet and shoving it into a big green trash bag. "My Aunt Rose keeps this place stocked with so many linens you'd think she was planning to open a hotel."

As she watched Judd move around the kitchen, Dusty thought about how much she'd missed him, and realized she'd been wrong about him not being any different than he was the last time they'd seen each other.

Ten years does a lot to a person. She did see some changes in Judd—even if they were only subtle. He was a little heavier and more well built than he'd been at twenty-six, but the extra pounds looked good on him; making him look even more masculine.

He seemed to be less wild and impulsive, too. Actually, so did Blackie. A decade ago, Blackie would've killed the men that had attacked her first, and asked questions later. And Judd, who she knew used to worship the ground his older brother walked on, would've been right by his side.

But they were both different now.

The biggest change was in Judd's demeanor. She discovered tonight that he possessed something now that he'd never had before ... patience and tenderness. She'd never heard him talk to anyone the way he'd spoken to her while she was lying on the ground outside. He was gentle,

caring, and surprisingly concerned when he thought she was hurt.

Dusty liked the new Judd.

But would he still like her when he found out her secret?

* * * *

They needed to talk.

As Judd tried to think of a way to bring up the subject of her tattoo, he fooled around in the kitchen until there was nothing left to do. Just go talk to her, you damn coward.

"You hungry?" he called from the kitchen.

"No. And you can't avoid me all night, Judd. Why don't you just come in here and talk to me?"

Dusty and Rebel were the only two people who'd always had his number ... maybe that was why they were two of the people he respected the most.

Turning down the oil lamp until the objects in the room were nothing more than shadows, Judd walked over to the row of cots and sat on the one next to Dusty. "Okay, I'm here, let's talk. Neither one of us have ever been very subtle, so let's just get to the point. You can start by explaining your tattoo."

Looking as though she'd been expecting that to be his first question, Dusty smiled. "I knew you saw it."

"Of course I saw it! We all did. What gives?"

As she opened her mouth to answer, Judd opened a pack of cigarettes and offered her one. She declined with a shake of her head.

"What," he said, pretending to be offended, "you don't like my brand?"

"I don't smoke anymore. I quit when I—"

Why did she cut herself off? "When you what?"

"When my sisters and I left town." She shrugged. "Guess I lost my taste for nicotine when I couldn't afford to buy it."

Suddenly losing his taste for the Marlboro, Judd removed it from between his lips and stuffed it back into the pack. "The tattoo?"

Dusty took a deep breath and leaned her back against the pillow. "It was the best way I knew to keep you close to my heart."

Dumbfounded, Judd couldn't find the words to reply. Thankfully, Dusty didn't seem to notice his loss for words, and continued.

"I've been in love with you since elementary school," she admitted in a quiet, innocent voice he didn't recognize.

"Growing up, I did everything I could to get you to notice me, but you never treated me like anything more than a friend. The day I turned eighteen was the first time you let on that you might feel something for me. When you made love to me that night, I thought I'd died and gone to heaven."

Could she tell he was in shock? "Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why me, Dusty? Between my brothers and cousins, you probably had fifty McCasseys to choose from at the time. What made you pick me?"

She cleared her throat and slowly, tentatively, crawled over to his cot and sat next to him. "When I was eight, I was

walking down the street by myself when I ran into Davie Jenkins right in front of the garage. You and Rebel were working on a car in the parking lot and ran over to help me, remember?

Judd remembered it like it was yesterday...

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Chapter 15

"You better stop walking, Dusty Zamora; you hear me, dirty girl?"

Dusty was only eight, but she was used to being picked on and teased by Davie Jenkins. He and his brothers had always been mean to her and her sisters ... except her sister, Alex. All the Jenkins boys were nice to her.

"I'm not dirty," she said bravely, wincing in pain when he tightened his grip on a handful of her hair. "Why don't you just leave me alone, Davie?"

He laughed and tightened his grip even more. "Leave you alone? What fun would that be? And don't tell me you're not dirty, Dusty."

He picked up a handful of mud and smeared it down the front of her blue overalls. "You look dirty to me."

Dusty bent her head and looked down at the streak that the dirt had left on her clothes. Her mother was going to be really angry when she saw that.

Frowning, Dusty tilted her head to the right and glanced up at her tormentor. His buzz haircut and green coat made him look like a soldier she'd seen in a movie once, only Davie wasn't as tall as the man on TV.

"You gonna cry now, dirty girl?"

Crying was exactly what she wanted to do, but Dusty's pride refused to allow her to shed a tear.

"I hate you," she screamed at him and started struggling to free herself. "Let me go!" But each time she moved, Davie

laughed and pulled her hair tighter. Unable to stand the pain any longer, she gave up and stood still.

"That's more like it," he said. "I'm getting sick of dirty little kids walkin' down my street," he told her. "I don't want to see you here anymore, understand?"

"It ain't your street," someone said.

Davie turned his head in the direction of the voice. Since he was still holding onto her hair, Dusty was forced to do the same.

When she saw Judd and Rebel McCassey, she knew everything was going to be all right. They were friends, and they would help her. Judd, who was sixteen, stepped forward. "You see what I see, Rebel?" he asked sarcastically.

"I see Davie Jenkins claiming he owns the street in front of our garage, in a town he's not even living in anymore," Rebel said.

Judd nodded. "Yeah, that's what I see, too."

As Davie Jenkins' focus shifted to the two boys, he loosened his grip on Dusty's hair, but refused to let go. "Get the hell away from me, Judd," he said, "you too, Rebel. This is none of your business."

Neither boy moved.

"Picking on little girls is pretty low, Jenkins, even for you," Judd said. "Let Dusty go."

Dusty had seen Judd fight many times. She'd seen him lose his temper and yell; his deep voice always scaring her. But this time, hearing it was a relief. This time ... he was using it to protect her.

"I'm not gonna tell you again," Judd warned Davie as he took another step forward. "Let her go."

Suddenly, Davie released Dusty and gave her a hard shove toward the street. Unable to catch her balance, she stumbled and fell on all fours, ripping her pants and skinning her knees. Carried forward by momentum, her head flew forward when she landed on her stomach, scraping her hands and chin on the rough blacktop.

Even though she was afraid to look at what was happening between Davie and Judd, Dusty's curiosity got the best of her. Judd was a good fighter and she wanted to see him beat Davie. When she turned around and sat up, the first thing she saw was Judd make a fist, pull his right arm back, and punch Davie in the face. She thought the blood that came pouring out of his nose was gross, but was happy to see it and hoped that he was in pain.

The fight didn't last much longer. Davie swung back at Judd but missed, then Judd landed two more punches to Davie's stomach. When he fell to the ground, Dusty felt like jumping up and down and clapping. Instead, she glanced at Rebel, who'd done nothing during the fight except watch. The only thing he was doing now was smoking a cigarette.

Relieved the trouble seemed to be over; Dusty looked down and stared at the holes in her knees. Before she had a chance to really inspect them, a pair of strong hands wrapped themselves around her waist and lifted her to her feet.

"Are you okay, Dusty?" It was Judd. His large size was intimidating, but she wasn't afraid; especially when he knelt

down and playfully pulled a strand of her hair. "Well, are you?" he asked again.

Dusty stared at him, unable to speak. She'd known him her entire life, and had never thought of him as anything other than a friend. But today, he was something different ... her hero. He'd fought for her ... saved her. No one other than her sisters had ever stuck up for her, and she loved him for it.

"Easy, Judd," Rebel said, "It looks like you're scaring her."

Dusty backed up a step while Judd was distracted, but he reached out and laid a hand on her arm. "You're not afraid of me, are you, Dusty?"

Dusty shook her head, then added a quiet, shy, "No."

"Davie didn't hurt you too bad, did he?"

Thinking about the painful stinging in her skinned knees and hands caused the unshed tears in Dusty's eyes to spill over and roll down her cheeks. She hurriedly brushed at them with the back of her hands, afraid of what the brothers would think. Dusty didn't like crying. Not only did it make her feel like a baby, but it had never done her any good.

"Aw, don't cry." Judd pulled the sleeve of his nearly threadbare gray sweatshirt over his left hand and gently wiped away at what was left of her tears. "No worries, Dusty, I won't let Davie bother you anymore."

No worries! Everybody knew what it meant when a McCassey said that to someone. It meant that Judd was going to always protect her from Davie Jenkins.

"I hate him," she told Judd.

"Yeah, well, a lot of us feel that way, too, right, Reb?"

"Sure," Rebel agreed casually, "we could all do without Davie."

Judd glanced briefly at his brother, then back to Dusty. "How come you're walking by yourself today?"

"I had detention and had to stay after school, so I missed the bus."

Judd nodded. "What'd you have detention for?" he asked just as he reached down and gently took hold of her hands.

"Talking. My teacher said she was tired of telling me to be quiet."

Judd laughed and turned Dusty's hands over, studying the bloody scrapes for just a moment before carefully picking a piece of gravel from the cut in her right hand.

"That one might leave a scar," he told her, tossing the gravel to the ground. Then, with both hands, he tilted her head up and examined the scratches under her chin. "These probably will, too. And they need to be washed. You want to go inside the garage and get cleaned up?"

She did, but was too embarrassed. "No thanks, I'll wait until I get home. Jessie will help me."

He nodded. "Well, let's get you home, then. Come on." He held out his hand, patiently waiting for her to grab it. Dusty was so excited that despite the pain of her scrapes, she happily tucked her small hand into his larger one. Judd held onto her tightly as she allowed him to lead her out of the street and into the lot where his pickup truck was parked.

Dusty sat between Judd and Rebel during the two mile trip to her house. Judd had already released her hand, but as they pulled out of the parking lot, she rested her head on his

shoulder and decided that this was the man she loved; the man she was going to marry someday...

* * * *

When she was finished telling her story, Dusty turned and looked over at Judd. It was almost too dark to see the expression on his face, but the word, 'shock' was a good description of what she thought she saw.

"I don't know what to say," he admitted.

"You don't need to say anything. You asked why I chose you over your brothers and cousins, and I just told you. You've been my hero since I was eight years old, Judd. That's how long I've loved you."

"Why didn't you ever say anything?"

"I did ... to Blackie. He came to my house looking for Jessie one day, and while he was sitting on the sofa waiting for her to finish something in her room, I climbed up and explained everything to him. I made him promise not to let you marry anyone else because when I was old enough, I was going to marry you myself."

Judd's eyes went wide. "You, what!"

"You heard me."

"I bet he got a good laugh out of that."

"Actually, he didn't make fun of me at all. He even promised not to let you get married. He kept his word, didn't he?"

"Blackie has nothing to do with the reason I'm not married."

"Well, I started trying to show you how I felt when I was sixteen, but you never treated me like anything other than a friend; someone you always hung out with. I did everything I could to get you to make a move on me, but you never seemed interested."

"Oh, I was interested," he admitted, shocking her to the core of her very being. "But I was twenty-four, Dusty, it wouldn't have been right for me to mess around with you."

"But—"

Judd cut her off abruptly. "Hell, Dusty, don't even say it. I knew you'd been with a guy or two by that time, but sex wasn't the only reason I was interested in you. Believe it or not, I liked and respected you. I didn't just want your body. I wanted the whole package. The whole wild, smart-mouthed, I-may-be-a-girl-but-you-better-not-treat-me-like-one-or-I'll-kick-your-ass, package.

"To get what I wanted without feeling like a cradle-robbing son of a bitch, I had to wait until you were eighteen. As bad as I was back then, I still had a moral or two. You were way too young for me, and there was no way I was going to be responsible for corrupting you any more than you already had been."

Dusty didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

He'd wanted her. All that time, he'd wanted her.

What happened the night of her eighteenth birthday hadn't been just a one-night stand ... it was something they'd both been waiting for years to happen, and neither one of them had known it.

"How do you feel now?" she asked, wondering if he still had feelings for her.

Judd sighed, then went ahead and lit the cigarette he'd discarded earlier. "Christ, Dusty..."

Never having been one to be at a loss for words, the fact that Judd couldn't come up with anything to say answered her question.

He still had something for her.

Ignoring her soreness, Dusty turned toward Judd and reached for the cigarette, removing it from between his index and middle fingers. Taking a long drag, she inhaled, then dropped the Marlboro to the dirt floor.

"Dusty, what—" Judd started to say, but she cut him off by swinging her leg over him and straddling his lap. Then she wrapped her arms around his neck and leaned down, placing her lips on his. Using her tongue to coax his mouth open, she gave him the same kiss she had at the garage the other day. This time, he kissed her back with the same passion that he had the night they'd made love.

Being so close to Judd again made Dusty feel like she was invincible. Suddenly, she felt like everything was going to be all right.

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Chapter 16

Judd didn't know why anything Dusty did surprised him.

Even as a little kid, she'd always been forward, going after—and usually getting—everything she wanted.

She'd come right out and asked him how he felt about her. The reason he hadn't been able to answer was because he didn't know how to say that he was still in love with her. As Rebel had said, Judd was a bad liar when it came to women; Dusty had obviously picked up on that fact when he was unable to answer her question.

He was happy she'd taken the initiative to make the first move, and wondered how she'd feel about him making the second.

Raising his arms, he placed his hands behind her head and gently grasped two handfuls of her hair. Pressing her head forward, he deepened their kiss.

When Judd heard a slight moan of pleasure escape her lips, he knew they wanted more from each other than just a kiss. Releasing her hair, he placed his hands under her arms and lifted her off his lap. Leaning forward, he gently placed her on her back, then stood.

Before he could unbutton his jeans, Dusty's fingers were there doing it for him. Once the button was undone, she moved to the zipper; eyeing him seductively from her spot on the cot as she slowly lowered it.

Lying down again, Dusty removed her own jeans as Judd shrugged out of the rest of his clothes. By the time he moved toward her, she'd discarded everything but her shirt.

Not giving a damn about the little tank top, he said, "leave it," as he positioned himself between the legs she'd spread for him.

The sensation of her touch when she reached out and guided him inside her was enough to make him explode immediately.

"Don't move," he told her, trying to get himself under control.

But when Dusty raised her hands behind her head, motioning for him to take them, and said, "Yes," he couldn't hold back.

Grabbing hold of her wrists, Judd leaned forward and pinned her against the cot.

The sound of her murmuring, "Judd," as he began to move drove him crazy. All he could think of was how good it felt to be inside her. She was tight—as tight as she'd been the first time they were together—bringing back the memory of how she'd told him she loved him last time, and begged for more.

"Judd!" she suddenly gasped, breaking free of his hold and wrapping her arms around his neck. When she pulled him down closer and he felt her muscles clamping down around him, gripping him like a vice, he knew she was deep in the throes of an orgasm.

Doing his best to wait until her spasms subsided; he was barely able to stay in control as he braced his hands on the cot and raised himself over her. As he thrust forcefully, it

wasn't long before his loins tightened and he was ready to come. "I love you, Dusty," he grunted out just before he gave one final thrust and filled her.

Breathing heavily, Judd heard her whisper, "I love you, too," just before he collapsed on top of her.

"I don't want to crush you," he said after a few moments, trying to move away from her.

But she held on, begging him not to go. "Stay."

"I don't want to hurt you," he repeated.

Slowly rolling off her body, Judd lay on his left side and drew Dusty up against him. Allowing her to use his left arm as a pillow, he used his right arm to reach onto the cot next to them and pull off the cotton blanket. He covered them both before wrapping his right one around her waist and drifting off into an exhausted sleep.

* * * *

Hours later, they were awakened when each of them were moving around trying to get comfortable.

"These things weren't really designed for two people," Judd commented when he stood up to look for his jeans. The oil lamp had gone out and it was pitch black inside the cabin.

"What time is it?"

"I don't know," he said, pulling on his jeans, "probably about two in the morning. Let me relight the lamp and I'll check."

"No."

Judd stopped halfway to the kitchen. "No? You don't want light?"

"I don't need it. Just come lay with me."

Not needing a second invitation, Judd climbed back onto the cot and drew Dusty close once again, noticing she'd put her jeans back on as well.

"Dusty?"

"Hmm?"

"Why'd you wait so long to come back to Hagerstown? I understand that you couldn't come around while Johnson was still sheriff, but he's been in prison for the past five years. You were able to keep up on what the rest of us were doing, so I know you knew about him being locked up. What kept you away the last five years?"

Her silence made Judd wonder if she'd stayed away because she thought maybe he wouldn't want her.

Should he tell her? What the hell.

"I wanted to look for you," he said, before she had a chance to reply.

Dusty's body went rigid. "What?"

"About a week after you left, I wanted to go looking for you."

"Why didn't you?"

"Blackie told me not to. Sheriff Johnson spent a good week trying to find you girls. He knew one of you had killed Earl, and even went so far as to get the Frederick County Police Department involved so he could question your mother."

"My mom?"

Judd nodded. "He thought the four of you would've gone to her for help; thought maybe she was hiding you."

"We never told my mom what was going on. Before the night Jessie killed Earl, none of us had even spoken to Mom for at least a year."

"Yeah, well, the sheriff found that out. Then he questioned all of us."

"Jessie said he would."

"He harassed us on and off for a good month. When Blackie'd had enough, he finally told the sheriff that you girls were with the Renegades and personally offered to drive him out to their camp. That put a stop to his search real quick."

"I guess so," she said, and Judd felt the vibration of her slight chuckle against his chest. "He wouldn't have been there ten seconds before one of those guys took him out."

"They would've been doing us all a favor."

"How come you didn't come looking for me after the sheriff gave up?"

"I wanted to, but he was still watching us pretty closely. Blackie convinced me that Johnson would've had me tailed. If I'd found you, I would've lead the cops right to you."

Dusty sighed. "He was probably right."

"He was," Judd agreed, "but I still resented him for it. Rebel finally convinced me to just give you time. He said that when you were ready, you'd come back."

"Yeah, well, what happened today with the Drifters wasn't exactly the way I dreamed my homecoming would be."

"You've thought about coming home?"

"Every day since I heard Ben Johnson went to prison."

"Then why didn't you?"

"It's a long story, Judd. I ... I'd rather not get into it now."

"Does this have anything to do with the problem you mentioned the other night? The one you said we had to deal with together."

"Yes," she admitted, "but I can't get into it now."

What? He'd just opened up and told her something personal, and she wouldn't even answer a damn question. "Can't," he spat, hearing the coldness in his own voice, "or won't?"

She tried to move slightly away from him, but he tightened his hold, refusing to allow her to move. "Both. But only for right now."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"I promise to tell you everything, Judd, I do. And I should've told you a long time ago. But now isn't the time. Before I can talk to you about it, I have to find Jessie. She's out there somewhere, I know it. What if she needs help? I can't just leave her, and I can't move on with the rest of my life until I know what happened to her."

"Dusty—"

"What would you do if you were in my position; if it was Blackie or Rebel who were in trouble? I don't think you'd sit around trying to explain yourself to some girl. You'd be out there searching for your brother."

When she tried to pull away from him this time, he let her go. "So that's what I am to you ... just some guy?"

Judd jumped off the cot, as did Dusty.

"Of course not!"

"Then would you mind explaining just what the hell you meant by that?"

"I—"

Dusty never got to finish her sentence.

In the next second, a flaming Molotov Cocktail crashed through one of the small windows, shattering on the ground and igniting a firestorm.

Dusty screamed as not only the area near the front door—the only way out of the cabin—but the entire row of cots along the wall burst into flames.

The inside of the cabin filled with smoke almost immediately, making it hard for Judd to see Dusty. "Dusty!" he called, stretching out his arms; reaching for her.

"Judd! Where are you?"

Hearing the panic in her voice, Judd continued groping for her through the thick smoke. "I'm here!" Finally making contact with her arm, he pulled at her, getting her to move toward him. "Come on!"

Coughing out of control, Judd knew she was going to pass out from smoke inhalation if she didn't calm down. He had to get her out of there.

"Stay right here!" he told her, then bent down and felt along the ground for their boots. Finding them with little trouble, he gripped both pair in one hand, using the other one to pull Dusty toward the kitchen.

"Where are we going?" she yelled in between coughing fits.

Judd looped his arm around her neck and pulled her toward him; forcing her face into his chest to try and keep her from inhaling so much smoke. "There's a trap door in the kitchen that leads to an underground tunnel."

A few steps later, Judd pulled back the curtain leading to the pantry and let go of Dusty. "Don't move!" he yelled, bending down to unlock the door.

After lifting it, he threw their boots down into the hole and placed his hands on her shoulders. "There's a ladder leading into the tunnel. It's a good twenty feet down, so don't be scared. Once you reach the ground, get the hell out of the way. I'm going to get your saddlebags and a few guns; I'll be right behind you! Go!" he tried to guide her into the hole, but she refused to move.

"Judd, no! I won't go without you!"

"Go, goddammit! I'll be right there!"

"No," she cried, trying to move closer to him, "I can help you!"

"I don't need your damn help; I need to know you're safe! Get your ass onto that ladder and into the hole before I throw you down!" She finally went when he gave her a not-so-gentle shove.

With the flames getting hotter and the sides of the building starting to give way, Judd waited until Dusty disappeared, then felt his way to the far side of the cabin where he remembered seeing her saddlebags. Picking them up, he slung the black leather bags over his shoulder.

Moving over to the shelves at the end of the row of cots, he squatted down and opened the doors on the bottom, feeling around until his hand came into contact with a flashlight. Stuffing it into a saddlebag, he put his hand back and grabbed the guns and ammo he could reach; hoping they matched each other. Shoving everything into the bag, Judd

stood, dodging falling embers from the roof as he made his way back to the kitchen.

Hoping Dusty had reached the bottom and remembered to stand out of the way, he yelled, "They're coming down!" seconds before stuffing her saddlebags into the hole and dropping them.

Putting one foot, then the other, on the first ladder rung, Judd went down a few steps, then shut and locked the fireproof, steel trap door. Climbing down as fast as he could, he called for Dusty as soon as he hit the ground. "Dusty?"

"I'm here," her voice echoed. The next thing he knew, he felt her hands on him. As soon as she made contact with his body, she wrapped her arms around him and tightened her hold. He automatically did the same, offering her the comfort she obviously needed. "Are you okay?" she asked. "I was afraid you weren't going to make it."

"I'm fine," he answered, bending his head in an effort to swipe it against his left bicep and get the sweat-soaked hair out of his face. "You?"

He felt her nod against his bare chest, but she didn't respond. "It's okay, Dusty," he tried to reassure her, wondering if the reason she hadn't said anything was because she was crying. "We're fine."

At least he hoped they were fine.

Although the tunnel had been in existence since the early 1900's, it hadn't been used since his grandfather had made moonshine down here during prohibition. Judd, his brothers, and cousins had occasionally come down as teenagers, but for

the most part, the tunnel had never even been given a second thought.

"What happened up there, Judd? Who would do this?"

Surprised she'd let her guard down long enough to show so much emotion, Judd decided not to voice his opinion on the situation ... yet. Now wasn't the time to interrogate Dusty on whether or not she'd told the truth earlier; maybe she had other enemies that wanted to kill her and maybe she didn't.

But she was obviously shaken.

He wasn't going to be able to get to the bottom of whatever was going on from under the ground, so Judd simply answered her question; knowing the truth would come out sooner or later. "I don't know, Dusty. But I do know that we need to get the hell out of here."

Dusty backed out of his embrace but continued clutching his hand. "Why, what's wrong now?"

Was she kidding? "What's wrong? Dusty, by now, the cabin is probably fully engulfed in flames. It's the middle of the night, so there's not a real good chance of anyone seeing the blaze and calling the fire department. Once the brush and dead trees around the cabin catch fire, the whole damn woods is going to go up in flames. I don't know about you, but I'd like to be far away from here when that happens."

"What do we do?" she asked, the worry in her voice telling him just how uncomfortable she was. "How do we get out of here?"

Releasing one of Dusty's hands, Judd squatted down and began digging in her saddlebags for the flashlight. Still clutching his other hand, she squatted beside him. "This

tunnel runs along the middle of the property for half a mile or so," he explained. "All we have to do is follow it, and it'll dump us out at the edge of the woods a few hundred yards from the garage."

"Do you have a flashlight?"

"Yeah," he said, finally finding the large Maglight. "Let's just hope the batteries work."

Judd pushed the small black button, and with a 'click', the tunnel was brightly lit. Glancing at Dusty, whose tear-streaked cheeks were still moist, Judd noticed she looked relieved. Truthfully, so was he. Walking through an underground tunnel without being able to see where—or what—you were about to come in contact with didn't appeal to him.

"Let's go," Dusty urged.

Reaching out, Judd grabbed her before she could go any further. "Not so fast," he said, quickly shining the light along the walls. "I need to put my boots on, and I want to take a look around first."

"Why?"

"Why?" he asked more sarcastically than he meant to. "This tunnel is almost a hundred years old, Dusty. And even though none of us guys have been down here in twenty years, it doesn't mean that other living, breathing things haven't. I'd rather not run into any surprises, if it's all the same to you."

"You mean there're animals down here?"

The high-pitched, shaky voice she'd used to ask the question amused him. In the eighteen years Judd and Dusty

had spent around each other before she left town, Judd could count on one hand the amount of times he'd seen her scared.

Dusty and his sister-in-law, Angel, were two of the toughest women he knew. It took a lot to set them off balance. So the fact that the thought of coming into contact with a small, furry animal had Dusty shaking in her boots, made Judd smile. Hell, if he didn't think she'd walk over and beat him to death, he would've laughed out loud. "I don't know what's down here, Dusty. That's why I want to check it out."

Judd shined the flashlight along the sides of the tunnel and down the path. Seeing nothing other than what he expected—dirt, tree roots, a few old stills, and empty glass jugs—he decided it was safe enough.

"All right, it looks good. Come on over here," he said, walking to the saddlebags. "I grabbed a few guns on my way down. I couldn't see a damn thing through all the smoke, so hopefully the ammo I took matches the weapons."

Handing the flashlight to Dusty, she held it while he dug in the bag for the guns. Pulling them out, he laid them on the ground one by one. "I've got two .38 Specials and a .357. Which one you want?"

"I'll take the .38's."

Judd looked up at her. "Both?"

"Yes, Judd, both." She extended her hand. "Give me some ammo."

Judd was wary of giving her two guns.

That would only leave him with one, which worried him. He had no idea whether Dusty was still as good a shot as she

used to be. She and Angel had been better shots than most men when they were teenagers—Angel still beat him at target practice on a regular basis. But maybe Dusty was out of practice. Maybe she didn't have the skills anymore to respond accurately on a moment's notice.

"I know what you're thinking," she said as if she could read his thoughts. "And all you need to know about whether or not I can still shoot a pea off a fencepost is that you and your brothers taught me and my sisters how to shoot. I've forgotten about as much as you have over the past ten years. Give me the guns."

She was right.

If there was one thing you could say about all McCasseys, it's that they were expert marksman. They hadn't only taught the Zamora sisters how to shoot, but how to shoot well. If Dusty had spent even a minimal amount of time around firearms since she'd been gone, there was a good chance she was going to be another woman who could beat him at target practice.

Wordlessly, he handed her a gun and watched her load it. After slipping it into the holster attached to her boot, she put her hand out for the other one.

When all the weapons were loaded, they stood. She handed him the flashlight. "You light the way, I'll get my bags."

"Dusty—"

In a flash, she turned on him. The next thing he knew, he was staring down the barrel of a cocked and loaded .38 special. "Judd."

Not sure which Dusty he liked better—the scared, vulnerable one he'd gotten a glimpse of a few minutes ago, or the one he was looking at now ... tough and ready to kill him.

Raising his hands, Judd silently conceded. "Fine." He'd just been trying to be nice. If she didn't want help, she could carry her own damn saddlebags. They were ten times bigger than a purse and fifty times as heavy, anyway. "Anyone ever tell you it isn't ladylike to point a loaded gun in the face of someone who's trying to help you?"

Dusty lowered the weapon and laid the sarcasm on thick. "Anyone ever tell you that being female doesn't make someone weak?"

No. But he had been advised a time or two not to start an argument with a woman unless he had plenty of time to waste ... and right now, he didn't. "Let's get moving."

Judd waited while she swung the saddlebags over her shoulder, then he took the lead, walking briskly.

He didn't like the fact that the heat was beginning to build in the tunnel, or the faint, unidentifiable noises he'd begun hearing a few minutes ago.

They needed to get the hell out of there.

If the woods were already burning by the time they reached the opening of the tunnel, there'd be nowhere for them to go...

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Chapter 17

If Judd was trying to keep his worry from her, it wasn't working.

Dusty could feel the temperature in the tunnel rising. This can't be good.

It was obvious by the speed Judd was walking that he wanted to get them out of there.

"We should be pretty close to the end, shouldn't we?" Judd slowed down, but didn't stop. "Yeah."

"It's cooler up here," she commented, hoping he'd tell her that meant the fire hadn't reached the area yet.

"Yeah," Judd said again. This time, he did stop. So suddenly, in fact, that she collided with him. Mumbling a quick, "Sorry," she backed away. "Why'd you stop?"

"Look." Judd shined the light on the path ahead of them. The ground had caved in and there were thick tree branches, a few large rocks, and a sizeable puddle of stale, stagnant water blocking their path.

Dusty dropped her bags to the ground and stepped forward with the intention of clearing the debris out of the way.

"Hold on." Judd grabbed her by the arm as she tried to walk by him.

"What's wrong?"

"I want to check it out before you go digging around in there. Who knows what could be living in that pile."

Not being a huge fan of anything that could bite, sting, or strangle her, Dusty was thankful Judd had stopped her when he did. "I'll just wait right over here," she told him as he picked up a long stick and began cautiously poking it into the pile.

"Mmm, hmm," he mumbled under his breath, "you don't mind letting a man do the work now, do you?"

She knew he was teasing her, but she'd take her medicine without complaining this time. "I might as well ... you being so familiar with sneaky, obnoxious things that like to go bump in the night."

Poking the stick under a branch, Judd kept most of his attention on the task at hand. "If you're referring to the time Rebel and I jumped out of a tree in these very woods, nearly scaring you and Benni to death, you two deserved it. We told you not to follow us that night, and you still did. Someone had to teach you girls a lesson about doing, or not doing, what you were told."

"Yeah, you boys taught us a lesson, all right ... if you're going to disobey a McCassey, be better prepared to suffer the consequences when you get caught. Tossing us in the creek in the middle of March was a little extreme, don't you think?"

Tipping a rock upwards with his boot, Judd squatted down and shined the light underneath. "It got you to go home, didn't it?"

"Of course! We were soaking wet and freezing."

"Then the answer to your question is no; we were not being too extreme." Tossing his stick to the side, he dropped

the small talk. "It looks okay. Let's get some of this debris moved aside so we can get the hell out of here."

Working side by side, Dusty and Judd had a path large enough to pass through cleared within minutes. Once on the other side, Dusty asked if they should block it back up, "Just in case."

Judd stepped to the side, his foot making a small splash in the puddle. "No, I think—ah, mother fu—!" he yelled as he fell to the ground.

Dusty's entire body went rigid when she heard Judd's cry of pain. She dropped her saddlebags, picked up the flashlight he'd dropped, and instinctively went for her gun. "Judd!"

Shining the light on the area where he'd fallen, she spotted what appeared to be about a four foot long Copperhead next to Judd, and blood soaking his jeans on his right calf, just above his boot. Taking aim, she fired without thinking twice; the shot echoing through the tunnel and blowing the snake to pieces.

Falling beside him, Dusty tried to keep it together. She hated snakes. "Judd! Judd!"

He was breathing heavily, but was surprisingly calm for someone who'd just been bitten by a snake.

"I'm okay, Dusty," he said calmly, which she knew was for her benefit. After scooting a few feet away from the water, he gave her more instructions. "Lift the cuff of my jeans and shine the light on the entrance wound. I want to see how bad it is."

He wanted to look at the wound? He wanted her to look at it? Yuck!

After carefully lifting his pants, Dusty used the bottom part of her shirt to wipe away the blood oozing from the wound. It looked okay to her. "What should we do now?" she asked. "Aren't I supposed to cut an 'X' and suck out the poison or something?"

"Yeah, sure ... if this was 1850, and we were in the middle of the Oregon Trail headed west with a wagon train."

She threw him a dirty look she knew he didn't see. "I'm just trying to help! Copperheads are poisonous and I don't want you to die!"

"Calm down, Dusty. They are poisonous, but I haven't heard of an adult dying from a Copperhead's bite in over twenty years. It can get infected, though. You got any whiskey in your saddlebags?"

"No, but I do have some peroxide. Will that help?"

"Yeah. Get it and drench the bite and the area around it. Then we have to go."

Praying he was going to be okay—and that he'd be able to walk—Dusty did as she was told. Although Judd was trying to sound like he was fine, his erratic breathing told her he was in a lot of pain. He was sweating profusely, too. Was that a side effect of being snake bitten?

"Dusty?"

She pulled the peroxide out of her bag and went back to his side. "What?"

"Hurry up. We're still trying to outrun a fire, you know."

"I know," she said, "I'm sorry."

Trying to keep her shaking hands steady, she lifted his pant leg and once more wiped the blood away. After

unscrewing the bottle, she tossed the cap to the ground, lifted the bottle over his wound, and began to pour.

He suddenly touched her upper arm, causing her to jump. "It's okay," he reassured her. "Take your time, and when you're done, we'll leave."

"What if you can't walk?"

"That's just too damn bad. I'm going to have to. We can't stay down here, and I'm not letting you go anywhere alone. Help me up."

"Shouldn't I wrap something around the wound to keep it from bleeding?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. It might be better to just let it bleed. Maybe it'll help some of the venom to run out."

"Are you sure?"

"No I'm not sure! But I'm not a doctor! Come on, Dusty, are you going to help me up or not?"

Grasping his hand, Dusty pulled Judd to his feet. Wincing when he put weight on his right leg, he hopped around for a few seconds. "Let's go."

"Judd—"

"Now, dammit! We're almost at the end of the tunnel. Once we're there, you can leave me, run over to the garage, and call my brothers to let them know we're not dead."

Great, that's just the kind of news she wanted to wake Blackie and Rebel up for and deliver in the middle of the night. They were probably going to blame her for this whole stupid mess. The worst part about it was ... they would be right.

Slinging her saddlebags over her shoulder once again, she also remained in charge of holding the flashlight, allowing Judd to concentrate on making it to the end of the tunnel. Watching him walk, no one would ever know that he was in pain. But she'd bet her life that the expression on his face—which she couldn't see—would tell a different story.

Suddenly, there was a loud commotion up ahead. Dusty stopped and instantly moved closer to Judd, who'd also stopped and was leaning against the wall of the tunnel for support. "What was that?"

"Shh!"

When he closed his eyes to listen, she took a good look at him, noticing that his hair was soaked with sweat. It was also dripping down his face and bare chest. He was obviously in a lot of pain, but hadn't complained once.

Reaching behind him, he pulled the .357 from the waistband of his pants and cocked it. "It sounds like someone's out there."

Following suit, Dusty dropped her bags and pulled her gun as well.

"Turn off the light," Judd whispered.

Dusty did as she was told and set the flashlight on the ground. When she felt Judd's hand reach for her, she grasped it and held on tight.

As the commotion got louder, Judd extended his arm and tried to ease her behind him, but she refused to move. She was flattered that he wanted to protect her, but he was the one who needed protecting this time. If someone—or something—was about to attack them, Judd wasn't going to

be able to make a run for it. It was going to be up to her to protect him. She was going to have to be dead-on with her shots, which wouldn't happen if she was cowering behind him.

When the faint sound of voices filled the tunnel, Dusty felt Judd relax.

"That sounded like Rebel," he told her.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Dusty relaxed, too. When she heard Blackie's voice calling his brother seconds later, she stepped away from Judd. "I'm going to meet them, stay here."

Before he could protest, Dusty was running toward the voices.

She saw the glow from their flashlights first.

Slowing down to a fast walk, Dusty felt tears of relief flood her eyes when two shadows came into view. Knowing the largest one was Blackie, she called his name and started running toward him.

"Whoa, Dusty!" he said, catching her as she ran into his arms. "Where's Judd?"

"Back there." She motioned down the tunnel. "He got bitten by a snake."

"What?"

"It was a Copperhead," she tried to explain, but Blackie wasn't listening ... he'd grabbed her hand and was chasing after Rebel, who'd taken off running the instant he heard his brother was hurt.

Trying to keep up with Blackie's long strides, Dusty eventually gave up and let go, allowing him to go on without her.

What should she do now?

This was the perfect opportunity for her to slip away unnoticed; leave the McCasseys before she caused them anymore harm.

But she couldn't do it.

Judd had done everything he could to protect her. Abandoning him wouldn't be right.

I might as well take my medicine, she told herself, sure that Blackie and Rebel were going to have more than a few words for her.

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Chapter 18

Judd knew the thunderous footsteps coming toward him belonged to at least one of his brothers. Holding up the light, he shined it in front of him to light their way. When he saw Rebel, Judd gave in to his pain, dropped his flashlight and gun, and sank to the ground.

Rebel dropped beside him. "Judd!"

Eyes closed, Judd leaned his head back against the wall. "I'm fine," he said, holding up his hand to keep Rebel from fussing over him, "just tired of standing. Where's Dusty?"

"With Blackie. Where's the bite?"

"My right calf, just above my boot."

As Rebel removed Judd's boot and rolled up his pant leg to get a better look at the snakebite, Judd began talking to take his mind off the pain. "How'd you know we were down here?"

"We were hoping you had a chance to get to the tunnel when the fire broke out, but weren't sure until we heard a shot."

"That was Dusty," Judd explained. "She blew up the snake."

Rebel momentarily stopped what he was doing and looked up at Judd, brows raised. "What happened at the cabin?"

"Hell if I know. One minute Dusty and I were half asleep. Next thing we knew, one of the windows shattered and a Molotov Cocktail landed on the floor, igniting half the room. Ouch! Jesus, Reb, take it easy!"

"Sorry," Rebel apologized without taking his eyes off Judd's wound. "This doesn't look too good, man."

"Yeah, well, it doesn't feel too damn good, either." Judd couldn't help his sarcasm. Not only was his leg throbbing, it was also soaked in blood from his calf down. What he wouldn't give for a shower right about now.

"How'd you know about the fire?"

"I got a call from Sheriff Walton a half hour ago. He was driving to work and saw the flames. The fire went to three alarms because they were afraid it was going to turn into a massive brush fire."

"Did it?"

"No. It's pretty much contained now. The cabin's gone, but hardly any of the woods. Blackie crashed on my sofa last night," Rebel said, answering Judd's next question before he had a chance to ask it, "so I didn't have to worry about going over to pick him up. We'd have been here sooner, but the brush around the opening to the tunnel was so overgrown we had a hard time finding it. You and Dusty are lucky you made it out alive."

That was the truth. The wood the cabin had been constructed of was so dry that if the trap door to the tunnel hadn't been there, there was no doubt in his mind they would've burned to death ... quickly.

Judd heard a noise and turned his head to the right, spotting Blackie, who skidded to a halt and dropped to the ground beside Rebel. "How is it?"

"Pretty bad. He's bleeding a lot."

"We should get him to Frank."

When the hell did those two start making his decisions for him? "Will you two shut up and quit talking about me like I'm unconscious? I don't need to see Frank, goddammit, I'm fine. Dusty dumped a whole damn bottle of peroxide on it earlier. People don't die from Copperhead bites ... usually." Realizing then that Dusty hadn't been with Blackie, he looked at his older brother. "Where is she?"

"Who?"

"Dusty, dammit, Blackie. Rebel said she was with you."

Blackie spared a moment to look behind him, then turned his attention back to Judd's snakebite. "She was."

Was? "What the hell do you mean, 'was'? You left her alone?"

"Here I am."

Judd looked to his right and saw her hanging back as if she was afraid to intrude.

Was there a reason she looked uncomfortable?

Had one of his brothers said something to upset her?

Judd raised his right arm toward Dusty. "Come here."

After glancing at Blackie and Rebel, who were still fussing over the snakebite, Dusty hesitantly stepped forward. When she reached Judd's side, she sank down next to him and rested her head on his right shoulder. "How is he?" she asked no one in particular.

"He'll live," Blackie said, dryly, "if he's lucky."

"Shut up," he ordered his brother. "I told you I'm fine."

"Yeah, well, you're fine for now. But this does need to be cleaned up. And you should see a doctor ... or at least Frank."

Without waiting for a response from Judd, Blackie said, "You want to tell us what happened up there?"

"I already told Rebel—"

"Not you," Blackie said angrily, cutting him off and turning to Dusty, "you."

Instead of cowering the way most people did when Blackie turned on them, Dusty fired back. "Oh, so you think this is my fault?"

"Ain't it?"

"I didn't start that fire, Blackie."

"Maybe not. But that don't mean you don't know who did."

Judd felt Dusty's body go rigid. "I didn't see anything, Blackie, it was dark."

"Come on, Dusty! You've been lyin' to us from the beginnin'."

Judd sighed inwardly. Oh great, now he's done it.

"I'm not lying," Dusty shrieked, "I didn't see anyone!"

"You may not have seen anyone, but I think you know who set that fire. Rebel and I had an interestin' conversation with Davie Jenkins earlier. Would you like to know what he said?"

Dusty remained silent; staring at Blackie.

Judd glanced at Dusty, then at his older brother. "I would," he told him, and listened carefully as Blackie repeated everything Davie had said, word for word.

"Neither Davie Jenkins nor any of the Drifters set that fire. Rebel and I are with Judd all the time, Dusty. All day, every day. We'd know if someone wanted to hurt him. As many enemies as he's had in the past, surprisingly, there ain't no

one pissed off at him enough right now to want him dead. That leaves you as the only person someone could be after."

Judd had to admit that what Blackie said made a lot of sense. He wondered why Dusty wasn't saying anything to defend herself. Did she know who set the fire? If she did, why wasn't she saying anything?

He had to call her on it; it was the only way to find out the truth. "That was no accident, Dusty," he said to her, "whoever threw that Molotov Cocktail through the window knew what they were doing. They were trying to kill one, or both of us."

Blackie suddenly turned his attention to Judd. "What'd you just say?" he shouted harshly.

Irritated by Blackie's interruption, Judd didn't want to answer, but something about the haunted look on his brother's face made him. "Which part?"

"Did you say Molotov Cocktail?"

"Yeah, what about it?"

Blackie quickly got up. "Let's go," he said, reaching down and yanking Judd to his feet, "we gotta get outta here. Now."

"Ah!" Caught off guard and unable to put any weight on his right foot, Judd was forced to hop around on his left foot to try and catch his balance. Blackie finally put his hands on Judd's shoulders, steadying him. "Easy, Blackie! What's the damn hurry?"

Offering no apology, Blackie began barking orders. "We'll talk about it later. You need to see a doctor first."

"Blackie—"

"Shut up! I'm callin' the shots now, and I'm takin' you to the hospital myself. Rebel, take Dusty to your house and keep

an eye on her," he ordered. "Don't let either of the girls or any of the kids outta your sight, either. Keep everyone inside. Providin' Judd don't drop dead on me, we'll meet you there in a few hours."

"Don't you think you ought to tell us what's going on?"

"No, Rebel," Blackie spat, "I don't." Grabbing Dusty's saddlebags off the ground, Blackie shoved them at her. "Get movin'."

Staring at Blackie, Dusty dropped her bags to the floor. "I'm not going anywhere," she yelled, the defiance in her voice raising several red flags with Judd.

"Bullshit, you're not! You almost got my brother—and yourself—killed, Dusty! Until you decide to start tellin' the truth about what's goin' on, you need to be someplace we can all keep an eye on you."

"What?"

"You heard me! This mess is your fault!"

"I told you I didn't lie!"

"Okay," Blackie agreed, "maybe you didn't lie. But you sure as hell left out a lot of the truth! If you'd just told us from the beginnin' that Davie Jenkins was involved, we—"

"You what, Blackie? Would've gone after him? Killed him? That's real bright. I'm sure Angel would've appreciated you not only putting yourself in that kind of danger, but also violating your parole and taking the chance of being sent back to prison."

Judd and Rebel, both watching and listening intently, looked at each other. Rebel nodded his head toward Blackie, silently telling Judd he'd step in and get Blackie calmed down.

Even though he didn't want Dusty to be upset, Judd knew it was better to let the two of them fight it out. A good shouting match—if they all survived it—would clear the air and make the situation a lot less tense.

Blackie turned his full attention on Dusty. "Hey, you're the one who came to us!"

"That's right!" she shouted. "I came to you looking for my sister, that's all. If you remember correctly, I didn't want your help! But the big, bad McCassey brothers just wouldn't take no for an answer! You insisted on getting involved!"

Blackie's voice suddenly turned ice cold. "If we hadn't gotten involved, little girl, you woulda been dead twice already ... not to mention raped."

Judd stole a glance at Dusty, whose stare was fixed on Blackie ... probably boring holes right through him. She was silent, but the look on her face said more than enough. She was angry as hell.

When Blackie started in on her again, Judd cringed. He knew Dusty, and guilty of keeping secrets or not, she wasn't going to take this attack much longer before striking back.

"And after hearin' somethin' Judd just said, I'm convinced now more than ever that you know who set that fire. After everything that's happened, you owe us an explanation at the very least—"

That did it. Dusty suddenly reached out with both hands and gave Blackie a hard shove. Caught unaware, he bumped into Rebel, lost his balance, and landed on his ass in the dirt. Judd bit the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing. It was obvious his brother hadn't expected a physical retaliation.

"I owe you nothing!" she shouted. "But if you want an explanation, Blackie, fine, I'll give you one. How about this?" Dusty put her hands on her hips. "Do you actually think this was the first time someone tried to rape me?"

Blackie didn't answer.

"Do you!" she yelled.

Still no answer.

"Okay, then. How about if I explain to you what it felt like to be pinned under the weight of that man out there in the woods? Or what his rough hands felt like when they tore away my clothes and touched my breasts. How about I explain in detail the nausea I fought back as one of them jammed his hand down my pants and between my legs? Because he sure as hell wasn't gentle!"

"Dusty," Blackie finally said, standing up.

"What almost happened to me last night and what happened to me tonight are two of the reasons I didn't want you guys involved! I tried to keep you out of it—keep you and your families safe—but you wouldn't give up! Yeah, you saved my life." She shrugged, and for the first time since they began fighting, took her eyes off Blackie. "Fine. Great. Look at what you got for your trouble ... a charred cabin, a brother with a snakebite, and God only knows what else!"

"You tell us, Dusty! What else has to happen before you come clean? I know you know somethin' about that fire that you ain't tellin'. If Angel, Gypsy, or any of the kids get hurt because you're too much of a coward to tell the truth—"

Dusty turned her back on them, then. Leaning down, she reached for her saddlebags and slung them over her shoulder.

"Dusty!" Blackie said firmly.

Keeping her back to them, she sighed. "Leave me alone, Blackie. All of you; just leave me alone!" She took a few steps forward, stopped, then slowly continued forward. "I have to go."

"Dusty!" Rebel yelled and jumped to his feet, "Don't go, it's too dangerous. Especially now."

She took another step forward.

"Look," Rebel said, trying to convince her, "maybe you know something and maybe you don't. But in any case, it's not safe for you to leave here alone. You've got nowhere to go."

Dusty just continued to walk.

No longer able to stand, Judd sat down again. He agreed with Blackie, and wasn't at all sure that Dusty wasn't hiding something. Wondering if the problem she said they had to deal with together had anything to do with her not wanting to talk in front of his brothers, Judd figured right now, that was beside the point.

He had to do something to stop her from leaving. She was the only woman he'd ever loved; the only person other than his brothers that he couldn't live without. She wasn't doing this to him ... to them ... a second time. "Dusty," he yelled angrily. When she didn't respond, Judd blurted out, "I love you, goddammit! Don't you dare walk away from me again!"

That did it.

Dusty flung her saddlebags to the ground and dropped to her knees, burying her face in her hands. Violent sobs wracked her body. She didn't protest when Rebel leaned

down and scooped her up, allowing him to carry her to Judd's waiting arms.

When Rebel placed her in Judd's lap, he encircled his arms around her as she buried her face in his chest. "What do we do now?" he asked his brothers.

Blackie, who'd been unusually silent for the past few minutes, finally spoke. "I got an idea." He paused and looked at Dusty. "But she may not go for it."

Judd glanced down at Dusty, who gave no indication that she was even listening. "She'll do what needs to be done. What is it?"

"I don't have time to give you all the details now. Like I said, you need to go to the hospital and I ain't takin' no for an answer. Rebel can take Dusty back to his house. We'll meet them there as soon as a doctor takes a look at that snakebite."

"Wait a minute—"

"Don't even bother arguin', Judd, 'cause I ain't listenin'." Blackie reached down and offered Judd a hand. "Get your ass off the ground. We need to get outta here."

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Chapter 19

The ride to Rebel's house didn't take long, but had been plenty uncomfortable.

During the drive, Rebel had repeated everything Davie Jenkins had said, described how Blackie had chased away the Drifters, and explained how the brothers had come to the conclusion that the person who set the fire was after her.

"Are you sure there's nothing you want to tell me before my brothers get back?" he asked her as they pulled into the driveway. "Out of the three of us, I'm probably the most likely to listen with an open mind."

Dusty knew Rebel was right. She loved Judd, but knew what a short fuse he had. Chances are, he'd listen to what she had to say for about five seconds, then begin yelling and screaming the instant she revealed the secret she was keeping.

And Blackie, well, no explanation was needed there.

Shifting in her seat, Dusty positioned herself so she was facing Rebel. "To be honest," she said quietly, "I wasn't lying when I told you boys I didn't know who set fire to the cabin. I had my suspicions, of course, which was why I didn't say anything while Blackie was trying to interrogate me in the tunnel.

"But now, after hearing for the second time the conversation you had with Davie, I'm pretty sure I know who did it."

"Tell me."

"I wish I could, Rebel."

"Why can't you?"

"Because it's not that simple."

"Dusty—"

"I can't tell you, Rebel!"

"Fine," he spat. "You know what? You don't have to tell me a damn thing." Dusty could tell he was frustrated, but to his credit, hadn't really lost his temper. Yet. "But you're going to have to tell someone eventually. And talking to me is going to be a hell of a lot easier than talking to Blackie or Judd when they're angry."

Yanking the keys from the ignition, Rebel reached for the door handle.

He was leaving.

Once he was gone, she knew he wouldn't bring the subject up again until his brothers came back ... until she was sitting in front of all three of them.

She really did want to tell Rebel everything. It'd be better for her if he knew what was going on. Blackie and Judd respected and listened to him. Already having Rebel on her side when she told the other two her secret would be to her benefit.

But when she opened her mouth to speak, the words just wouldn't come.

Rebel sighed, shook his head, and started to get out of the truck.

"I can't tell you!" she yelled out of desperation. "If I do, he'll hurt Judd!"

Rebel froze and turned around. "Who, Dusty? Who's going to hurt Judd?"

Taking a deep, quivering breath, Dusty knew she'd said too much.

"Dusty?"

"I can't. You'd never believe me."

"Try me," he ordered with a slight plea. "If there's someone after Judd, my brothers and I need to know. We can't keep him safe if we don't know who wants to hurt him."

"He said that as long as I stayed away, he wouldn't come after Judd," she explained through her sobs. "But I know now that he was lying. He tried to kill both of us tonight, and if that tunnel hadn't been there, he would've succeeded. He must be the one who has Jessie, too."

"Who, dammit?" Rebel was losing his patience, and Dusty couldn't blame him.

Dusty took a deep breath and sighed. The words, "I'm sorry, I just can't," came out just above a whisper.

Feeling as though she'd lost her last ally, Dusty pulled the handle on the door with the intention of getting out. She was going to have to handle this on her own; just like she handled everything else.

"Hold it!" Rebel yelled, and she stopped. "I think I deserve a little more of an explanation, don't you?"

He did. They all did.

But she couldn't give them one.

Not yet.

"Yes," she said, hoping it would buy her some time. "But I'd like to have to tell this story only once. Can we wait until Judd and Blackie get back?"

"It can; if you're actually going to wait around that long and not try to run away again. But something tells me that as soon as I turn my back, you'll be gone."

Rebel wasn't the unofficial leader of the McCassey clan for nothing. He was smart.

Too smart for her to continue lying to.

"It isn't safe for me to be here, Rebel. You don't know how ruthless he is; what he's capable of. He'd hurt your wife and kids without thinking twice, and—"

"Save it, Dusty," he told her, clearly frustrated. "Just wait until my brothers get back. You have between now and then to get yourself together. Because when Blackie and Judd get back, you have a lot of explaining to do."

* * * *

Lying in bed in the room she'd been told used to be Judd's, Dusty kept going over the conversation she'd had with Rebel in his truck.

It was a relief to know that Davie Jenkins and the Drifters were finally out of her life.

Although she was glad she no longer had to deal with outlaw biker gangs; Dusty wondered if dealing with the man who was now after her was really the lesser of two evils.

She knew what he wanted. But she'd be damned if she was going to allow him to get his hands on her most prized possession.

Wishing she and Judd had gotten around to having that talk, Dusty was more than a little reluctant to have it with him now. His snakebite put him in no condition to help her, and she wasn't about to put Blackie and Rebel in more danger.

As much as she hated to do it, Dusty needed to leave Hagerstown ... fast. If the man thought she'd died in that fire, then there was a good chance he was on his way to Virginia at this very moment.

She had to get there before he did.

All she really cared about was being able to hide what she didn't want him to get his hands on. Once she'd done that, she'd come back to Hagerstown and explain everything. With any luck, Judd would forgive her.

* * * *

After five minutes of watching Blackie pace back and forth in his living room, Rebel had had enough. "Gypsy'll kill you if you wind up wearing a hole in the rug."

Blackie stopped short and bent his head, looking at the ground. "Sorry," he said, taking a seat on the sofa.

"What's with you? The doctor said Judd's going to be fine. Quit worrying so much."

"Judd ain't the one I'm worried about."

"Then who? What's on your mind?"

"Get Judd out here. He needs to hear this."

"I'm right here," the middle McCassey brother announced, limping into the room holding a can of Budweiser. "What the

hell is wrong with you, Blackie? You've been looking like you've seen a damn ghost ever since we left the tunnel."

Rebel took a closer look at his oldest brother and decided Judd was right. It was odd that Blackie would let anything bother him so much that it actually showed.

"I got somethin' to tell you boys, but I'll be damned if I know how to do it."

Judd wrinkled his face and raised a brow. "Jesus, Blackie, just spit it out."

"I think I know who set fire to the cabin."

"Why wouldn't you know how to tell us that?"

Blackie sighed. "Because either it was a ghost, or someone that we all thought was dead, ain't."

Stopping just short of sipping his beer, Judd lowered the can and squinted at Blackie. "What the hell are you talking about?"

Looking as pained as Rebel had ever seen him, Blackie slowly splayed the fingers on his right hand and ran it through his hair.

"There's only one man I know of who loved to blow things up usin' Molotov Cocktails. He threw one into the old police station once; another time it was a liquor store on Franklin Street. He burned Granddaddy's old storage barn to the ground with one when I was twelve, and threatened to do the same thing to our house a hundred times."

Rebel actually felt the blood drain from his own face. Glancing at Judd, he saw the same thing. "Dad," they said in unison.

"Dad," Blackie confirmed with a nod.

Judd set his beer can on the coffee table. "How could that be? Dad's been dead since I was fifteen years old. How the hell can a dead man set a fire?"

"Maybe he ain't dead," Blackie suggested. "Maybe he only wanted us to think he was dead."

Shaking his head, Judd refused to believe the possibility that their father could still be alive. Judd sat down and looked up at Blackie. "You saw Harry Allen shoot him with a scatter gun. You watched him go down; saw the blood stains on his shirt."

"Yeah, but I never checked his pulse, Judd. He wasn't movin' and his entire upper body was covered in blood. But maybe he was still alive. Maybe he faked his death. I don't know why he'd do somethin' like that, but it's possible. Ain't it, Reb?"

Why were they both looking at him?

It was times like this that Rebel wished his brothers had someone else to go to for answers. "I guess anything's possible. But why would he want us all to think he was dead? It wasn't like we were going to miss him. We didn't even go to the funeral."

Looking surprised, Judd turned his head in Rebel's direction. "There was a funeral?"

"Are you for real?" Rebel reached out and slapped the side of Judd's head. "Of course there was a funeral, stupid. But nobody I knew went—with the exception of Grandma—not even Granddaddy."

"Then who paid for it?"

"I don't know, Judd! Grandma always had a soft spot for Dad. Maybe she had a few dollars stashed away. Maybe she got money from Frank or Jimmy; none of her other five sons would've given her one red cent for Dad, that's for sure. He treated his brothers just as bad—if not worse—than he treated us. Especially the younger ones."

"So what now?"

Rebel glanced at Blackie, who'd been unusually quiet for the past few minutes. "What's on your mind?"

"I'm just wonderin' how Dusty fits into all this. I'm also wonderin'; if Dad really is alive, where the hell has he been all these years? Why'd he wait until now to come back? And why, if he wanted to kill us all, did he start with Judd?"

"If he's been hangin' around town, he knows Reb and I have kids. If he wanted to get our attention, grabbin' one of them woulda been the easiest way to do it."

Obviously having forgotten about his beer, Judd focused his attention on Blackie. "Hold on, you two. Do you both actually think Dad is alive?"

Figuring now was the best time to tell his brothers about the conversation he'd had with Dusty, Rebel sat on the sofa and looked across the room at them. "Before you speculate anymore, I've got something to tell you boys..."

Rebel watched the expressions on his brother's faces go from shock, to anger, and back again as he repeated everything Dusty had told him, word for word. "She's terrified of whoever is after you," he told Judd.

"What would make her believe this man wants to hurt me?"

Rebel shrugged. "That's what she said he told her. Come on, we all know Dusty; know she's just as fearless as Angel. In order for Dusty to be so scared, this guy really must've done a number on her."

"What else did she say?"

"Nothing; other than she only wants to tell the story once, and said she'd do it when the two of you got here."

"Then someone better go get her," Blackie ordered.

"Wait a minute," Judd told Rebel as he stood. "Do either one of you actually believe Dad could be alive?"

All three brothers looked at each other. Rebel answered the question. "I hope to hell not, Judd. But if he is, then that explains a lot. Out of the three of us, you were the one Dad always went after with the most vengeance. Remember the day he broke three of your ribs?"

"So what? He also threw you up against the wall and dislocated your shoulder."

"Yeah, but he went after you first. He always did."

"What the hell are you trying to say, Reb?"

"I'm saying that it would make sense for you to be his first target. I don't think he'd grab one of the kids, because then he'd have to deal with all three of us at once. What I do think, is that he's counting on the element of surprise; trying to catch us with our guard down."

Blackie suddenly jumped up and started pacing again. "Well, all I gotta say is if that worthless bastard really is alive, we got big problems. One of you go get Dusty. She owes us some answers."

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Chapter 20

As Judd limped down the basement steps toward his old room, his mind was swimming with questions; first and foremost, if his father really was alive, how the hell had Dusty Zamora gotten mixed up with him?

Dusty was only about eight years old when Judd's father had supposedly died. They'd only ever come in contact with each other a few times, and as far as Judd knew, had never spoken a word to each other.

Quite frankly, Judd was more than a little curious about what was going on. He hadn't been able to shake the feeling that Dusty was hiding more than she let on. At the very least, the story she had to tell was no doubt going to be a good one.

When he reached the bottom of the steps and turned the knob on his old bedroom door, Judd had a sinking feeling. It wasn't locked, but refused to budge.

Dusty had barricaded the door.

Once again, he should've known.

"Dammit!"

Judd would bet an entire month's salary that if he walked outside, he'd find the window leading into the bedroom unlocked. It was much too small for him to fit through, but Dusty was tiny enough to squeeze through with no problem.

The sound of footsteps thundering down the stairs caught Judd's attention. When he turned around, Blackie and Rebel skidded to a halt.

Blackie rolled his eyes. "She's gone, ain't she?"

All Judd did was nod.

"We gotta find her, Judd, and we gotta do it now. The old man ain't no one to fuck around with. He's already tried to kill Dusty once. She may not be lucky enough to get away a second time."

That was the truth. Dusty hadn't known about the escape tunnel under the cabin. If she'd been alone when the fire broke out, she would've died. They had to find her. Fast. "Let's go."

But as he started to limp back up the steps, Blackie blocked his path. "Just where the hell do you think you're goin'?"

"Same place you are; to find Dusty."

Judd tried to push Blackie out of the way, but the man refused to move. "You ain't goin' nowhere, little brother. The doctor said to stay off that leg for a few days, not a few minutes. Me and Reb will find Dusty and bring her back here."

In no mood to play games, Judd reached out and tried to push his brother to the side. "Quit telling me what to do!"

"It's for your own damn good!"

"Ahem!" The sound of Rebel clearing his throat gave Judd the impression that Reb had obviously had enough. "How about if I go look for Dusty by myself while you two ten-year-olds fight this out?"

Judd looked at Blackie, who did nothing more than nod. "The three of us will go together."

"Give me a few minutes," Rebel told them. "I don't think it's a good idea to leave the women and children here by

themselves ... just in case. I'm going to call Frank and Jimmy and have them come over."

"That's a good idea, bro. You want us to do anything?"

"Yeah. I'll wake Gypsy before I make those calls. Blackie, go wake Angel, then tell the two of them what's going on. Judd, make sure all the guns are loaded. When you're done, lock them inside the cabinet in the living room and put the key on the hook next to it. Leave two .357's on the top shelf of the bookcase where Angel can get to them quickly if she needs to. We'll leave here in five minutes."

The brothers split up to complete their tasks. When they were finished, they met back in the living room. "Frank and Jimmy will be here in a few minutes. Rose is coming too, to help with the kids. I called Brady and Kane while I was at it; they're going to pick up Flynn and go hang out at the garage ... just to keep anything too interesting from happening."

"Good idea." Rebel always thought of everything.

"Everybody ready?"

Surprisingly, Blackie looked at Judd and shrugged. "Where do you want to start lookin'?"

Judd looked at the small, round, wall clock hanging above the sofa and thought for a moment. "I don't know. But I'd say the only thing going for us right now is that it's six o'clock on a Sunday morning. Dusty couldn't have gotten far because nothing's open in this town until at least noon." After a quick pause, he added, "Except the bus station."

Rebel gave him a firm pat on the back. "Then let's start there."

* * * *

The Hagerstown bus station was nearly deserted.

As the three brothers walked side-by-side through the automatic double doors and into the building that had been a train depot until the mid-nineteen forties, Judd wasn't a bit surprised to see it so empty.

On any given night, the place was usually crawling with every low-life within a five mile radius. The hookers, drug dealers, and addicts that had taken over Franklin Street always flocked to the bus station when business began to slow outside.

But even they had a bedtime.

By the wee hours of the morning, most of them had vacated the building that had been added onto twice, and was now a good seven thousand square feet.

Walking along the white, marble floor, Judd and his brothers passed the row of vending machines against the wall and headed to the ticket booth. If there was anyone in this godforsaken place that would know whether or not Dusty was here, it was Lucas.

Friends since childhood, Judd often wondered why the man had always gone by his last name. Even their school teachers had called him Lucas. Judd knew he had a first name, but was damned if he could remember what it was.

The aroma of clove cigarettes in the air told Judd that his old friend was indeed working. Just the thought of those cigarettes made Judd's stomach lurch. Lucas had been smoking the Djarum Specials since he and Judd had stolen a pack from the liquor store in seventh grade.

When he got to the window of the booth, Judd peeked inside. What he saw made him want to laugh.

Not having seen Lucas in a good six months, Judd noticed that his friend's mousy brown hair had gotten much longer, and he'd grown a full, dark beard. What was so funny was what he was doing; casually leaning back in a chair, feet crossed and propped up on a desk, reading National Geographic. To top it all off, he was wearing ragged brown corduroys and a half-buttoned, threadbare, red and blue flannel shirt, with a white, equally threadbare Star Wars T-shirt underneath, and had one of those retched smelling cloves dangling between his lips.

To anyone who knew Lucas, his behavior and clothing choice were no surprise. He'd always been a little different; never afraid to be himself. Judd admired and respected that the man made his own choices and didn't give a damn about what anyone else thought. As a result, the two of them had remained friends, although not close, since elementary school.

"Hey," Judd said, dropping his cigarette butt to the floor and extinguishing it under the heel of his boot.

Lucas closed his magazine and set it on the desk. A slight smile crossed his face when he noticed who was standing at the window. "Well," he drawled, taking a moment to study all three of them, "if it ain't the infamous McCassey brothers. This ain't your usual hangout," he commented, lifting his left arm and glancing at his wristwatch, "especially at six-thirty in the morning. You boys runnin' away from home?"

"No, man, we're looking for a girl."

Lucas cocked an eyebrow and chuckled. "Sorry boys, if you'd come in a few hours ago, you would've had your pick. But ain't none of 'em here now; guess they went on home to bed."

Judd rolled his eyes. "We're not looking for hookers, asshole; we're here for one girl in particular."

Lucas' grin was humorously evil, and Judd realized he'd been bested.

"There was one in here earlier, about five-four, maybe five-five. She had dark, straight hair, and looked an awful lot like one of the Zamora sisters. I can't remember which one, though."

Bingo. "That's her. Where is she?"

Lucas shrugged and reached for his pack of cloves. "Beats me, man. She bought a ticket to Richmond, asked me which gate the bus was leavin' from, and disappeared. I ain't seen her since."

"What time was the bus supposed to pull out?"

Lucas glanced casually at his silver Timex wristwatch. "Just a few minutes ago."

"Shit! From what gate?"

"Number three," he said, pointing down the hall. "Just go around that corner there by the restrooms; you can't miss it."

Judd tapped the surface of the counter and extended his hand. "Thanks, man," he said as Lucas shook his hand, "I'll see ya."

"The force is with you, man," Lucas said, "use it!"

Wondering faintly if a clove cigarette was the only thing Lucas was smoking in that booth, Judd nodded and took off—half walking, half limping—to find the gate.

When the brothers rounded the corner, Rebel tapped Judd on the shoulder. "There." He pointed to Dusty, sitting alone on a bench staring at something in her hand, her saddlebags at her feet. "You want a few minutes alone?"

Judd shook his head. "No. This situation is way past being gentle and trying to respect her feelings. We need to find out exactly what's going on. Now."

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Chapter 21

Dusty saw the McCassey brothers walking toward her. Judd, in the lead, was limping; signs that the snakebite was still bothering him.

She knew they'd find her.

Hell, maybe she'd even hoped they would.

All Dusty knew was that she'd come to the bus station figuring it was the easiest way to get home; to solve her problems.

But when it came time to board the bus, all she could think about was Judd. She knew she hadn't been fair to him. He deserved to know. He may hate her for what she had to say, but it was time to let him know what was going on.

Shoving the picture she'd been staring at into her saddlebag, Dusty didn't even bother to lift her head when the three brothers sat down on the bench.

"You missed your bus."

Dusty nodded at Judd's statement.

"Are you ready to talk now? To tell us what's going on?"

She nodded again.

"Is someone after you?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

Here goes nothing. "Someone who wants something that I ... that we, have."

"We?" he asked, "like you and me?"

Dusty bent down and reached for the picture of the husky, nine-year-old boy with little-too-long dark, loose and unruly curly hair, and royal blue eyes, and handed it to Judd.

* * * *

Whatever it was that Judd had been expecting; it sure as hell wasn't a picture of a nine-year-old boy who looked too much like himself at that age to be a coincidence.

This child belonged to him. This boy was his son.

Judd looked up, and without taking his eyes off Dusty, passed the picture over his shoulder to Rebel, who was sitting directly behind him.

"Dusty—" he said breathlessly, because he had no other words.

"His name is Judd," she told him, "but I call him Jay."

Judd had suddenly forgotten everything he wanted to say to Dusty. His mind was a total blank.

Wishing he could find his voice, Judd just kept staring at Dusty. They had a child together. A boy. He had a son.

"I found out I was pregnant about three weeks after my sisters and I left town. We were on the road with a few of the Renegades riding through Virginia when I started getting sick."

Judd's head was swimming. All thoughts of his father gone, the only thing he could think about was why she hadn't told him she was going to have his baby. "I understand that you couldn't come back because of Sheriff Johnson, but why didn't you try to get a message to me? Didn't you think that was something I should've known?"

"You were on probation at that time, Judd; you weren't supposed to leave the state!"

"Who said anything about leaving the state? All you had to do was make a damn phone call!"

"You told me yourself that Blackie said it wasn't a good idea to come looking for me! If I'd called and you'd come after me, you know damn well Sheriff Johnson would've followed you. Then, not only would me and my sisters have been arrested on murder charges, but you would've gone to prison for violating probation!"

"I had a right to know that I was going to be a father, Dusty!"

"Yes, you did. But you weren't ready to be a father back then, Judd, and you know it!"

She was right, but he'd be damned if he was going to admit it. Changing the subject—at least for the moment—he brought up the other issue. "The man that's after you; he wants Jay?"

Dusty took a deep breath and exhaled. "Yes."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

Judd could feel his face beginning to heat with anger. "You don't know? He didn't tell you?"

"No!"

"Don't lie to me, goddammit! I have a feeling I know who it is, Dusty, but I want to hear you say it! I want you to tell me who the hell is after the three of us, how you got mixed up with him, and why he wants to get his hands on my son!"

"I don't have any answers! All I can tell you is that he said if I ever tried to contact you, or tell you about Jay, he'd kill you and come back for Jay."

"And you believed that son of a bitch?"

"I was eighteen years old at the time, Judd! I was scared! I loved you! I didn't want you to die, and I didn't want him to take Jay!"

Dusty stood up and began pacing.

"Dusty—"

"Stop, Judd!" she paused and yelled, "just stop!" Then she started pacing again. "You have no right to criticize me for what's happened in my life over the past ten years, because you have no idea what it was like for my sisters and me when we left here! We were terrified Sheriff Johnson was going to find us, so we had to keep moving. We were basically homeless; sleeping anywhere we could. We rode with the Renegades sometimes, and whether we were with the gang or not, Church was always with us; Dragon, too, sometimes."

"Dusty—" he said again, becoming irritated that she wouldn't let him get a word in.

She stopped again. This time she pointed a finger in his face. "I'm not finished!"

Judd shrugged, crossed his arms in front of his chest, and leaned back against the bench. He wasn't going to try and stop her. He wanted to know what happened after she left Hagerstown; about Jay, and all they'd been through. She'd been so closed-mouthed the past few days that getting her to give him any information had been downright torture on both of them.

Now that she was ready to volunteer the information he'd been trying to get her to cough up since she rode back into town, he'd be damned if he was going to criticize the way she gave it to him; even if it meant he had to deal with being yelled at.

He'd get in what he had to say, and get her to tell him what he wanted to hear ... eventually. All he had to do was be patient.

"I was scared, Judd! Scared because I didn't want to have a baby by myself; because I wanted you with me and I couldn't even risk telling you I was pregnant! After Jay was born and the two of you were threatened, I was afraid to go outside."

Judd wasn't exactly sure how to respond.

Dusty had kept things from him.

Things he had a right to know.

He understood that she'd been young and scared; understood why she was afraid of whoever wanted to hurt him and take Jay.

But he just couldn't get past the fact that she hadn't been honest with him.

"Dusty, if you had just contacted me, I would've tried—"

"Judd, I told you—"

This time, he pointed a finger in her face. "I listened to you talk; now it's my turn."

She fell silent, but the expression on her face said she wasn't happy about it.

"As I was saying ... I would've tried to do what I could. Get to you; send you money until my probation was over, something."

"What are you saying?"

"Jesus, Dusty, I'm saying that I'm not real happy about missing the first nine years of my son's life! Finding out that someone's been after not only me, but also my son, doesn't please me much, either! You know me and my brothers can handle anything. You should've had faith that we could've kept you safe!"

Dusty rose from the bench and stood directly in front of Judd. When he turned to look at her, her open palm connected with his face, the loud slap echoing throughout the empty corridor. "You arrogant son of a bitch!"

She'd hit him so hard that not only was his face stinging, but his ears were ringing, also. He was so angry that he wanted to pick her up and dump her head-first into a trashcan. Fortunately for her, he could barely get his thoughts together.

"How dare you even mention your son and keeping me safe in the same sentence? If you'd kept me safe, Judd McCassey, we wouldn't have a son! I didn't get pregnant all by myself, you know. And what the hell do you know about trust? Has there ever been anyone so dependent on you that every decision you made affected their life, their safety?"

"For you, planning your weekend always meant which bars you're going to hit and which one of your brothers or cousins you're going to bring with you. Even now, you play touch

football in parking lots, have bonfires, and probably still try to drink each other under the table.

"You want to know how I've spent most of my weekends until recently?"

Figuring he was safer not speaking, he remained quiet.

"I may look like an outlaw biker, Judd, but I'm far from it; I always have been. While my sisters were riding and partying, I was working to try and earn a little money. Planning my weekends was usually wondering where my son's next meal was coming from, and if I was going to have enough money to buy him the things he needed. I've spent countless weekends working with him; teaching him how to shoot a gun ... just in case. And six years ago, I spent four weekends recovering from injuries I got when the same man who's after you and Jay attacked me in the parking lot of a restaurant where I was working."

She looked at Blackie. "That was the second time someone tried to rape me," she said, obviously referring to the conversation the two of them had in the tunnel earlier.

"I don't need you or anyone else to lecture me on trust or responsibility. And I learned a long time ago that if I couldn't keep myself safe, no one else was going to, either."

Shocked by the things he'd just heard, Judd was literally speechless. How could he argue with her? She was absolutely right. He had no idea what she'd been through, until now. None.

When Dusty suddenly reached down and picked up her saddlebags, Judd finally found his voice. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Leaving!" She turned and started walking away. Jumping off the bench and limping after her, he followed.

"Dusty!" Fully expecting her to be angry when he grabbed her shoulders and swung her around, Judd was prepared to be screamed at. What he wasn't prepared for was the .38 Special she'd pulled, cocked, and was now pointing directly between his eyes.

Damn, he'd forgotten she had those guns.

"Don't 'Dusty' me," she said through clenched teeth. "There's a nine-year-old boy in Virginia waiting for me to come home ... because I promised I would. And I don't break promises, Judd, ever. I have no idea where Jessie is, but I'd bet my life on the fact that the man who burned down the cabin does. So now I have to go find Church and tell him that his wife is missing; which, trust me, isn't something I'm looking forward to doing.

"I love you, Judd, and probably always will. But I don't give a damn what you think about me or my decisions. I did what I had to do all those years ago because at the time, I honestly believed it was the right thing.

"You were nothing more than an outlaw yourself until a few years back, and have a lot to learn about cutting others a little slack. Some of us survive the only way we can; the only way we know how ... while others constantly rely on family members to bail their asses out of trouble.

"We don't come from the same place anymore, Judd, and I don't want or need your help with anything. It's time for me to go home. Have a nice life."

It wasn't until Judd felt the shooting pain and trickle of blood oozing down the side of his face that he realized she'd clocked him in the temple with the butt of the gun.

Dizzy, he swayed on his feet.

"Whoa, there, little brother." Blackie chuckled when he jumped up and caught Judd as he tilted backward. "This just ain't your day, is it?"

No, it sure as hell wasn't.

Judd waited until Blackie had dragged him backward and deposited him on the bench before lifting a hand to his temple. Between his snakebite and the nice little wound Dusty had just given him, Judd had seen enough blood for one day.

Blackie chuckled again as he watched Judd examine the blood on his hand. "You're some kind of stupid asshole, you know that?"

"Fuck you, Blackie. I'm not in the mood!"

"Not only did that girl just say she loves you," Blackie said, ignoring him, "she also told you that you have a son; a son who sounds like he could use his father's help."

"He doesn't need my help. He has the great and powerful Dusty Zamora—who doesn't want my help—to look after him."

"So you ain't even gonna go after her?"

"Hell no I'm not going after her! Screw her! She's the one who walked away. If Dusty needs help—which she made clear she doesn't—let her come back and ask for it!"

Blackie shook his head. "You know her, Judd, she ain't gonna do that."

"Then that's her problem. And you both know her, too," he said bitterly. "That boy probably isn't even mine."

Judd knew he was wrong about Jay not being his son; that kid looked so much like him that it was almost unbelievable. But it'd been a long time since he'd felt as angry as he did right now, and saying what he did—even if it was only out of anger—had felt good.

"I ain't—"

Judd had had enough of his older brother's mouth. "Let her go, dammit! And while you're at it, butt out of my business! You don't hear him," Judd said, gesturing toward Rebel, "trying to tell me what to do."

Blackie stood, then reached down and wrapped his large hand around Judd's upper left arm, not-so-gently pulling him to his feet. "That's because he knows I'm right, and there ain't no use in both of us wastin' our breath." Blackie let go and took a step away. "You know what? Do whatever the fuck you want to about Dusty, Judd. I ain't interested in your goddamn love life."

"But while you were busy bitchin' at Dusty, actin' like a goddamned spoiled brat, you forgot to ask her about the old man. Now we don't know whether or not that bastard's alive or dead! And thanks to you, you goddamned thick-headed son of a bitch, we ain't gonna find out until he tries to kill one of us again!"

Giving Judd a slight shove, Blackie turned and stormed off down the long corridor.

"Hey! Who are you calling a thick-headed son of a bitch!" Teetering off balance, Judd did his best to charge after

Blackie but Rebel reached out grabbed him by the shoulders, stopping him. In reality, Judd was grateful. Rebel's hand had steadied him. If it hadn't been there, Judd knew he would've fallen.

"Where the hell does he get off—"

"We should go, too," Rebel interrupted.

"I need to cool off first, Reb. We'll go in a minute."

"No," Rebel disagreed, "we have to go now. Unless of course, you want to walk home on that sore leg of yours. Blackie's got my truck keys. The mood he's in, you know damn well he'd leave without us."

"Shit."

"Come on." Rebel stepped closer, and Judd was thankful for his help.

Propping his right arm on Rebel's shoulder, Judd leaned on his brother for support as the two of them slowly made their way through the still-deserted bus station. Deserted, that was, except for Lucas, who hadn't moved from his post in the ticket booth.

As Judd and Rebel passed by, Lucas stepped in front of the window and waved his arms to get the brother's attention. Pointing at Judd, he nodded and gave a thumbs-up. "Dusty!" he called, "that was Dusty Zamora, man!"

Smiling for the first time in hours—even if it was only briefly—Judd shook his head. "There's no way the only thing he's smoking back there are those damn Djaram Specials."

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Chapter 22

Rebel yawned and stretched.

The shower he'd taken when he and his brothers had returned from the bus station an hour ago had woken him up; but hadn't done anything to soothe his weary body. All the running around they'd done in the past few days, combined with the lack of sleep, was really beginning to take their toll.

Exhausted, Blackie had collected his wife and kids and gone home shortly after the brothers had gotten back. It had taken some convincing on Rebel's part, and after twenty minutes of going back and forth, Judd had finally agreed to stay at the house instead of going back to the garage.

Rebel knew his brother well. He had a feeling that once the fact that he and Dusty had a son sank in, angry or not, Judd was going to kick himself for letting Dusty go.

When that happened, Judd was going to need someone to talk some sense into him and keep him from going off half-cocked.

Glancing across the kitchen at Judd, whose hair was still damp from his shower, Rebel noticed that he looked as weary as Rebel felt.

"Here." Rebel walked to the table and placed a steaming hot cup of coffee in front of his brother. "It's probably not as good as Gypsy makes it, but she's had more practice."

"No worries, bro. It could taste like mud and I wouldn't care ... as long as it keeps me awake. I feel like I could sleep for a week."

"You and me both, man," Rebel said wearily. "My guess is that Blackie feels the same way. We'll be lucky to see him by Tuesday."

"So much for getting any work done this week." Judd chuckled, but the humor didn't reach his eyes.

It's already hit him. He already regrets letting Dusty walk out of his life.

Knowing it'd be much better to let Judd bring up the subject, Rebel sat in companionable silence with his brother, sipping coffee.

Five minutes passed—which had to be a record—before Judd finally spoke. "What do you think, bro, honestly, is it really possible that Dad could be alive?"

Rebel looked at his brother's face, which was lined with worry. This time, he wished he had all the answers. "Like I said earlier, Judd, anything's possible. But if he's been alive for the past twenty years, why hasn't he surfaced before now? Why wait so long? Why even fake your own death in the first place? Unfortunately, we'll probably never have answers to any of those questions."

Setting his coffee cup on the table, Judd pushed it in front of him, abandoning the hot liquid. "Until he shows up here."

Unfortunately, that was probably the truth.

"We can't put our lives on hold just because someone dangerous may or may not come after us. We'll just have to be extra careful, that's all. The rest of the family needs to be told what's going on, just in case. And Gypsy, Angel, and the kids will have to hang out together during the day while us guys are at the garage."

"Dusty may have been angry at you when she left here, but she loves you, Judd, we all heard her say so. This whole mess started because she was trying to protect you; to keep you safe from someone who wants to hurt you. If she runs into trouble, or knows trouble's headed this way, she'll get in touch with one of us."

"Ha!" Gingerly touching the tender spot on his temple, Judd actually laughed. "Don't count on it, Reb. Cracking someone in the temple with the butt of a gun doesn't exactly say, 'I love you'. Dusty doesn't want to help me anymore, bro. Hell, I'm not even sure I'd want her help if she was willing to give it."

"What! Why the hell not?"

"Because, Rebel! How many days was Dusty in town, three? I'm so damn tired I can't even remember. During her reluctant stay, the only time she told the truth was when she was forced to. Even then, she still kept things from us."

"Who the hell knows what she's hiding? Maybe there isn't anyone after me at all. I'm not denying that Jay's my son; he looks enough like me to be a McCassey. But Dusty could've come here for any number of reasons. Maybe she needs money and figured that since we have a son, I'd give it to her. Crying and carrying on about someone wanting to hurt me—acting like she's upset about it—would've been a good way to fool me."

"Did it work?"

"It would've ... if I hadn't found out she was hiding so many things."

"What about the fire?" Rebel asked, "how do you explain that? The two of you could've died—would've died—if it weren't for the tunnel. If she came here just to extort money from you, Judd, she wouldn't have put her own life in danger. She wouldn't have risked leaving Jay without either of his parents."

The dark expression that covered Judd's face told Rebel that he'd made his point. Mentally patting himself on the back for accomplishing the task of making his hard-headed brother think, Rebel relaxed in his chair.

Judd jumped out of his and raked a frustrated hand through his still-damp, dark hair. "Just whose side are you on, Rebel?"

"Yours."

"Well, you could've fooled me!"

This time, Rebel stood, too. "Aw, come on, Judd! I'm not going to waste my breath repeating everything that's gone on this week; everything Dusty's told us. But take a step back and look at the facts! You have to admit that some of that shit she just could not have made up! Something's going on. I don't care what you say, that girl needs help. Obviously, she's too damn stubborn to admit it."

Throwing his hands in the air as if he was giving up on the entire situation, Judd turned his back on Rebel. "Then that's her problem!"

"No!" Rebel stepped forward and reached out, grabbing hold of Judd's shoulders and not-so-gently turning him around. "It's your problem, too! You know you love her, Judd. And if something happens to that girl—or your son—because

you and Dusty are both too goddamn stubborn to deal with each other, you're going to hate yourself for the rest of your life!"

"Fuck you, Rebel!" Reaching forward, Judd put his hands on Rebel's chest and attempted to give him a hard shove. Unfortunately, his sore leg prevented him from putting weight on it and getting any leverage. "I don't need this!"

Spinning on his heel, Judd limped over and grabbed his boots, swung open the front door, then slammed it shut after leaving.

"Oh yes you did, big brother," Rebel said from his spot in the kitchen, "you needed it more than you know."

* * * *

Dusty had known that if she stayed in one place long enough, the McCassey brothers would eventually find her; which was why she hadn't been surprised when they'd shown up at the bus station.

To tell the truth, she'd been relieved to see them.

Her situation had become too complicated and dangerous to handle alone. She needed help, and who better to give it to her than the three men she trusted and respected the most?

When they'd all sat down on the bench, Dusty had been ready to tell them everything. She'd known exactly where she wanted to start her story, and what she was going to use as the final piece of information. She would've told them the most important thing last. That way they'd hear everything else she had to say, too.

But then Judd had made that arrogant comment about him and his brothers being able to handle anything. And after he yelled at her for keeping his son from him, without even asking why she'd done it, Dusty lost control of her temper.

Ever since she was eighteen years old, Dusty had solved all her problems by running away. That had been the only way she'd been able to survive. Unfortunately, it had become such a habit that she no longer realized when she did it. This time she had realized it, though ... too damn late.

Judd had a right to be upset.

After all, he'd missed the first nine years of his son's life. And although she honestly believed he was wasn't ready to be a father ten years ago, Dusty had talked about Judd and the rest of the McCasseys every day since Jay was born.

She'd made sure her son knew who and where he came from, and had taught him that being Judd Dolan McCassey, Jr. was something to be proud of. Jay knew all about his family in Hagerstown, and loved Judd as much as if the two of them had seen each other every day of their lives.

But Judd didn't know any of that ... because Dusty had never gotten around to telling him.

She'd meant to, but he'd made her so angry that she'd lost her train of thought and completely forgotten everything she wanted to say.

An hour ago, she'd had three men willing to help her.

Now, she was on her own once again. She'd known the minute she left the bus station that she'd made a mistake. But it was too late to turn back now. Judd was probably in no mood to talk to her ... at least rationally. Why would he be?

She wouldn't want to talk to anyone who'd cracked her temple with the butt of a gun, either.

There was a good chance that the man who wanted to hurt Judd and Jay believed that she and Judd died in the fire; which meant he was probably well on his way to Virginia.

If Dusty wanted to save her son, she had to get moving.

Knowing she couldn't go back to the bus station, she realized her only other travel option was to drive. Using the stolen motorcycle she'd ridden into town on wasn't an option. The McCasseys had stored it in the pit at the garage and she'd never be able to retrieve it by herself. She didn't have a car or truck, either ... but she knew who did.

Judd was going to want to kill her for what she was about to do, but he was going to have to stand in line ... there was someone else who wanted a crack at her first.

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Chapter 23

In the week since Dusty had walked out of the bus station, stolen Judd's pickup truck, and disappeared without a trace, Judd had become nearly impossible to be around.

Blackie had sympathized with his younger brother as much as he could, doing his best to ignore Judd's shorter-than-normal fuse, his constant sarcastic remarks, and endless bad mood. It hadn't been easy, since the brothers had been working so much overtime to catch up on the work they'd missed while chasing Dusty all over town.

Finally, Blackie had had enough.

As if working early on a Sunday morning when he'd rather be lying in bed with his wife wasn't bad enough, Blackie had been less than thrilled to discover that his set of socket wrenches—which he'd needed first thing that morning—was missing.

When he heard Judd pull the tow truck into the parking lot, Blackie placed the wrench he'd been working with back inside his tool cabinet. After digging a pack of cigarettes out of the side pocket of his mechanics coveralls, he lit up and inhaled deeply, hoping the nicotine would help to soothe his anger.

If it didn't work, Judd would be wise to start running for his life ... now.

Walking out through one of the open bay doors, Blackie stood by the soda machine and finished his cigarette while he waited for Judd to unload the car he'd just towed in. When he was finished, Blackie flung the butt to the ground and strode

toward his brother, who had started making his way toward the garage.

The brothers met ten feet from the building. When they were directly in front of each other, Blackie extended his arms and placed his hands on Judd's chest, giving him a mighty shove. "Where the fuck are they, asshole?"

Obviously not expecting an attack to come in the form of his brother, Judd fell to the ground, but was back on his feet almost instantly; giving Blackie a shove in return. "Where is what? What the hell are you talking about!"

Blackie smiled inwardly. He could tell Judd was looking for a fight; his eyes were wide, his fists were clenched, and he was having a hard time standing still. Normally, Blackie didn't like to physically fight with his brothers. Rolling around on the ground throwing half-hearted punches at one another was one thing, but he'd always been much bigger, and outweighed each of them by a good sixty pounds. Judd and Rebel could do more than hold their own in a fight, but he never wanted to take even the slightest chance of hurting them.

But this time, he was going to make an exception.

Knocking some sense into Judd was going to feel damn good.

"I'm talkin' about your miserable excuse for a brain, and my socket wrenches! Dammit, Judd, can't you ever put back the things you borrow?"

"Socket wrenches?" Judd shouted in disbelief, "you pushed me to the ground because I didn't return your damn tools?"

"No! I pushed you because I'm sick to death of your piss-ass attitude! You've been mopin' around here all week causin'

trouble 'cause you're feelin' sorry for yourself over what happened with Dusty. I've been wantin' to pound on you since Tuesday ... you not returnin' my tools was just a good excuse to finally do it."

"Lay off, Blackie! I'm not in the mood!"

Blackie tried to push him again, but Judd stood his ground this time. Blackie smirked at his brother. "Oh yeah? Well that's too bad, little brother. Because one more day of you actin' this way, and you ain't gonna see your next birthday."

"I'm not impressed with your sense of humor, Blackie."

Judd tried to shove his way past, but Blackie refused to let him by. "I ain't tryin' to impress you, Judd. I'm tryin' not to kill you."

"What the hell is your problem?"

"My problem is that you've been on everyone's last nerve all fuckin' week, Judd! Dusty's gone! After the fight you two had at the bus station and the things you said to each other, she probably ain't comin' back. Get over it, and get yourself under control!"

Not more than a second passed before Judd let out a guttural growl and launched himself at Blackie. Having known it was coming, Blackie was ready. Opening his arms, he caught Judd as he slammed into his chest, and they both went down.

As worked up as Judd was, Blackie had to struggle to get leverage on his brother. They rolled around on the blacktop for a good minute, throwing punches at each other. Judd's left hook to the side of his brother's face caught Blackie with his guard down and drew blood.

Momentarily stunned, Blackie froze and looked his brother dead in the eye. "Is that the way you want to play, you sneaky little son of a bitch?"

Before Judd had a chance to answer, Blackie had rolled him over and landed two fierce blows to his abdomen. Before he could get in a third, he was tackled from behind; the force causing his body to fly forward. Lucky for him, he turned his head to the side in time to avoid landing face first onto the blacktop.

Blackie didn't need to look at who'd attacked him to know it was Rebel. Not only were they the only three people at the garage, but ever since he was a little kid, Rebel couldn't stand to be left out of anything that involved his two older brothers.

Thoroughly amused, Blackie reached behind him and grabbed a handful of Rebel's coveralls. Using all his strength, he whipped his youngest brother around until he landed on the ground with a thud. "Think I can't take the two of you?" he asked, hearing the humor in his own voice.

For the next few minutes, Blackie, Judd, and Rebel were nothing but a tangled mass of flailing and swinging arms, legs, and very loud grunts.

Halfway through, Blackie could hear himself, as well as his brothers, panting and breathing heavily. Fighting and horsing around with Judd and Rebel was still fun, but not so much when they were rolling around on concrete. Next time he attacked one of them, he'd do it in the grass. It was softer.

"What the hell is going on out here?" Rebel's voice was strained as he tried to push Blackie off his chest.

Blackie moved off Rebel just enough so his brother could breathe, but kept him pinned to the ground. "Judd started it!"

"Bullshit," Judd called from the bottom of the pile, "Blackie came out here and attacked me for not returning his tools!"

Blackie punched Judd again; this time square in the jaw. "Wrong, asshole! I told you it was because you've been gettin' on my damn nerves all week and I've had enough!"

In a combined effort, Judd and Rebel reached up and grabbed two handfuls of Blackie's waist-length hair. As he shifted his weight and leaned down to lessen the pain as they pulled, the boys were able to free themselves enough to roll out from underneath him. Suddenly finding himself at the bottom of the pile, Blackie would've been in for it if they hadn't been interrupted by a small, but powerful voice.

"Hey!" they all heard someone call.

When a bucket of freezing cold water rained down, soaking all three of them, Blackie, Judd, and Rebel stopped immediately.

"What the fu—" Blackie started to say as he swiped his long, wet hair out of his face, stopping mid-sentence when Rebel punched him in the arm. "Dammit, Rebel!"

"Shut up, man," Rebel whispered, "it's a kid."

"I'm looking for my mom," the boy said coldly. "Who's seen her?"

Once they got a good look at him, all three brothers stared wide-eyed at the husky boy with fluffy, little-too-long, loose, curly dark hair and royal blue eyes.

It was the boy from the picture Dusty had shown them.
It was Judd's son.

* * * *

Blackie, Judd, and Rebel all got to their feet.

Dry-mouthed and feeling as though he was moving in slow motion, Judd stepped forward, pried his tongue off the roof of his mouth, and extended his hand. "Judd McCassey."

"Me, too," the boy said cautiously, giving Judd a good, firm handshake, "but my mom calls me Jay."

Hardly able to believe that he was staring into the eyes of his son, Judd swallowed the lump in his throat and ran a hand through his damp hair. Motioning behind him, he said, "These are my brother's, Blackie and Rebel."

Both men leaned forward and offered a hand, which Jay shook.

When the boy turned his attention back to him, Judd couldn't seem to find his voice. Thankfully, Rebel stepped in. "You say you're looking for your mom?"

"Yeah, Dusty Zamora. She promised she'd be home five days ago but never showed. She's never broken a promise to me before..."

Judd's heart fell into the pit of his stomach. "She never showed?" he asked.

Jay shook his head to confirm what he'd just said. During their fight at the bus station, Dusty had told them that she never broke a promise.

She'd promised their son she'd be home five days ago.

She never showed.

She had to be in trouble.

Jay turned his attention to Judd. "Is that all you have to say? 'She never showed'? I just told you that!"

Sighing in frustration, the boy turned his back on Judd and began walking away. "I knew I shouldn't have come here! I knew you wouldn't care!"

That snapped Judd out of his daze. He thinks I don't care? "Hey! Get back here!"

The boy continued walking. Unsure of what to do and feeling like a little kid himself, Judd turned around and looked at his brothers.

Rebel made a forward motion with his arms and mouthed, "Go!"

Judd tentatively stepped forward and called out in the deepest, most authoritative voice he could come up with. "Jay!"

Jay finally stopped, but kept his back to Judd.

"Don't you ever think I don't care about your mom! Do you understand me? I love her!"

Jay whipped his body around and faced his father. Judd thought Jay was ready to talk rationally, but there was fire in those McCassey royal blue eyes of his; the boy was ready to battle. He wore the same angry look that Judd had seen on both of his brothers, and every one of his cousins at one time or another.

"Then how come you're here and she's not?" Jay demanded. "Why didn't you come back to Virginia, too? She said you were tough! She said you saved her once, and that you always watched out for her when she was a kid. If you'd

been with Mom when she left here, nothing would've happened to her! This is all your fault!"

His fault? No, there was no way he was taking the blame for this one. He'd tried to help Dusty. She hadn't wanted any part of it. But Jay didn't need to know that. The love he had for Dusty was obvious; he didn't need to know that she'd turned down the offer of being helped by all three McCassey brothers.

"Calm down!" Judd yelled harsher than he meant to, causing the boy to take a step back. "Who said anything happened to her?" he asked next, a bit more calmly.

"I did! I know her! She's never broken her word. Not once! Something had to have happened for her not to have gotten home when she said she would."

Judd did his best to soften the tone of his voice when he asked, "When was the last time you heard from her?"

Apparently his change in demeanor worked. Jay's features relaxed a little, losing the 'I'm-ready-to-fight' look that proved he was a true McCassey. "A week ago. She called last Sunday morning and said she was on her way home. It was only supposed to take her two days. She should've been back five days ago."

Oh, no. Something's wrong.

Suddenly unable to find his voice, Judd wondered about the best way to comfort the boy. With the exception of his nieces and nephews, Judd didn't have much experience with kids.

Then it hit him. Comfort Jay the way you wanted to be comforted when you were a kid.

Might as well give it a shot.

Stepping forward, Judd put his hands on the boy's shoulders and pulled him close. Closing his eyes and resting his chin on the top of Jay's head, Judd reveled in the indescribable feeling of holding his son for the first time. In that moment, all Judd knew was that this nine-year-old boy was his, and he loved him already. He wanted to shelter Jay and keep him safe from the littlest things that could hurt him.

Most of all, he wanted to be the kind of father that his son could trust and rely on. The kind of father his brothers were to their kids.

Slowly, tentatively, Jay lifted his arms and wrapped them around Judd's waist.

Nothing, Judd thought as Jay clung tightly to him, nothing will ever compare to this feeling.

After a few silent moments, Judd backed away and knelt down. When he and Jay were face to face, he was finally able to speak. "Tell me what you know."

Jay shrugged. "I don't know anything except what I just told you. My mom's never broken a promise," he repeated, "never. Something's wrong, Da..." Jay suddenly stopped after sounding as if he'd been about to call Judd, Dad. The boy looked as though he was afraid Judd would reject him. "Something's wrong," he repeated, leaving out the word, Dad. "I know it."

"We'll find her, son," he reassured Jay, hoping his use of the word, 'son' would tell Jay it was okay for him to call Judd, Dad. "Let's go inside."

Jay seemed to relax a little more. He looked relieved to have someone on his side; someone who would shoulder the bulk of the burden he was trying to carry on his young shoulders.

As the group began to head into the garage, Judd stopped and looked around the parking lot. "Wait a minute, how'd you get here?"

"I rode."

"You're nine years old. How many friends do you have that drive?"

"None. Church brought me up. Aunt Jessie's doing a lot better now, so he said it was okay to leave her for while."

Blackie suddenly reached out and grabbed Jay by the shoulders. "Jessie's alive?"

Looking very intimidated, Jay nodded and tried to take a step closer to Judd, but Blackie wouldn't let him move.

"Yeah," he said shakily, "but she almost didn't make it."

"What happened?" Blackie demanded.

"She was really sick. The doctors said she a bad case of pneumonia ... one of the worst they'd ever seen. She just came home from the hospital yesterday morning. That's why Church was finally able to bring me up here. He wanted to do it earlier, but he wouldn't leave Aunt Jessie while she was still in the hospital because the doctors didn't know if she was going to make it."

Blackie let go of Jay and stood, shaking his head. "Damn, all that worryin' Dusty was doin' over her sister and she was just laid up in the hospital. Why'd Church bring you here?"

"He married Aunt Jessie before I was born, so he's been with us for a long time. He knows my mom really well, too, and knows that if she says she's going to be somewhere at a certain time, she's there. He knows something's wrong, but can't look for her because he has to take care of Aunt Jessie. But he did say that The Devil and his brothers would find her." Jay looked at all three McCassey brothers, his gaze lingering a few moments on each one. "Church told me you guys always know what to do."

Blackie raised a brow and smiled, changing the subject slightly. "You rode all the way up here from southern Virginia on the back of a Fat Boy?"

Obviously now feeling much more at ease, Jay smirked in return and mimicked his uncle's stance. "Is there any other way to ride?"

"No, kid, I guess there ain't. Where'd Church disappear to?"

"He had to get back to Aunt Jessie, but said he'd come back in a few days if you guys needed him. Then he said something about wild women and mom being more of a renegade than he ever was; whatever the hell that means."

Laughing, Blackie playfully hit the side of Jay's arm. "Goddamn if you ain't just like your father, boy," he said, winking at Judd, who was staring back at Blackie wondering how the hell he seemed to have gotten through to Jay. "You always talk like that?"

Jay cocked an eyebrow at his uncle. "Do you always talk like that?"

Blackie laughed once more and changed the subject again. "We better get inside and figure out what the hell is goin' on. You know more about this whole thing than you're lettin' on, don't you?" Blackie asked Jay.

"I know some stuff. I'll tell you everything if you think it'll help find my mom."

"You'll tell us anyway, kid, whether it helps us find Dusty or not. This ain't no game."

Turning away from the small group, Blackie walked toward the garage, the other three following close behind.

Once they were inside, Judd told Jay to sit at the card table while the brothers closed all three bay doors.

Normally, in situations like this, Judd would turn to one of his brothers and ask what their next move was going to be. But those days were over. He had a son to take care of now, and he had to find Dusty. It was time for him to take charge. This time, he was calling the shots. "Go get the envelope," he ordered Rebel.

Blackie threw him a sideways glance. "What envelope?"

"The one Dusty left for Rebel in my dresser drawer. She wanted him to have it in case—" he stopped abruptly and glanced at Jay, who was staring at him and seemed to be hanging on his every word.

"In case anything happened to her?" Jay finished his father's sentence.

"Uh ... yeah."

"She left me one, too," Jay said, digging into the front pocket of his blue jeans. "Here." He handed the note to Judd. "I already knew everything it said."

Judd nodded as he scanned Dusty's brief message. All it said was that if anything happened to her, Jay was to go with Church, who would bring him to Hagerstown. Judd couldn't help smiling when he read the last line she'd written, telling Jay to behave himself.

"You have no idea what's in Rebel's note, do you?" Jay asked.

Judd looked up and caught Rebel staring at him. "No," he answered curtly, then nodded to Rebel, who turned and started for the metal stairs.

Trying to read the expression on Jay's face, Judd couldn't tell whether his son was upset, worried, or just acting like a typical nine-year-old ... whatever they were like now-a-days. "This doesn't mean anything happened to her," Judd tried to reassure the boy, "but there could be a clue in whatever she wrote that might help us decide where to start looking for her."

Looking up at Judd, Jay nodded, crossed his arms in front of his chest, and slouched in his chair. "My mom's tough," he told Judd and Blackie, "and she's really smart. I never get away with anything. It's like she has eyes in back of her head or something. She can even shoot a pea off a fencepost with her .44. She'll be okay."

Judd chuckled quietly at Jay's description of Dusty. He wondered if the boy knew that Judd had been the one who taught her how to use a gun. "She's tough, all right," he confirmed. "She'll be fine until we find her." When Jay didn't respond, Judd added, "We will find her, Jay. I promise."

That got his attention. "Really?"

"Really."

"But the guy who wants to hurt her is—"

Before Jay could finish his sentence, Rebel was back with the letter. The boy stopped talking, and Judd turned his attention to his brother. Seeing that Rebel had already read it, Judd took the note and scanned it.

Hi Judd

I addressed this letter to Rebel because you and I both know he's more likely to think before he reacts. Sorry, but I didn't want you flying off the handle and doing something out of anger that was going to wind up getting you killed.

I hope that you and I had the chance to discuss this while I was in town, but just in case we didn't, I have information that you need to know about. I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner, but I was afraid; afraid for you and Jay.

A year after Jay was born, we were out with Jessie and Church and ran into your father. I know you think he's dead, but Judd, I swear to you, he's very much alive ... and more dangerous than ever.

He took one look at Jay and knew immediately that he was yours. That was the first time he threatened to hurt you. He told me he was watching you and your brothers. He said that if I ever tried to contact you, not only would he tell Sheriff Johnson where my sisters and I were hiding, but he'd also kill you and then come after Jay.

The thought of something happening to you scared me to death. I even tried to bargain with him ... trade my life for yours by turning myself into the sheriff. I was willing to go to prison if he'd let me give Jay to you to raise, but he refused.

Now I know that the whole thing was just a game to him; that he harassed me constantly—dropping in and out of our lives every six months or so—continuously threatening you and our son for no other reason than it amused him. Church almost caught him once, but only wound up getting shot for his trouble.

If I'm either missing or dead right now, chances are that he's behind it.

I'd tell you not to put yourself in danger to find me, but I know it wouldn't do any good. So instead, I'll tell you what little I know ... maybe it'll be of some help.

Your dad goes by his name, Dolan. No last name. If you do some asking around, a few of the old Renegades, guys who were members even before Blackie, might be able to tell you where he is. I'm sorry, I don't know any names, but Church might. If you can find Dragon, he might be able to help you, too.

You and Jay have always been the most important things in my life. I'm sorry it took me so long to tell you about him, but please believe that I did it because I love you both so much. He knows all about who he is and where he comes from, and he's proud to be a McCassey. He's funny and smart and knows the score, so you don't have to hide much from him. Watch him, though, he's slick ... just like you were. And be careful, he's allergic to strawberries.

Below is information about a savings account I started for him when he was a baby. Your name is on there, too, so you won't have any trouble getting access to the money.

Jay needs you, Judd. He's a good kid, and you'll be a great father.

I love you, Judd Dolan McCassey. Forever.

Dusty Rose

"Son of a bitch!" Judd crumpled up the letter and let it fly, then walked into Rose's office and slammed the door so hard that the glass shattered.

Leaning on Rose's desk, he bowed his head and breathed deeply, trying to get himself under control.

His father was alive.

The bastard that had made the first fifteen years of his life a living hell wasn't dead, but alive and well, and still doing his best to make Judd's life miserable.

Because of his father, not only had Judd and Dusty lost years they could've spent together, but he'd also been robbed of the first nine years of his son's life.

I'm going to find you, Old Man. And God help you when I do.

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Chapter 24

Jay jumped at the sound of the door slamming and turned away when the glass shattered, trying to avoid the shards that flew across the room.

Was his father angry, sad, or both?

It was hard to tell.

Jay stared at the office door, wondering if he should go talk to him.

"Go ahead," his uncle, Rebel, told him. "He'd probably like to talk to you."

Jay wasn't so sure that was true. His father was upset.

Maybe he didn't want to be bothered.

Maybe he thought Jay would just be in the way.

Maybe he should stay right where he was and let his father come to him.

"He doesn't bite," Rebel assured him.

But Jay wasn't so sure about that, either.

"Leave the kid alone, Reb," Blackie said as he picked the note up off the floor and scanned it. When he was finished, he folded it in half and laid it on the table. "We've got other problems. Big problems. Have you read this?"

Rebel nodded. "Yeah."

"So it's true. That worthless bastard really is alive."

"Looks that way."

Jay knew they were talking about their father—his grandfather. He knew the whole story because his mom had

told him. They should know it, too, Jay thought to himself. It might help them find Mom.

Rising from his chair, he ignored the stares from his uncles and slowly walked to the office door. Doing his best to sidestep the glass, he twisted the knob and walked inside. The sight of his father leaning against the desk with his head buried in his hands made Jay feel like he wanted to do something to make him feel better.

So he did the only thing he knew how. "Dad?"

Judd glanced up, a surprised look on his face.

"I think we should talk. I know some things; things Mom probably didn't say in her letter."

"What kind of things?"

"I think maybe Uncle Blackie and Uncle Rebel should hear this, too. Some of it is about them."

Judd nodded and followed Jay out to the card table. When all four of them were sitting, Jay read over his mother's letter so he'd know what his dad did and didn't know. Then he began his story; concentrating harder than ever before, making sure not to leave anything out.

"I've always known about your father wanting to hurt you and me," he told Judd, "Mom told me everything."

"Jesus ... everything?"

"Yeah. She told me all about how bad your father treated you guys when you were kids, and how mean he was to your mom. She explained what he said to her, and how she really believed he'd hurt us if she didn't do what he said."

"I wouldn't have let that ba—my father hurt you, Jay," Judd told him. "If I'd known he was still alive and how he was

threatening you and your mom, I would've come to Virginia and brought you two back here. I'm a grown man, son. He can't hurt me anymore."

Jay nodded and sat up in the chair a little straighter. "I know. My mom has talked about you guys and the rest of the McCasseys so much that I feel like I know all of you. And Church talks about you," he said, pointing to Blackie, "all the time. I know how tough you all are. You wouldn't have any trouble handling your father if you guys stuck together, I know it."

"So why didn't she tell me what was going on?"

"She was scared, Dad." Jay paused, waiting to see if his father was going to have a reaction to being called, 'Dad' again. When he saw the corners of Judd's mouth curve up into a smile, he knew he'd done the right thing. "Just like in her letter, she said that you and me were the most important things in the world to her."

"Have things always been this bad for you?"

Hearing the crack of Judd's voice made Jay sad. He could tell that his father loved his mother, and wished he could do something to make his father feel better. Unfortunately, the only thing he could do to help was tell him everything he knew.

"No. They didn't start getting really bad until I turned eight. Your dad broke into the house one day and tried to take me. Mom was asleep because she was working nights, and I was in the living room with Aunt Jessie. When your dad dragged me outside, Jessie ran and got Mom."

"What happened then?"

"Mom shot him in the arm. He was still holding me and everything, but her aim was perfect. She didn't kill him because after he dropped me, she ran over to help me and he wound up getting away."

The loud noise of Judd's fist hitting the table caused Jay to jump. "Why the hell didn't she just call me then?"

Jay took a deep breath.

He could do this.

He had to ... for his mom.

"That's what she didn't say in her letter, Dad."

"What didn't she say?"

"She left out the part about your dad threatening Uncle Rebel's family. He said that he'd heard Rebel had a beautiful wife and little girl, and that he'd love to get his hands on them. He said he was heading back up to Hagerstown, and if Mom tried to contact you, he'd kill the little girl, and—"

"And what?" Rebel asked.

Oh man, did he really have to say it? "Enjoy the experience of being with a hot red—"

"I get the point," Rebel interrupted, saving Jay the embarrassment of finishing the sentence. "I'm just surprised Dusty believed any of the filth that came out of his mouth."

Jay glanced at his uncle—the one he'd heard was a great leader. "She was afraid not to, Uncle Rebel."

"I don't understand why, though. Everyone who knew him knew that he was full of shit. He hardly ever did one damn thing he said he was going to do."

"Yeah, Reb," Blackie added, "but Dusty couldn't have been more than eight years old when Dad supposedly died. All she

knew was that he'd been a violent man. She wouldn't have known that even though he threatened people all the time, he rarely ever followed through."

"True," Rebel agreed. "She probably never heard about the numerous people he'd vowed to kill but wound up never bothering again. Sorry, Jay," he apologized. "Finish what you were saying."

The looks on his father's and uncle's faces were becoming scarier by the minute. If Jay didn't think telling them all this would help his mom, he would've stopped talking already. "Well, he followed through when he threatened us. The first time, he said that he'd burn our house down around us. Mom didn't believe him and shouted some smartass remark in his face. A week later, our house caught fire in the middle of the night and Aunt Benni died. Mom pulled me out of bed and left me in the front yard, then ran back inside and tried to save her sister, but she couldn't."

"Is that how she got the burn on her arm?" Judd asked.

"Yeah. Mom still blames herself for that. She said it was her fault that Aunt Benni died ... that she'd failed two of her sisters, and that's why they were both dead."

"So she blames herself for both Courtney's and Benni's deaths," Blackie stated. "That's a hell of a burden for someone to carry around all by themselves."

"She just doesn't want anyone else to get hurt, Uncle Blackie." Jay hesitated a moment before adding, "And she doesn't want you to go back to prison."

Blackie squinted at him. "Why would I go back to prison?" he asked suspiciously.

"I don't know. Your father said that he could fix it so you'd spend the rest of your life in prison. Mom didn't want that to happen. She said you were a good man and deserved to live a happy life."

"So she allowed the two of you to suffer because she was protectin' all of us?"

"I never suffered!" Jay yelled. He wasn't sure, but it sounded like Blackie had just insulted his mother. "She did it because she loves all of you. She said that other than me and her sisters, you guys were the only other family she had!"

Blackie put his hands in the air. "Hold on, kid, I wasn't sayin' nothin' bad about your mom. What you said just surprised me, that's all."

Judd focused his attention on Jay. "All right, so we know now that our father is alive and he wants to hurt us. Fine. We'll deal with it. What about the Drifter's, Jay? Do you know anything about them?"

Jay shrugged. "Just that one of them killed Aunt Alex; then Aunt Jessie killed him."

Jay bowed his head and fell silent after that. It had been a mistake to start this conversation. He couldn't go on. He couldn't tell them the rest.

"Jay?" his father said.

He couldn't answer. It sounded like his father knew there was more...

"Jay?" Judd said again.

He had to answer. If he ever wanted to see his mom again, his father and uncles needed to know everything. "Yeah?"

"When was the last time you saw your mom?"

He knows what I'm about to say. Why else would he ask if he didn't know? "Six months ago."

Judd jumped up, causing his chair to fly backward. Pointing his index finger at Jay, he hollered, "Six months! Boy, you'd better tell me the rest of what's going on. Right now!"

Holding his chin up, Jay took a deep breath.

He was happy to finally know his dad, but he missed his mom. He just wanted this to be over. Fighting the urge to cry, he looked at Judd. "The last time I saw my mom, she, Jessie, and Alex went out riding. They used to do that every now and then; just the three of them. Usually, it was just for a few days. They'd pack some clothes and get on their bikes and go."

"What about you?" Judd asked. "Where were you?"

"I always stayed with Church. He'd put me on the school bus in the morning and meet me when I got off. We'd do guy things while the girls were off doing their thing. But after Alex was killed, Mom and Jessie never came back. The Drifters were chasing them all over the place and they were afraid that if they came home, the Drifters would follow."

"They would have," Blackie told Judd. "Dusty and Jessie did the right thing. If the Drifters had known about Jay, they woulda grabbed him just for the fun of it."

Judd nodded.

"A couple weeks ago, Aunt Jessie came home. She rode up on her bike in the middle of the night. Alone. She was really sick; burning up with a fever and having a hard time

breathing. She told us what happened at the bar where she and my mom got separated, but didn't get a chance to tell us that they were supposed to meet here because she passed out.

"Church rushed her to the hospital and she almost died. He sat there with her for over a week. When she finally woke up, she told us the rest of the story. The next morning, my mom called and said she was coming home. She cried when I told her Aunt Jessie was alive." He looked at Judd and was almost crying himself when he added, "She never cries."

"She wasn't having a good day," Judd explained. "We had a fight that morning and she was upset."

"I figured it was because she said we had to move again. She told me that your father had found the two of you and tried to kill you."

Judd retrieved his chair and sat down again. "She actually told you that?"

"I told you, Dad. Mom doesn't hide stuff like that from me. She always tells me the things I need to know."

"What else did she say?"

"Every time she called over the past six months, she promised she'd be home by Halloween. This time she said that she was leaving Hagerstown and she would be home sometime Monday. I was supposed to be packed and ready to go.

"When she didn't show, Jessie was worried right away. Church said that if she wasn't back by yesterday, he'd bring me up here because it was time you and your brothers knew what was going on."

"Is that everything?"

Jay nodded. He couldn't think of anything else. "Yeah."

Judd rounded the table and grasped Jay's arm, pulling him to his feet and then into a hug that nearly swallowed the boy. "You did good, Jay," he said. "All this is some pretty heavy stuff for a kid to have to deal with. It makes me proud to have such a smart son. And I'm proud of your mom, too. When this is all over, I'm going to kick her ass for trying to handle everything on her own and not coming to me for help. Then I'm going to marry her."

Not bothering to hide his excitement, Jay backed away from his father and jumped up and down. "You mean it!"

"Damn right, I mean it. But there's a lot that has to be done between now and then. We need to find out where my father's holding her. And the sooner we do that, the better."

Suddenly, Jay no longer felt like celebrating. He didn't want anything to happen to his mother ... especially not now.

Not when his parents could finally be together.

Not now that there was a chance they could be a real family.

Jay looked up to meet Judd's gaze. He looked him dead in the eye, knowing his father would tell him the truth. "Do ... do you think he'd kill her?"

"Nope. I think he did this just to get our attention. He wants to face us, but obviously wants it to be on his own terms. He's probably beating his head against the wall wondering why we haven't come after her yet."

"Then let's go!"

"Hold it, Jay. The only place you're going is to stay with Gypsy and Angel. We can't take you along."

They were going to keep him from helping to rescue his mother? "What? I'm not staying with women and babies while you guys go off and do man stuff. No way!"

"This ain't no game of hide-and-go-seek we're playin' here, boy!" Blackie hollered, surprising all of them. "And it ain't nothin' a nine-year-old kid ought to be any part of!"

Jay was more than a little afraid of his enormous, powerful looking uncle, but he wasn't backing down. "Uncle Blackie—"

It was Blackie's turn to jump out of his chair. He leaned over until he was face to face with Jay. "Uncle Blackie, nothin', Little Judd! Christ, you're just as damn ornery as he was," Blackie said, motioning to Judd, "when he was little. It's too dangerous, you ain't goin', and that's final."

"Couldn't you use an extra gun?" Jay asked, in one last attempt to change his uncle's mind.

"What the hell do you know about guns?" Judd demanded.

Turning around to look at his father, Jay swelled with pride when he said, "A lot. Mom taught me to shoot a couple years ago. I'm dead on with a .22 and a .38. I even beat her once during target practice last summer."

Blackie chuckled and gave Jay a playful punch in the arm. "Don't ever let her forget that, kid."

"I won't."

"Good, but you still ain't goin' with us. Judd, talk some sense into your kid while Reb and me clean up that glass. Rose ain't gonna be too happy when she comes in here

tomorrow mornin' and finds out that the only thing she had to separate our nasty mouths from her ears is now missin'."

When they were alone, Jay followed his father across the garage to the set of metal stairs. They both sat down and faced each other.

"You really can't go with us," Judd told his son, "it's too dangerous."

Jay had already come to terms with being left behind. Truthfully, he never expected to be allowed to go, but figured it was worth asking. "I know. But what am I supposed to do?"

"You'll have to stay with Gypsy, Angel, and the rest of the kids."

Why women and babies? "But—"

"But I'm going to give you a job to do. If you think you can handle it, that is."

"I can handle anything," Jay told his dad, because he really believed that he could.

Jay listened closely as Judd told him about Gypsy and Angel, and that Angel was a crack shot, but Gypsy couldn't shoot her way out of a paper bag. "That doesn't mean she isn't good at other things," his dad explained, "but she doesn't really like guns. So if something happens at the house while me and my brothers are gone, it'll be up to you to help Angel. Do you think you can handle that?"

He knew he could. "I'll help her, Dad, I promise."

Judd ruffled his hair and smiled, making Jay proud, really proud, to be his father's son.

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Chapter 25

Dusty couldn't believe her luck ... or the lack of it.

At first, she thought it was a cop who'd tapped on the driver's side window as she was in the parking lot of the garage hotwiring Judd's truck.

A closer look confirmed she was wrong.

What's he still doing in town, she wondered. Why isn't he halfway to Virginia?

Dolan McCassey smirked as if he wanted to say, 'Ha! I finally caught you.' But Dusty didn't care. Believe it or not, she was actually happy to see him. The fact that he was here in Hagerstown meant he wasn't in Virginia trying to hurt Jay.

Her son was safe, which made Dusty ... happy.

Not surprised when Dolan opened the passenger side door and climbed into the truck, Dusty stopped just short of crossing the ignition and battery wires to get the truck started, and lounged back in the seat. "What the hell do you want?"

"I've been lookin' all over town for you, bitch. Did you like the little, 'welcome to Hagerstown' present I gave you at the cabin?"

Dusty couldn't help but stare. Dolan looked so much like Blackie that she had to do a double-take every time she saw him. If Dolan had been a few inches taller with a bigger build—and cleaner, better smelling body—the two men could be twins. "Is that your way of saying you're sorry you didn't kill Judd and me?"

"All in due time, bitch, all in due time. First, you and me are gonna take a little ride. Start the truck."

Quickly weighing her options, Dusty decided to do as he told her. She didn't doubt that he had a gun or that he'd use it if she made him angry.

Cursing herself for being so distracted by her fight with Judd that she'd neglected to load her own gun after leaving the bus station, Dusty realized she had no choice. As she crossed the wires, the diesel engine roared to life. "Where to?"

"Your house," he answered, "and don't get no smart ideas about flyin' through town to get the cop's attention. Just drive slow and normal-like."

Although the thought of trying to get the attention of the police had crossed her mind ... so had the fact that she was driving a stolen vehicle. "The speed limit it is."

Since she'd been so distracted every other time she'd seen Dolan to get a really good look at him, Dusty stole a few glances at him as she drove. He wasn't half-bad looking—in a dirty, sleazy, ruthless criminal sort of way. In fact, she imagined that in his younger days, he had probably been as attractive as all three of his sons were now.

If her math was correct, she figured him to be about fifty-seven. Blackie was forty, and just as hot as he had been twenty years ago. If there was one thing true about the McCassey men, each one was better looking than the next.

Slowing as she neared her house, Dusty asked where he wanted her to park. There never had been much of a

driveway; those who had cars had always parked on the street.

"Pull into what's left of the driveway. The overgrown brush will hide the truck. We wouldn't want anyone knowin' you stole Judd's truck, would we?"

"Of course not," she spat back. "Then they'd know you kidnapped me, too."

Dolan reached over and slapped the side of Dusty's head. "Don't be a smartass, bitch. I ain't got the patience."

Ignoring him—and the white stars she was seeing—Dusty pulled into the driveway, driving through the bushes and branches until she could go no further. She shut down the engine. "Now what?"

"Get out," he ordered as he pulled a .22 from his jacket. "But don't be gettin' no ideas about runnin' away. I'll pick you off like a sniper before you're out of the front yard."

With a .22? Yeah, right. Dusty wasn't too worried. She'd been shot before and knew what it felt like. The pain was bearable ... for a time. She also knew that as long as the bullets missed her vital organs, she could be shot numerous times with a .22 and not die until there were so many holes in her that she bled to death.

Dusty wasn't happy about her situation, but decided to bide her time. She could handle Dolan McCassey ... at least for a while. Her guns and ammo were in Judd's truck. If she could just get to them...

"Get inside," Dolan ordered.

Wordlessly, Dusty turned and jumped up onto the porch; avoiding the rotten steps. Walking through the front door, she

realized by what she saw that Dolan had obviously been staying here. There was a loaf of bread, some peanut butter and jelly, and a few cans of food on the kitchen table. A jug—probably filled with moonshine—was there, too.

"Keep goin'," he ordered, "into the livin' room."

Dusty walked down the short hall, smiling when she stepped over broken pieces of the clay pot she'd blown up with her .44 the night she fired it at Judd. That had been several days ago, but with everything that had happened, it felt like a lifetime.

Stopping in the middle of the living room, Dusty spotted the filthy sleeping bag and pillow on the floor. Shivers traveled up her spine at the thought of Dolan McCassey living in her house. Not only did she feel violated, she felt the sudden need for a long, hot shower.

"Take off your clothes," he ordered.

"What?"

"You heard me, bitch, take off them clothes." He raised his gun, pointed it directly at her heart, and cocked it. "Now."

Dusty could tell by the look in Dolan's eyes that he was going to kill her. It was the same wide-eyed, faraway look that she'd seen when he'd threatened her years earlier, right before he set the fire that had killed her sister, Benni.

She decided that it didn't really matter how she died. She could handle any kind of abuse as long as she knew Jay was safe, which she was sure he was. Her son was a smart boy. Chances were that he and Church would contact Judd when she failed to show up in Virginia. And, thinking that

something had happened to her, the McCassey brothers would read her note.

If they had, then they would know the whole story.

They knew their father was alive.

They'd know where to look for Jay.

She'd done it; she'd kept Judd and Jay safe.

At least she wouldn't die in vain.

Dolan was getting antsy. "Did you hear me, bitch?"

"No," she said firmly.

"I said—"

"I heard what you said!" she spat back. "I said, 'no', I'm not taking off my clothes. If you want my clothes off, you come over here and take them off yourself."

Dolan didn't lower his gun, but he did squint and maneuver his facial features a few times until he looked thoroughly confused—as if he couldn't understand why she wasn't afraid of him the way she'd been in the past.

"This ain't no toy gun, bitch!" he yelled, sounding frustrated. "You do as I say or your life's blood will cover this floor!"

Dusty was scared to death, but apparently doing a good job of hiding it. She didn't want to die, but there was no way in hell she was giving in to Dolan's demands. "I'd take a bullet through the heart before I let you touch me! And I'm not stripping for you! If you don't like that, either take them off yourself, or go ahead and shoot me."

The expression on his face was priceless.

He obviously hadn't been expecting her to disobey him, and at that moment, he looked as though he didn't know what to say.

Then, suddenly, his whole demeanor changed.

Still holding the gun, Dolan's hands went to his waist. He undid his belt buckle and took a step toward her. "I don't know why you're fightin' it, girl. How do you know that I ain't better in the sack than Judd? He's my kid after all. Maybe I taught him everything he knows."

Just the thought of Dolan McCassey and anything sexual nearly caused Dusty to get sick. Swallowing the bile that had risen in her throat, she did her best to hide how disturbed she was by his statement. "You're going to have to blow my head off before I allow you to lay a hand on me."

Grinning evilly, he took another step forward. "I had a feelin' you was gonna say somethin' like that. Unfortunately, I ain't into fuckin' stiffs. When I take you, bitch, you're gonna be alive enough to feel every inch of me." He reached down and grabbed his crotch, massaging his obvious erection. "Ain't no use fightin' it, either. You ain't exactly in the position to disagree with me."

Think, Dusty. Think of a way to get yourself out of this mess. If you don't do something quick, the father of the man you love is going to rape you.

She should've been expecting the assault. Dusty's skin burned and stung when Dolan's open palm connected with the left side of her face.

Shake it off and stay alert. He's watching you, waiting for the right moment to strike again.

Dusty's body tingled in anticipation. He was going to come at her again, she could feel it. She knew what Dolan McCassey was capable of, and prepared herself for the attack. When he finally lowered his gun and came at her, this time, she was ready.

"Ain't no damn woman gonna run my show." His right arm shot out as he grabbed for the front of her shirt, but this time, Dusty was faster. She used her own right arm to swipe his to the side. Taken by surprise, he was knocked off balance as his body turned, leaving his right side unprotected. Taking advantage of his vulnerability, Dusty bent her arm and jammed her elbow into his side as hard as she could.

"Ah!" Dolan cried in pain. His left hand immediately flew to his side and he stumbled backward. "You goddamn bitch!"

Dusty didn't reply. Instead, she remained focused on her enemy. By the amount of pain Dolan appeared to be in, there was a good chance she'd bruised a couple of his ribs. That kind of minor injury wouldn't keep him from trying to hurt her, but if she was lucky, it would slow him down a little.

"You think you're smart, don't you?" he asked. He was breathing heavily and his voice laced with pain. "Don't you!"

Watching him closely, Dusty refused to answer. For the moment, she had the upper hand. He was hurting and she wasn't. If she didn't think he'd shoot her in the back, she'd turn and bolt out the door.

If she couldn't run, what could she do? Her choices were slim and she knew it. So, she had a feeling, did Dolan.

Still holding his side, he glanced up at her—the evil look in his eye sending waves of chills up her spine. "Wonderin' what

to do, ain't you, girl? Well, I got an idea." He reached behind him and retrieved his gun. Waving it in her face, he said, "Take off them clothes. Now. Slow and easy-like. I don't wanna miss anything."

She couldn't do it.

Dusty would rather take her chances on being shot than give into his demands. Nothing was worse than giving up because you were afraid—which she was. But no amount of fear was going to make her give in.

Taken off guard when he balled his left fist and slammed it into her gut, she doubled over and struggled to breathe.

"Ready to change your mind yet?" Even though he'd hit her with his left hand, it was obvious his right side was in a great deal of pain. Judging by his shallow breathing and the beads of sweat on his forehead, the impact of the punch he'd thrown had to have taken a toll on his injury.

Although Dusty thought she may be in a little less danger now that Dolan was hurt, she still couldn't think of a way to escape the situation. Even if he was half-dead, he still had a gun trained on her. One pull of the trigger and it wouldn't matter how injured he was; if a bullet hit her in the right spot, she'd be dead.

"No," she said in the best smartass tone she could come up with.

She could tell he was frustrated. He probably hadn't expected her to be so defiant. There was no way in hell she was giving in. Judd wouldn't. He was a fighter. He'd think of a way to get himself out of the situation, no matter what it took.

Suddenly, Dolan walked to his bag and reached inside, pulling out two long pieces of twine. He motioned toward the kitchen. "Get in there and sit down," he ordered. "And don't try nothin' funny. Remember, I got a gun."

"Like I could forget!" she spat.

"I didn't tell you to talk, bitch! I told you to get your ass in the kitchen." Without warning, Dolan aimed his .22 at one of the living room windows and fired; the unexpected noise causing Dusty to jump. "Now move!"

Dusty hesitated only a moment before following his orders. As much as she didn't want to be rendered helpless, being tied to the chair seemed to be the safest place for her right now. That was one place it would be nearly impossible for him to rape her.

But if he wasn't going to rape her, what was he going to do? Hold her for ransom? Tie her up and leave her here to die?

Dusty sat patiently, cooperating with Dolan as he bound her arms and legs securely to the chair, then tied the chair to the table. When he was finished, he turned and started to leave the room.

"Hey!" she yelled.

"What do you want?"

"I want to know why you faked your death. Why you hate Judd so much that you'd want to keep us apart. And why now, after all these years, did you come back to Hagerstown?"

"I don't have to tell you nothin', girl. But because I ain't got nothin' better to do, I'll tell you that I faked my death

because the law was breathin' down my neck, threatenin' to shut down my moonshine business. I needed to make a clean break from this town and start over somewhere else.

"Judd's a little bastard who don't deserve to be happy after all he put me through. Him and them two brothers of his never shoulda been born. But a man has needs, you know? And havin' kids was the price I paid for them needs.

"I came back to Hagerstown to start livin' my life again. But this town ain't big enough for me and them three boys. I'm gonna kill 'em off one by one ... their wives and kids, too, startin' with you."

Dusty was speechless ... and Dolan had to be crazy. It was the only explanation for why he thought he could murder Blackie, Judd, Rebel, and their families. They were too tough and too smart to fall for anything their father tried. Dolan might kill her, but she would be the only one he got to.

It was only a matter of time before the McCassey brothers figured out what was going on. When they did, Dolan was the one who was going to die.

* * * *

How much longer was Dolan going to leave her here?

Dusty had been tied to the chair for three days.

Because of the way she was sitting, she hadn't been able to sleep more than a few minutes at a time and was exhausted. She was hungry and thirsty. Her pants were wet because she hadn't been able to use a bathroom. She was also freezing; the warm Indian summer that had made her

first few days in Hagerstown so comfortable was now long gone.

She'd spent hours wiggling her wrists and trying to rock the chair; doing anything she could to try and escape, but it hadn't done any good. Everything was tied too tight, and all she'd gotten for her trouble were two raw, bloody wrists.

Dolan had left that first day and not returned until last night. His visit had been brief, just long enough to give her a drink of water and remind her that she, along with Judd and the others, were as good as dead. She didn't know why he'd given her water, but she'd taken it and gulped it down greedily.

Well, Dusty had had enough. If he was going to kill her, she wished to hell he'd do it already. She was tired of waiting around.

As if on cue, Dolan walked through the door.

Taking in his appearance, Dusty was surprised to see that he was considerably cleaner, had shaved, and changed into clean clothes.

"That's right," he said as he came to a stop in front of her, "You like the way I look now, don't you?"

Ugh, was he saying that he'd cleaned up ... for her?

"After gazin' in the mirror, I realized what turned you off was my looks." Reaching into his front pocket, Dolan pulled out a small pocket knife and opened it. "Now, if you promise to be good, I'll cut you lose." With a dirty grin, he walked around her and stood behind the chair. Refusing to turn her head, Dusty followed him only with her eyes. "Maybe we can get to know each other a little better."

Was he serious?

Did he really think that just because he'd taken a bath, she'd want to have sex with him?

Dolan McCassey really was crazy.

"What do you say, girl, you gonna behave?"

Hell no. She may be weak from hunger and exhaustion, but he didn't have to know that. She'd find the energy to do what she had to do. If Dolan was dumb enough to take her word, then he deserved what she was going to do to him if she could get hold of a weapon.

Even if she couldn't, she still had a chance. His ribs had to still be sore where she'd elbowed him. If she could manage to break free—just for a second—she might be able to distract him enough to get away.

The hardest part was going to be pretending she was interested in him. Just the thought made her want to throw up.

"I'll behave."

With one flick of his wrist, Dolan cut the twine binding her to the chair. Dusty let her arms fall limp, hoping it wouldn't take too long for the numbness to go away. Once her legs were free, she stood slowly and stretched.

"In there." He motioned toward the living room.

Dusty walked slowly, hoping to stall and give her limbs as much time as possible to begin to feel normal.

When they reached the far side of the room, Dusty spotted a sleeping bag that had been smoothly laid out on the wood floor, the corner folded back. She stopped suddenly, refusing to move any further.

Prodding her from behind, Dolan wanted to know what the problem was.

"I just—"

"You ain't backin' out on me now, girl!"

Oh, God, what was she going to do?

She couldn't do it. Dusty could not let him touch her. She couldn't even pretend to be interested.

"Look—" she said, turning around with the intention of telling him he might as well tie her up again, because there was no way he was laying a hand on her.

But the sight of his .22 pointed at her chest stopped her cold.

"No, girl, you look." He waved the gun in her face. "I'm in charge here. What I say goes." Motioning to the sleeping bag, he told her to lie down.

Knowing she had mere seconds to do as he told her, Dusty made her decision. If she had any shot at all of getting away, she had to do something now. Catch him off guard. If he got her on the ground, he'd have the upper hand and she'd never get away.

Thankfully, they were standing within inches of each other. Taking a deep breath, Dusty brought her right knee up into his crotch. He grunted and fell to the ground, but didn't drop the gun.

Turning away, Dusty took one step, then another, toward the door. But just when she thought she was home free, a hand reached out and wrapped around her ankle, causing her to fall. Lying on the ground, she did her best to fling her leg

back and forth, trying to force him to lose his grip, but it was like iron.

He wasn't letting go.

Fighting for all she was worth, Dusty rolled and twisted, scratched, and pulled to get away.

"You're more damn trouble than you're worth, bitch!"

The right side of Dusty's body exploded in pain before she even heard the gunshot. She felt the warm stickiness of blood oozing from the area where the bullet had entered her body just under her ribs. She got one last look at Dolan before her world went black.

* * * *

One down, a handful to go.

Dolan stood and stared at Dusty's still form on the floor, her life's blood seeping from her body.

This wasn't exactly the way he'd hoped the afternoon would turn out, but it didn't really matter. He could get a piece of ass just about anywhere he wanted. He may be fifty-seven years old, but wasn't bad looking for a man his age. He got plenty of attention from women.

Shoving the gun into the back waistband of his jeans, he nudged Dusty's body with the toe of his boot, rolling her onto her back. He noticed that the rise and fall of her chest was slight, but wasn't worried. Judging by the amount of blood covering the floor, she wouldn't be alive much longer.

The first thing on his agenda was a little visit to the whores on Franklin Street. When he was finished, he'd head back to his father's barn and wait for his boys to show up.

And they would show up. Once it was discovered that Dusty was missing, he just knew they'd figure out he was responsible and want revenge.

He couldn't wait.

* * * *

She couldn't make it one inch further.

Dusty had waited until Dolan had left the house, then crawled out of the living room and down the hall toward her bedroom. Knowing she was losing a lot of blood, she'd forced herself to go on despite the pain in her side. She had to get to where it'd be easy for someone to spot her.

The window.

It took hours, and several long rests, but Dusty had finally reached her bedroom. Once inside the room, she knew she had to get out of the house.

It was her only chance.

Reaching up, she grabbed onto the windowsill and pulled herself up. Thankfully, the window was still open from when she'd jumped out the first time she'd come back to the house.

Good, it's light outside; maybe someone will see me.

Exhausted, sweaty, and probably literally dying of thirst, Dusty leaned forward and stuck her body through the window, dropping to the ground below.

The pain that shot through her body was so intense she cried out.

Is it too late, am I already dying?

Rest. She just needed to close her eyes and rest for a minute.

When Dusty awoke, it was dark.

How long have I been asleep?

Further away from the house ... she needed to get further away from the house so anyone passing by might see her.

Dusty had made it as far as she could. Lying in the woods, she had no idea where she was, only that it had taken her a long time to get there. She'd crawled, rested, and crawled so many times that she'd lost count. At some point, it had gotten light again, but now it was dark.

Hot, why am I so hot?

Is anyone ever going to find me?

Judd! She called out loud—at least she thought she'd said it out loud.

Now she was cold.

Rest, she needed more rest.

If she closed her eyes, Judd would be here when she woke up. All she had to do was wait.

"Judd," she murmured, before giving into the darkness once again.

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Chapter 26

Long after Judd and his brothers had taken Jay to Rebel's house; after he'd been hugged, kissed, fussed over, and fed way too much by Gypsy and Angel; after he'd been attacked, pounced on, and dragged down to the basement by Raider and Chase to play, then finally put to bed with all the other kids, the five adults finally sat down to talk.

"What are you guys going to do?" Blackie's wife, Angel, asked no one in particular. "Your dad could be holding Dusty just about anywhere."

"Not really," Judd answered. "I think he wants to be found. He's probably having way too much fun knowing that he pulled one over on me, and I'm sure he can't wait to rub it in my face."

Blackie agreed. "Judd's right, Angel Face, the old man is probably tickled pink that he's got our attention. It wouldn't surprise me if he's got her stashed somewhere right here in Hagerstown."

Running a hand through his hair, Rebel leaned back in his chair and sighed. "So what do we do about it? And keep in mind, boys, we have to be careful. This isn't going to be like going to the Renegade's camp where there was an arsenal of guns and no cops around. With you on probation," he said to Judd, "and Blackie on parole, we're not going to be able to just roam around town with our guns drawn."

That very thought had crossed Judd's mind several times in the past couple hours. In previous situations, he and his

brothers and cousins had picked up guns and taken care of things the way they were used to ... with firepower. This time, there was a by-the-book sheriff in town. And whether he was friendly with the McCasseys or not, he'd throw the book at Blackie and Judd if they were caught with weapons.

"What about you?" Gypsy asked her husband. "You can still carry a gun."

"Sure I can, darlin', but I'm not going to be very effective by myself."

"So what if you did this the legal way for a change? What if you contacted Sheriff Walton and explained what's going on? He's honest, Reb, you know he is. He'd help you."

"Gypsy does have a point," Rebel told his brothers. "As far as we know, Dusty isn't wanted for anything. Neither are the three of us. Maybe we should bring Walton in on this one."

Judd knew there was no way that was going to work. "And just what the hell are we supposed to tell him, Rebel? That according to a hand-scribbled note and a nine-year-old boy, a dead man kidnapped Dusty and is holding her against her will?"

"I don't know, man, it was just a suggestion. Blackie, what do you think?"

Judd looked at his older brother, who had been unusually quiet the past few minutes.

"I think that whatever we do, we ain't gonna have to look too far. Sounds like someone's out front."

Judd closed his eyes and listened closely, the way Blackie had taught him. It was much easier to hear your enemy

coming if you closed off the rest of your senses and concentrated on hearing.

They all heard the crash at the same time.

Someone was in the front yard.

Everyone jumped from their chairs.

Rebel immediately shooed Gypsy and Angel down the hall toward the bedrooms, but not before handing Angel a loaded .357 Magnum. She nodded and assured the men she'd do what she had to in order to keep them safe. "We'll be fine." And the two women disappeared.

The three brothers each grabbed loaded guns from the cabinet and rounded the corner, headed for the front door. Feeling as though his father had personally called him out, Judd wanted to take the lead. He wanted to be the first to reach his father; if indeed it was his father lurking around out there.

Not only was he itching to make the miserable excuse of a man who fathered him pay for all the beatings he'd given Judd as a kid, but also for torturing and harassing Dusty and Jay all these years.

Unfortunately for him, the path to the door was only wide enough for one person; being the oldest, biggest, and closest to the door, Blackie pushed his way to the front.

Standing in silence, the brothers listened for anything that would give them the slightest clue as to who was out there. After several minutes passed without a sound, they relaxed and backed away from the door.

"You think it was him?"

Blackie shrugged. "Who knows, Rebel? It's almost midnight. It could've been a damn raccoon for all we know. This is a house; you know things go bump in the night."

Judd was starting to lose his patience. They'd been sitting around talking for hours and didn't have a single lead, or one decent idea about what they were going to do. Judd was about to announce that he was striking out on his own to track down Dusty, when something Blackie had just said stopped him cold. "House," he said out loud.

"What?" Blackie and Rebel said in unison.

"House," Judd repeated. "Dusty's house."

Rebel squinted and shrugged. "What about it?"

He couldn't believe he hadn't thought of it before. "It's the perfect place for Dad to hold Dusty. It's filthy, abandoned, and somewhere he probably doesn't think we'd look because it's too damn obvious."

Laying his gun on the table, Blackie seemed to think for a minute before he spoke. "You think Dad's holdin' Dusty prisoner in her house?"

"Yes!" Judd shouted, tucking his gun into the waistband of his pants. "I'm going to check it out."

Judd reached for his boots, but Blackie grabbed his arm, refusing to allow him to move. "You ain't goin' alone."

Knowing there was no use trying to talk him out of it, Judd nodded to his brother. "Then come with me. But get your ass moving. I'm leaving in thirty seconds." Glancing at Rebel, he said, "I guess you're coming, too."

"You're goddamn right I am! Just give me a second to let Gypsy and Angel know what's going on."

* * * *

"Park here," Judd told Blackie when they were approximately a quarter mile from Dusty's house.

Blackie slowed his massive one ton, black, diesel dually pickup truck, pulling off the main road and onto a cart road leading into the woods. He shut down the engine and the brothers climbed out.

Checking the loads in their weapons, they walked briskly, reaching the house in just a few minutes.

The first thing Judd noticed about the house was that it was dark. He knew there was no electricity, but if someone was inside, they'd need to be able to see, even if it was only by candlelight. Maybe they're sleeping, he told himself. If they're asleep, they wouldn't want the house to be lit up, especially since it would probably draw attention to the supposedly abandoned home.

"How do you want to go in?" Rebel asked.

"Let's stay away from the driveway," Judd told him, "it's so overgrown with brush that we'd create a hell of a racket trying to make our way through it. Let's peek in the window on the opposite side of the house, the one that looks directly into the kitchen. If we don't see anything, we'll go in through the front door. Be careful, though, the steps are rotten and you'll fall right through."

The three brothers silently crept around the side of the house. Inch-thick grime on the windows, aided by the darkness, made it nearly impossible to see inside. "I can't see

a damn thing," Judd whispered. "We're going to have to go in."

Blackie and Rebel nodded, and all three men drew their guns as they walked around to the front of the house. After jumping onto the front porch, Judd paused and felt his back pocket, making sure the flashlight was still there. He wasn't planning to use it right away. Lighting the room would ruin the only advantage the brothers had ... the element of surprise.

With Judd in the lead, the front door was pushed open and the brothers crept inside. From what Judd could see, the kitchen looked exactly as it had the night he'd found Dusty here. Nothing was out of place anymore than it had been then. There was no sign that anyone had been there.

Moving out of the kitchen and into the hallway, Judd closed his eyes and listened for anything that would clue him in to whether or not anyone was in the house.

Nothing.

Looking back to his brothers, Judd shook his head.

When they reached the living room, it, too, was exactly the same.

There was no one here.

"Dammit!" he said in his normal tone of voice. "There's no one here."

Rebel was suddenly beside him, placing a comforting hand on Judd's shoulder. "What about the bedrooms?"

"They're down the hall," Judd explained, motioning to his left. "I'd check them, but there's no sign anyone's been here,

Reb. This is exactly the way the house looked the last time I was inside."

Taking the flashlight from his pocket, Judd clicked it on and lit the room. He shone it on the walls and over the furniture, looking for something, anything, that would tell them Dusty or their father had been there.

Nothing.

"What do you want to do now?" Blackie asked.

"Hell, I don't know. I had a feeling, Blackie. I could've sworn they were here."

Ignoring the sympathetic look on Blackie's usually stoic face, Judd started walking across the room. He didn't want or need his brother's feeling sorry for him.

When he reached the spot where he and Dusty had sat and polished off the bottle of Southern Comfort, he stepped in something and slid across the hardwood floor, then stuck, nearly losing his balance. "What the hell—"

"What?" Blackie shouted, his voice laced with alarm.

At first, Judd couldn't imagine what it was ... until he shined his light on the floor and noticed the oozing puddle—most of which was dry—covering a large area of the floor.

All three men squatted down to inspect the find.

Judd gasped and felt nauseous the instant his light revealed the large, dark red stain. He didn't need to see Blackie run his finger through the substance and smell it, or get a whiff of the offensive, metallic stench to know that it was blood.

A lot of blood.

His older brother wiped his hands on his jeans and stood.
"Judd—"

"I know, Blackie!" he shouted, trying to keep a hold on his emotions. "I know! Dusty!" He stood and shined his light all over the room. "Dusty!"

"Shine that light down here, Judd," Blackie instructed calmly, "it looks like there's a trail."

The instant Judd lowered the light, he noticed that Blackie was right. There was a trail of blood leading toward the bedrooms. But it wasn't the type of trail he'd expected to find. There were no drips or footprints. Instead, it was one long smear, as if whoever was bleeding had crawled—or been dragged—across the floor.

Slow but determined, the brothers followed the trail, which led down the hall and straight to Dusty's bedroom. Judd stopped in front of the door and raised his hand, pausing before he pushed it open to take a deep, shuddering breath.

Dear God, please don't let her be dead.

The old wooden door creaked as Judd eased it open, expecting to find either her or his father lying on the ground.

Nothing.

The trail led across the floor and ended at the wall under the window.

At least he thought it ended.

Suddenly, Blackie pointed to the wall. "Look here."

Judd shined the light on what used to be a white wall, but was now stained crimson.

The trail led right out the open window.

Shoving Blackie and Rebel out of the way, Judd hung his head out the window and scanned the area, assuming whoever was hurt was lying somewhere close to the house. They had to be. Someone who had lost that much blood wouldn't have been able to make it very far.

When he didn't see anything, Judd backed away. "Dusty has to be the one who's hurt," he shouted during a sudden moment of clarity. "Anyone else would be too big to fit through that window! Let's go!"

In the lead once again, Judd and his brothers ran through the house and out the front door, headed for the side of the house where Dusty's bedroom was. When they reached the driveway, they ran smack into his truck, which had been hidden by the brush. "Oh my God," he said, but barely gave the vehicle a second glance.

The brothers took off running and reached the side of the house together. "Dusty!" they all called.

Since they only had one flashlight, the three of them had to stay close together in order to be able to see. Not wanting to take a chance on missing anything, they walked side by side over every inch of the side yard. Not finding anything there, either, they ventured into the woods.

Trudging through the brush and dried leaves, Judd didn't think they'd ever find anything. Then he spotted a small, motionless mound thirty feet away. "There!" he shined his light on the object, and the brothers raced through the woods to investigate.

Skidding to a halt, Judd tossed the flashlight to Rebel as the brothers fell to their knees. They made quick work of

brushing away the dead leaves that had fallen on top of her eerily still body.

"Dusty?" he said not-so-quietly. "Dusty?"

Nothing.

Then Judd noticed she was still wearing the clothes she'd had on in the bus station a week ago. What was left of her white shirt was not only filthy, it was also caked with blood, stretched out, and torn, as if someone had tried to rip it from her body. Dusty's blue jeans were just as dirty.

How long had she been here?

"Let's turn her over," Blackie suggested. "I'll hold her neck stable while you move her body, Judd. Rebel," he instructed, "shine that light over here."

Why is Blackie so calm? Judd wondered. Doesn't he care that Dusty's hurt, that she could be ... I can't even think about it.

With shaking hands, Judd gently tucked Dusty's left arm under her body and eased her onto her back. What he saw turned his stomach ... and scared him to death. "Oh, Christ, she's been shot! Here," he said, trying to steady his hands, "on her right side!"

Judd wanted to brush away the dirt and leaves that were caked to the dry blood on Dusty's shirt, but he was afraid. He didn't know how badly she was hurt, and didn't want to cause her anymore pain. In the end, he decided it was better to clean her off.

Rebel held the light steady so Judd could see what he was doing while Blackie felt for a pulse.

"Is she breathing?" Rebel asked.

"Barely," Blackie answered, "and she's burnin' up." Shaking his head and shifting his attention to the right side of Dusty's body, Blackie swatted at Judd's hands to get them out of the way. "This wound is old, Judd. Look," he said, motioning to the dried blood, "it's probably been here three, maybe four days. And there's no exit wound; the bullet's still inside her."

Judd's heart nearly stopped beating.

He didn't need to be told that if they didn't get Dusty to the hospital immediately, she was probably going to die. "Reb, give me the light, then go to my truck and raise Gypsy on the CB. Give her this address and tell her to call 911, now!"

Rebel tossed the flashlight to Judd and took off running.

"Talk to her, Judd," Blackie whispered.

Had Blackie gone crazy? "What?"

"Talk to Dusty," he said again, using a calm, soothing voice that Judd had never heard before, not even when he was talking to their niece, Jade, or either of his own kids. "Let her know you're here. Tell her everything's gonna be okay."

Judd sat frozen. "She can't—"

"Yes, she can! When Angel got hurt last year, the paramedics had me talk to her the whole way to the hospital. They said that even though she was unconscious, she could still hear me. If Dusty knows you're here, she'll fight harder to stay alive. Tell her you love her. Tell her Jay's safe. Tell her whatever you think she wants to hear."

Judd still couldn't move.

Blackie slapped his face. "Do it, dammit! I don't know how the hell she's hung on this long. If you don't do somethin' to keep her with us, she probably ain't gonna make it. She needs you."

Dusty needed him ... that was all he needed to hear.

Taking Dusty's hand in his, Judd held on tightly and began to speak in a soft, low voice. "Dusty? Dusty, it's Judd. Can you hear me? I'm right here. You're safe now. Everything's going to be okay."

Judd stopped talking when he heard the faint sounds of approaching sirens. He looked up at Blackie, silently asking what he should do.

"Keep talkin'."

Nodding, Judd used his left hand to brush a few strands of Dusty's long, blue black hair away from her face. "Jay's safe, Dusty, do you hear me? Our son is okay. Church brought him here to Hagerstown and he's fine. I love you, Dusty, and I need you to stay with me." After a slight pause, his voice caught as he added, "Please."

In the moment that followed, Judd didn't know what surprised him more, Blackie's hand on his shoulder in a silent show of support, or the single tear he felt roll down his cheek and land on his arm. Staring at the wet spot, Judd was shocked that he was even able to cry.

It seemed like forever since he'd done it.

In fact, he couldn't even remember the last thing that had upset him enough to make him want to cry. As a kid, he would rather have been skinned alive than to shed a tear in

front of his big brother. Now, he didn't give a damn if Blackie gave him a hard time about it.

He just wanted Dusty to be okay.

He wanted her to live so he could take care of her for the rest of his life.

"Keep talkin', Judd," Blackie encouraged. "Help her stay with us. Them sirens are almost here."

"Hang on, Dusty. Hang on just a little longer. Help is on the way."

Less than a minute later, Rebel ran up behind them, leading the way for the three paramedics following him.

Judd tried to hang on to Dusty's hand as the paramedics went to work on her, but was eventually pushed out of the way. He started to protest, but Blackie dragged him away. "You can't do nothin' for her right now, little brother. Let the men do their job."

Blackie was right, of course. But it didn't make Judd feel any less helpless.

Judd listened to the voices of the paramedics in the background as they worked on her. He heard medical instruments clanking together, paper being ripped away from bandages, and other things snapping and banging around as the men who were trying to save Dusty's life moved around in the brush and dried leaves.

Unable to watch her being poked and prodded, Judd turned his back. Tipping his head up toward the night sky, he closed his eyes shut tight and said a silent prayer to whoever might be listening. I know I don't deserve this, but if you let her live, I swear I'll never let her out of my sight again. I'll

love her and take care of her, and do my best to never cause another ounce of trouble.

Judd could keep that promise ... he knew he could.

For Dusty, he could do anything.

"I lost her pulse!" one of the paramedics suddenly yelled, his voice shattering the peace Judd had been trying to find.

Opening his eyes, Judd whirled his body around. "No!"

With the intention of running to Dusty's side, Judd got no further than a single step before Blackie and Rebel were at his side. His brothers caught him, each wrapping their arms around his body to keep him from going anywhere. "Get the hell off of me!" He struggled to break free, but their holds were too strong. "Dusty!"

Judd raised his hands and wrapped them around Blackie's forearm—which was loosely looped around his neck—more for support than anything else. He wasn't foolish enough to think he could get away, and believed wholeheartedly that his brothers were there to catch him in case he fell ... just as they always had been.

Helplessly, he stood deathly still as the paramedics worked on her—one doing chest compressions while the other administered CPR.

It seemed like hours instead of seconds had passed before one of them finally announced that he'd found a pulse. "It's weak, but it's there."

"All right," another one said, "she's as stable as she's going to get. Let's get her onto this board."

Once the paramedics had secured Dusty on the board, they lifted her and quickly, but carefully, carried her out of

the woods. The brothers followed to the waiting ambulance, and were standing shoulder to shoulder, staring at the paramedics when Judd announced he was riding with Dusty to the hospital.

"There really isn't any room," one of the men said.

Simultaneously, Blackie, Judd, and Rebel all crossed their arms in front of their chests and took a step toward the vehicle.

"Fine," the EMT said, "let's go."

Judd climbed into the ambulance.

"Me and Reb will get the trucks and meet you at the hospital."

Judd was able to say a quick, 'thanks' before the back of the ambulance doors slammed shut and the vehicle started forward.

He loved his brothers.

He really did.

They'd been through hell, and had survived—had beaten everything they'd ever been up against ... together. Judd didn't know what he would do without Blackie and Rebel.

Or what he would do without Dusty.

He'd never realized exactly how empty and meaningless his life had been until she walked back into it.

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Chapter 27

Leaning forward in a chair with his head buried in his hands, Judd wondered for the hundredth time why they hadn't heard any news.

He'd been in this very same waiting room the previous year, waiting for news while Angel was in surgery.

He knew these things could take hours.

He knew that the doctors were doing all they could to save Dusty.

Even knowing all those things, what had seemed like endless hours of waiting wasn't any easier.

Blackie and Rebel had gotten to the hospital just a few minutes after the ambulance. They'd helped give the doctors information about Dusty that Judd himself had been too upset to remember.

They hadn't left his side once in the three hours they'd been waiting to hear something on Dusty's condition.

Judd had always loved his brothers, but it hadn't been until tonight that he understood exactly how much. The three of them had always been there for each other, but this was the first time he'd really needed to lean on them.

It felt good knowing he had so much support.

But the support hadn't only come from Blackie and Rebel. Not long after they'd settled themselves into the uncomfortable, barely-padded leather chairs in the waiting room, the rest of his family had begun trickling in.

Before he knew it, they were all there.

His uncles, Frank and Jimmy, had their heads together in the back of the room and hadn't stopped whispering since they'd come in. Brady and Kane, two men who were usually laughing, sat stoically sipping coffee. Even Flynn was there. His young cousin—who had the same flaming red hair as Gypsy—was in the corner by himself, sitting on the floor with his knees against his chest and his head against the wall with his eyes closed.

"You okay?" Rebel's voice brought Judd out of his daze, and he lifted his head.

"I'm fine," he told his brother, and accepted the steaming hot cup of coffee Rebel offered.

Rebel sat in the chair beside Judd and sipped on his own drink. "She'll be fine. This is a good hospital, Judd. Dusty's in good hands."

"I know she is, Reb. But you don't know how bad off she really was. They lost her in the ambulance again," he said, looking his brother straight in the eye. "Dusty died right in front of me. She was dead. They had to work damn hard that time to revive her, too. It took longer than it did in the woods. The paramedics were about to give up when one of them finally found a pulse."

"She was hurt pretty bad, Judd. But you saved her life."

Huh, that's funny. Judd had been thinking more along the lines that he was the one who'd caused her to almost lose it.

"No. This is my fault, Reb. If I'd—"

Rebel was shaking his head. "Don't do that to yourself, man. Don't say, 'what if'. You couldn't change anything now,

even if you wanted to. None of this is your fault. If you want to blame anyone for this mess, blame Dad."

Simply blaming his father wasn't good enough. Judd wanted to kill him.

But Rebel didn't need to know that.

"Gypsy and Angel wanted to be here," Rebel said, changing the subject, "but someone had to stay with Rose and the kids ... just in case."

"I never expected them to come here, Reb. It's four in the morning, for Christ's sake."

"I know, but they made me promise to tell you that they would've been here if they could've."

Judd nodded his understanding.

He'd been a bastard most of his life. As a kid, he'd worshiped the ground Blackie walked on, and did everything he could to be just like his older brother—including causing as much trouble as possible. Judd knew he was damn lucky he hadn't ended up in prison right alongside him.

He didn't feel like he deserved the kind of support he was getting from his family.

He didn't feel that he deserved a woman like Dusty, either. But he'd be damned if he was going to give her up.

* * * *

Bright pink and orange rays shone through the windows of the waiting room.

Six hours.

Dusty had been in surgery since just after one o'clock in the morning, and up until now, they hadn't heard one word.

When Judd spotted the weary, middle-aged doctor who'd spoken to them just before Dusty was taken into the operating room, he jumped from his seat.

The commotion got the attention of the rest of the McCasseys. Suddenly, they were all standing. Each and every one of them was right behind him, staring at the doctor.

Removing his wire-rimmed glasses, the doctor folded in the arms and dropped the spectacles into the pocket of his white coat. "Mr. McCassey?"

"Yeah. How is she?" Judd asked nervously.

"Well, she made it through surgery."

What the hell kind of answer was that? "And?"

"And ... that's a good sign," the doctor assured him. "It was touch and go for a while. We lost her twice in the operating room."

Lost her? The same way they'd lost her in the woods and the ambulance?

"What exactly was wrong with her? Did the bullet hit anything important?"

Judd felt like an idiot asking such a stupid question. Obviously every part of the human body was important, but he didn't know any of the fancy medical terms doctors used. However, he didn't care how stupid he sounded; he just wanted to know what exactly had happened to Dusty.

"The bullet came from a .22 caliber pistol. It entered the right side of her body directly under her ribcage," the doctor explained, demonstrating on his own body. "Upon entering, it grazed the top of her spleen, lodging itself in the organ. We

performed a splenectomy, which means we removed the entire spleen."

"Can you live without your spleen?"

The doctor nodded. "A normal, happy life."

"What about her fever?" Judd asked. "She was burning up when we found her."

"The fever was caused by an infection that had set in from the gunshot wound. She was also severely dehydrated, due to the fever and lack of water."

"Is she going to be okay?"

"She's young and strong, Mr. McCassey," the doctor assured him, "we expect her to make a full recovery."

Judd's shoulders slumped and he bent his head, resting his forehead in the palm of his hand. Had he ever felt such relief? Breathing deeply, he kept his head down until he was able to swallow the lump in his throat, and was sure he could speak.

"Can I see her?"

The doctor shook his head. "Not for a while. The surgery is complete, but there's still a few things to be done. You can see her once she's out of recovery and has been placed in a private room. It'll be a couple more hours at least."

"But she's okay?" Judd asked, feeling the need for more confirmation.

"She'll be fine, son."

The instant the doctor left, a collective sigh of relief was heard throughout the waiting room.

Dusty was going to live.

She was going to be just fine.

The future he'd wanted to have with her had a chance after all.

There was just one more obstacle in their way, and he intended to take care of that immediately.

Turning to his brothers, he fed them a line he prayed they'd believe. "I'm going to get some air. I'll be back."

They each gave a nod. "Want some company?" Rebel asked.

"No thanks. I need to do this alone."

"We'll wait here," Blackie said.

"Thanks," he said loud and clear.

Safely out of the way was exactly where he wanted them.

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Chapter 28

Where the hell were they?

Dolan McCassey took a long drink of moonshine from his jug, replaced the plug, and set it on the hard-packed dirt floor.

"Goddammit!" He used his booted foot to kick an old tractor tire, then began pacing the floor of his father's barn again, wondering what to do next.

So far, the little game he'd been trying to play with his sons hadn't been very much fun. It had been years in the making, and Dolan thought he'd had every last detail worked out.

But his boys were a lot smarter than he'd given them credit for. He hadn't counted on Blackie doing most things the legal way now, or Rebel being some kind of great leader.

And Judd ... Judd was the one he hated the most.

Dolan had sworn for years that Judd wasn't his kid. He'd convinced himself that his wife, Mary, had had an affair. But as Judd got older, he began to look more and more like a McCassey every day.

By that time, though, Dolan's hatred for Judd was so powerful that he had a hard time controlling it. The beatings he gave the boy relieved some of his resentment, but they'd only lasted a short time. Blackie had been fiercely protective of both Judd and Rebel, and by the time he was fourteen, he was a hell of a fighter ... a fighter that Dolan couldn't beat.

Dolan had been having fun torturing Judd by keeping his son from him ... until he realized that Judd wasn't being tortured at all because he didn't even know Jay existed.

So he'd put this little game into motion.

But he'd killed Dusty Zamora four days ago, and not one of his sons had come looking for him yet.

Just thinking about all his hard work and carefully laid plans going to waste was pissing him off.

Why the hell weren't they looking for her?

Did they even know she was dead?

It couldn't be because they didn't care about her; Dolan knew that they did. If Blackie, Judd, and Rebel knew something was wrong, they'd do what they could to fix things.

They'd been close to all the Zamora sisters.

If there was one thing he could say about his boys, they had good taste in females. He didn't remember the younger girls too well, but the two oldest sisters, Jessie and Alex, had been young teenagers back then ... just ripe for the picking.

Unfortunately, he'd never had a chance to sample that forbidden fruit ... but it wasn't for lack of trying.

Trudging along the path he'd worn in the dirt, Dolan thought about the best way to get his boys' attention. They obviously hadn't made anything of the little calling card he'd tossed through the window of the cabin on Ten Acres.

Actually, he'd been counting on Judd and Dusty's kid to break the news. Jay was smart, and Dolan had thought for sure that the boy would've contacted Judd when his mother didn't show up in Virginia.

Maybe they did know she was missing and just hadn't discovered her body yet.

Stopping in front of the jug, Dolan picked it up and unplugged it, bringing the container to his lips once again.

Damn, that tasted good.

"Well," he said out loud, "I ain't got all the damn time in the world to play this game. If them boys ain't smart enough to know where to look for her, I'll just have to make it a little easier on them."

His decision made, Dolan took one last sip of shine and tucked the jug behind a tall stack of burlap bags filled with corn seed.

After a quick search of his duffle bag, he found his gun. The reliable old .22 had been at his side for years. He didn't need the kind of firepower that he'd heard his boys relied on—.38's and .357's. No, a .22 was just fine for him. It had been enough to keep a certain someone frightened into doing what he wanted the past four years, done the job on Dusty—as well as quite a few before her—and he had no doubt it'd do just as well on the three bastards he'd fathered.

* * * *

Walking across the hospital parking lot in search of his pickup truck, Judd froze when he spotted the navy blue vehicle ... and his brothers sitting on the tailgate, each with a cigarette dangling from their lips.

"What the hell are you two doing out here?"

Blackie took one last drag of the cigarette, pinched the butt between his middle finger and thumb, and flicked it to

the ground. "A better question, little brother, is where the fuck do you think you're goin' all by yourself?"

Angry that they'd figured out what he was up to, Judd took a defensive stance, ready to fight. "How do you know I'm going anywhere?"

Blackie slid off the tailgate. Following his older brother's lead, Rebel tossed his cigarette away and did the same. "Come on, Judd. We know you. Dusty's going to be fine, so you probably figured that since you couldn't see her for a few hours anyway, you'd sneak out, look around a little for the old man—maybe kill him if you get the chance—and be back in time to be at her bedside when she wakes up. Am I close?"

How the hell did Rebel do that?

"Get out of my way." Judd tried to push past Blackie and Rebel, but they moved closer together, creating a wall Judd had no chance of breaking through.

"Not this time, Judd. I'm damn tired of playin' hide-and-go-seek; chasin' people all over town that don't want to be found—"

Judd was irritated that his brothers were wasting his time. "Then leave me alone, Blackie! Let me do what I have to do!"

Before Judd had time to blink, Blackie's right arm shot out, grabbing Judd by the front of his shirt. "We ain't leavin' you alone, Judd! If you want to hunt down the old man, then Rebel and me are comin' with you. If you don't like that idea, then we can all just go back inside and hang out in the waitin' room until Dusty wakes up."

"What?"

"You heard me, Judd. All of us go, or none of us go. It's your choice."

Had Blackie gone crazy? "So you're telling me that you're willing to let Dad escape just because I don't want you coming with me?"

"That's what I'm sayin', little brother. Sounds pretty goddamn stupid, don't it?"

Yes it did. "What about you?" Judd asked Rebel. "Why aren't you saying anything?"

Rebel finally relaxed his stance. "Because I'm waiting for the two of you to shut the hell up, so I can remind you that this isn't just between us and Dad anymore."

"What are you talking about, Reb?"

"I'm talking about the police, Judd! Maybe you were too distracted to notice, but an ambulance wasn't the only emergency vehicle that showed up at Dusty's house when Gypsy called 911. The place was crawling with cops, too. There's now an official investigation going on. You're on probation, remember? And you," he said, pointing at Blackie, "are on parole. You boys can't just run around town with loaded guns. Sheriff Walton is a fair man, but if he catches the two of you with any type of firearms, there's a good chance you'll be cellmates for the next ten to twenty years. We have to do things different this time."

Damn, Rebel had a point. Ben Johnson had been a corrupt sheriff. Judd, his brothers, and cousins had pretty much done what they wanted while he was in town—including carrying guns when they weren't supposed to—because not only had he been corrupt, he was also dumb as a rock.

Sheriff Walton was different. He didn't have it out for the McCasseys like Johnson had, but he was a smart, by-the-book lawman. He was friendly whenever he stopped by the garage, but would have no problem throwing the book at Blackie and Judd if he caught them violating their parole or probation.

Judd sighed and reached up, pulling Blackie off of him. "Fine. Rebel's right. So what do we do now?"

Rebel shrugged. "That's up to you, Judd. Where were you headed?"

"To Dusty's. It's been a good four days since she was shot. Judging by the amount of blood we found both on her and in the house, my guess is that Dad figured he killed her. He's probably wondering why we haven't come gunning for him yet. I was just thinking that he might return to the house to see what was up ... if we'd been there yet."

"Makes sense to me." Blackie shrugged. "Let's go."

As Blackie turned to get inside his truck, Judd grabbed his arm. "Wait a minute! What are we supposed to use to defend ourselves if we can't use guns? We can't walk in there unarmed."

Rebel reached into the bed of Judd's truck and pulled out three six-inch Bowie knives, all snapped securely into their well broken-in leather sheathes. He held one out to Judd. "You can skin a buck faster than anyone I know. Dad knows that, too. You don't need a gun to be intimidating, Judd. This blade ought to work just fine."

Accepting the knife, Judd fed the sheath through his belt loops and buckled it tight.

His brothers did the same.

"This ain't gonna be easy," Blackie warned, "no matter what happens."

Judd knew he was talking about the fact that one of them might have to kill their father. Growing up, Judd used to dream about getting a chance to take out the man who made his life a living hell. But as a teenager, he didn't think he would've had the balls to go through with it.

Today, was a different story.

Dolan McCassey had ruined more lives than any of them probably knew about. He deserved to die. It didn't really matter to Judd who wound up taking him out—just as long as Dolan McCassey knew that his sons had survived in spite of everything he'd done to ruin their lives.

"Well, then, I guess this is it." Judd raised his fist into the air.

"No worries," they all murmured when his brothers raised their fists as well.

"Let's get this done, and get it done quick. I want to be back here by the time Dusty's allowed to have visitors. I want to be there when she wakes up."

Blackie nodded. "Let's get movin' then, little brother; we got us some huntin' to do."

Leaving Judd's vehicle in the parking lot, the brothers piled into Blackie's truck and headed toward Dusty's house.

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Chapter 29

"Be careful, and watch your step," Judd warned from his position as the leader of their single file line. As they slipped quietly into the yard, he added, "And whatever you do, don't let Dad know that Dusty's still alive."

The yellow caution tape surrounding the Zamora's house was all that remained of the police investigation that had gone on throughout the night.

Judd didn't doubt for a minute that their father was close by ... or that he was probably even watching them.

The gunshot that came from inside the house confirmed his suspicion. The brothers dove for cover immediately, scattering into the brush alongside the house. Judd landed in a dry, long-dead rose bush just as a few more shots were fired—as a warning—he assumed.

His father obviously wanted to talk to them, which was why Judd doubted that taking cover was even necessary. Dolan wouldn't kill—or attempt to kill—any of them until he was finished speaking his mind.

When all had gotten quiet, Judd crawled out of the brush and looked around for Blackie and Rebel. Rebel waved at him from a few feet away. "Where's Blackie?" he silently mouthed to Reb.

Rebel shrugged and pointed toward the house.

Had Blackie gone in without them?

Of course he had.

Their older brother had appointed himself Judd and Rebel's protector when they were just little kids. It didn't matter that Blackie was forty years old now. Or that Judd was thirty-six and Rebel was thirty-five. All Blackie probably saw was that someone threatening his little brothers ... and that shit didn't fly with the man called 'The Devil' no matter how old the boys were now.

No longer worried about having to sneak around, Judd signaled to Rebel and they charged into the house. The sound of his father's voice sent chills down Judd's spine, stopping him cold as he entered the kitchen. He had trouble taking another step until he took a deep breath and remembered that he was no longer the kid his father used to beat on. You're an adult, he told himself. Dad is nothing to you. He can't hurt you anymore.

Rebel threw him a questioning glance, and Judd nodded to let his brother know he was okay. Stepping out in front, Judd took the lead once again.

When they entered the living room, they spotted Blackie right away. He had their father in a choke hold, and was resting the point of his knife against the older man's throat.

Dolan smirked and threw Judd and Rebel a taunting glance. "Well, well, well, look who it is, the leader and the follower. You boys are a little late."

Judd tried to shake off the heat of his rising anger, but he was already at the boiling point. There was no turning back now.

Take it easy.

Calm down.

Losing your cool is exactly what he wants you to do.
Don't let him win.

Blackie tightened his hold and jerked Dolan's head back.
"Shut the fuck up!"

"Aw, come on, Blackie, give your old dad a break. I was just funnin' with the boys a little."

"You leave them boys alone," Blackie warned through clenched teeth. "You've done enough damage."

Dolan tried to force another taunting smile, but it only wound up looking more like a grimace. It was obvious that he was in pain, even though he did manage to say, "Still playin' the part of big brother, I see."

"Damn right, you worthless bastard."

"Why do you hate me so much, boy? Look how strong of a man you turned into because of me."

"I became strong because someone had to keep you from killin' Judd and Rebel. Mom couldn't do it because you would've killed her, too."

"Well ain't that sentimental. I never figured you for a sissy, Blackie. Guess I was wrong. Guess you didn't learn nothin' from me after all."

Before Dolan had a chance to smirk, snicker, or respond, Blackie had let go, whipped him around, and closed his hand around their father's throat. "Sure I did, asshole. I learned to always check a man's pulse before just assumin' he's dead."

Judd had mixed emotions as he watched the scene unfolding before him. There was no doubt in his mind that his father deserved to die. He needed to pay the price for things

he'd done and the way he'd treated his wife and kids during the years they'd all lived in the same house.

Once his father's face began to turn purple, it was clear to Judd that Blackie meant to choke him to death.

It can't happen this way.

His father couldn't just die without suffering any consequences for his actions. The only way Judd was going to get over what his father had done to him, Dusty, and Jay ... the only way he was going to be able to go on with his life, was to confront the man; something he couldn't do if he was dead.

"Let him go, Blackie," Judd said in the same deep, authoritative voice he'd used on Jay, hoping his older brother would take him seriously. "This is my fight."

Judd knew that it wasn't really only his fight. But at the moment, he was the one who had been most affected by what their father had done.

Blackie glanced at Judd, then back to their father. Slowly releasing his hold, Blackie didn't even give the man a second to breathe before kneeing him in the gut and dropping him to the floor. "If I wasn't so anxious to watch Judd get revenge on you for what you did to Dusty and their kid, I'd kill you right here and now. But I think I'll hand you over to Judd and watch the show."

With a mighty shove, Blackie sent their father flying backward against the wall. He slumped to the ground, gasping for air.

Blackie crossed the room and came to a stop directly in front of his brothers. Raising his fist, he held it out to Judd, who lightly touched it in return.

Unsnapping the sheath on his belt, Judd pulled the Bowie knife free with his right hand and walked across the room. Using his booted foot, he rolled his father onto his back, then plunged the knife into his thick sweatshirt and pulled. "Get up, old man."

The sound of ripping material did nothing but fuel Judd's temper, as he remembered the many times his father had literally ripped the clothes from Judd's body.

By the time Dolan got to his feet, Judd was ready to unleash thirty-six years of anger.

Be patient, he tried to tell himself. It's about time you learned a little self-control.

Hoping that no one heard his deep, shuddering breath, Judd held the knife steady—half of it still inside his father's sweatshirt. "You look damn good for a dead man," he heard himself say. "What was so all-fired important that you had to fake your death?"

Dolan, who was on his feet but leaning against the wall for support, didn't answer. Judd also noticed that his father seemed to be favoring his right side. Was he injured? Had Blackie done something to him, or had it been Dusty?

Just the thought of Dusty fighting his father, desperately trying to defend herself, sent Judd's temper over the edge. With an iron grip on the knife, he balled his left fist and hit his father square in the jaw.

Damn, that felt good.

"I asked you a question, old man!"

"What the hell do you care whether or not I'm dead?"

Doing his best to keep his cool, Judd leaned to within an inch of his father's face and clenched his teeth. "I don't. In fact, I hope you don't have any future plans, because the only way you're leaving this house is in a body bag. You're going to die for harassing and threatening Dusty and Jay—something you probably did for no other reason than you thought it was funny—and I'm the one who's going to kill you."

Dolan suddenly stood up straight and laughed evilly as he stared at Judd through the cold madness in his eyes. His cheek already bruising from Judd's left hook, Dolan grinned through a bloody split in his lip and leaned in until he and Judd were nose to nose. "It was damn funny, boy. And so is your threat," he said, shaking his head. "You go right on ahead and tell yourself you're gonna kill me ... if that's what makes you feel better. But you ain't got the guts to do it, boy. You're a coward. You always have been."

Stay cool. I'm not going to let him know he's getting to me.

Judd brought his knee up and slammed it into his father's groin. Dolan grunted and slumped a little, causing the knife to rip further into the sweatshirt; the point coming that much closer to his throat.

"And picking on a woman and child is brave?"

"Maybe not," Dolan admitted, "but it was a hell of a lot more fun than livin' here, dishin' out my hard earned money to feed you and Rebel."

"Rebel and I were grown men by the time you started bothering Dusty, so I don't buy that excuse. It does make me want to laugh, though, because the only thing you ever worked hard at was sampling your own moonshine, and thinking of ways to make your family's life miserable. You never did a damn thing for any of us."

"Bullshit, boy!" Dolan yelled, still trying to suck in air. "I put a roof over your heads, clothes on your backs, and food in your smartass, back-talkin' mouths. There ain't never been no ounce of good in any one of you boys. You were lucky I didn't kill you all!"

"Probably," Judd agreed, staring stoically into his father's eyes. "But you're not going to be so lucky."

It seemed to take a few moments for Judd's statement to sink in. When it did, Dolan's eyes grew wide. He had to know that he couldn't take on all three of his sons. Hell, as angry as Judd was right now, there was no doubt in his mind that he could kill his father with little or no effort.

His father must've felt the same way. In the next instant, Dolan growled and lunged forward, slamming into Judd's chest, causing them both to go down. The Bowie knife slid across the wood floor, just out of Judd's reach.

With the wind knocked out of him, Judd struggled to breathe under the weight of his father's body.

"Ain't got much to say for yourself now, do you, boy?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Judd saw Blackie take a step forward, then saw him stop as Rebel's arm shot out and blocked his path. "This is Judd's fight," he heard Rebel whisper, "let him finish it."

Blackie mumbled something in response, but Judd couldn't tell what it was. His older brother had stopped his advance and was standing still, but Judd knew that if he needed help, Blackie would jump in.

Judd then looked up at the man who'd given him life. As a little kid who'd gotten beaten every time he turned around—most of the time for no reason—he'd been terrified of his father. He had done his best to stay out of the man's way, but it hadn't done much good.

Dolan probably would've killed both him and Rebel if it hadn't been for Blackie. But Judd didn't need Blackie to protect him anymore. He was a grown man now who towered over his father by three or four inches, and outweighed him by probably a good thirty pounds.

Judd could take care of himself.

Once he was able to fill his lungs with air, Judd whipped his right arm across his chest, and, in one fell swoop, knocked his father onto the floor. As he was rolling away, Judd jumped to his feet and jammed his foot into his father's stomach.

Although he wished he'd had time to retrieve his knife, Judd knew the white hot anger tingling inside his body was a deadly enough weapon. "I've got plenty to say for myself, old man," he yelled. "But all you need to know is that I'm no longer the little kid you used as a punching bag. You can't hurt me anymore ... and I sure as hell am going to enjoy killing you."

Dolan's eyes went wide again, but this time, the look in them was murderous.

The events of the next few seconds unfolded in slow motion.

Judd heard Blackie's warning to duck, and rolled out of the way just as Dolan pulled a gun and fired at Blackie and Rebel.

Where the hell had that gun come from?

He saw his brothers dive behind the furniture as their father repeatedly fired his .22 in their direction.

Why hadn't he shot at Judd? Although the gun was only a .22; fired from close range, the bullets would've killed him for sure.

Unarmed, Judd realized he was going to have to rely on his fists. He could do it; he was a good fighter. The only problem was that just as he was about to go for his father, the man pulled another gun and fired at Judd, who rolled out of the way again. Unfortunately, he lost his bearings in all the confusion and wound up pinned against the wall with his father standing over him, and a gun pointed at his chest.

"Ain't got no place to go now, do you, boy?"

Hearing the click of the gun spurred Judd into action. Just as his father's finger moved to pull the trigger, Judd sat halfway up, grabbed hold of his father's left leg and pulled. Teetering off balance, Dolan pulled the trigger anyway. The shot went wide, he fell against the wall, and Judd looked up in time to see his younger brother go down; blood pouring from his neck. "Rebel!"

That did it.

A red haze clouded Judd's vision as all he could think about was that their father had just killed Rebel. Launching himself forward, he landed on his father and let his fists fly. Blow

after blow, Judd became angrier and angrier. He wanted to hurt his dad so bad that he'd suffer, die a slow, painful death right here, all alone—which was a lot better than he deserved.

But somehow, while he'd been distracted by his thoughts, his father had managed to feel around for—and reach—his gun. Judd heard the familiar click again, and, with no means of escape, held his breath and waited for the inevitable pain the bullets would cause as the slugs slammed into his body.

Quickly realizing that the deafening boom that echoed through the house wasn't from a .22, Judd opened his eyes and looked up to see who'd fired the gun. Sure his eyes were playing tricks on him; he squinted toward the tall, lanky figure standing in the doorway holding a smoking, sawed-off shotgun. "Granddaddy?"

Dressed in his usual denim overalls and flannel shirt, Harlan McCassey nodded toward his grandson, then pumped the gun and raised it, aiming the weapon at his son. "Step away from that boy, Dolan, slow and easy-like."

Dolan raised his hands in the air, but didn't move. "Daddy—," he started to say, and Judd thought how strange it was to hear his father—lethal, murderous, and ready to take the lives of all three of his sons—say the word, 'daddy'.

Harlan fired the gun again, this time hitting the wall and sending bits of plaster flying into the air. "I told you to do something, boy, and I want it done now. Move."

Dolan took two steps back.

"Come on out of there, Judd."

Speechless, Judd watched his grandfather in amazement as he slid away from the wall. When he was a safe distance

from his father, he stood and rushed to the spot behind the sofa where a shirtless Blackie—whose arms, hands, and legs were covered in blood—was cradling Rebel's head in his lap, using his shirt to put pressure on their brother's wound.

"How's Rebel?" their grandfather called, his eyes and gun still trained on Dolan.

Judd looked at Blackie, who finally answered, "He's alive," but didn't elaborate.

"Your mother and I had eight boys," Judd heard his grandfather say.

Curious as to what else he had to say, Judd peeked around the corner.

"They all messed up from time to time, Dolan, but none of 'em as bad as you. You were my first born, so more often than not, I turned the other cheek when it came to your mischief. I know now that I made a mistake ... and that I failed them three boys of yours. I should've stepped in the minute you married Mary. Hell, I should've stood up for that poor girl when her daddy came to the fields wanting you to marry her. I knew it was a mistake. She was so young and innocent; I didn't think she'd survive more than a year with you."

"I didn't treat her bad," Dolan said in his own defense.

"You treated her worse than an animal, son. And you weren't any better to your boys."

Judd saw his father glance in their direction, open his mouth, and spit at them. "They weren't never worth bein' good to. Mary ran around on me. I ain't even sure Judd's mine."

"Bullshit, Dolan. Mary hardly ever left the house because you kept her locked in a bedroom half the time. There's no way Judd is anyone else's. That boy looks more like a McCassey than you do."

Judd's father glanced in his direction; the look on his face making the hairs on the back of Judd's neck stand up.

Dolan ignored his father. "So what now, Daddy? You gonna kill me, your own flesh and blood?"

"That's what you were going to do to these boys," Harlan said, motioning toward Blackie, Judd, and Rebel. "What's the difference if I do it to you?"

Unable to believe what he was hearing, Judd watched his grandfather closely. Could he really kill his own son? Would he?

Noticeably pale, Dolan took a step back and reached behind him. Judd was sure he had another gun back there, and was ready to dive on top of Rebel to protect his younger brother from any more harm.

Instead, his father held out a hand grenade. Holding the grenade in his left hand, Dolan slid the index finger of his right hand through the pin and grinned at his father. "Ain't no difference, I guess. But if I'm dyin', we're all dyin'."

"What's he doin'?" Blackie whispered to Judd.

"He's got a grenade," Judd whispered back.

Blackie let out a quiet string of curses and gently moved Rebel's head off his lap and onto the floor. "Take Reb and get outta here," Blackie instructed. "I'm gonna distract the old man."

"No!" It felt strange to argue in barely audible voices, but it was important not to let their father hear them. "I'm not letting you die for me!"

Blackie reached out and shoved Judd, who'd been squatting on his heels, causing him to fall to the ground. "You ain't got a choice!"

Refusing to allow Blackie to sacrifice himself, Judd fired back, "The hell I don't!" Then he brought his elbow up and jammed it into his brother's stomach, knocking the wind out of him just long enough for Judd to get away.

Quickly getting to his feet, he jumped out of the way as Blackie grabbed for his legs, then charged across the room toward his father.

"Get out, Granddaddy!" Judd hollered as he ran by, motioning toward the door.

Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted his grandfather toss the shotgun to Blackie, who caught it, pumped it, and aimed it in their father's direction.

"Move Judd, I can't get a goddamn shot off!"

But Judd couldn't move. He and his father were locked in battle, rolling around on the floor fighting over the grenade.

If ... I ... can just ... get it ... away ... from him. Judd stretched his body and reached for the grenade, but his father was protecting it; first holding it out of Judd's reach, then doubling over and keeping it close to his body.

"Judd!" Blackie yelled again.

"Get out!" Judd yelled back as he continued to wrestle his father for the explosive.

"Goddammit!" Judd heard Blackie swear, toss the gun away, and come up behind him. He felt Blackie's hands on his body trying to pull him away, and fought against his brother's nearly super-human strength as Blackie hauled him up and tossed him a few feet away.

They all heard the small ping of metal falling on wood at the same time.

Their father had pulled the pin on the grenade.

"Get the hell out!" Blackie yelled to Judd as their father dove out the window.

"What about Rebel?"

"I'll get him, Judd, go! Go!"

But Judd couldn't go yet. He knew he had between six and eight seconds from the time his father pulled the pin. So as Blackie swung Rebel over his shoulder and ran for the door, Judd picked up the grenade and heaved it out the window after their father. He covered his ears and shielded his head as it exploded less than a second after leaving his hand.

The force of the blast caused the windows to shatter and walls to shake. The far wall—the one where the window was that Judd had tossed the explosive from—had been blown apart, and a good bit of the stuff in the room was now on fire.

Coughing and sputtering, his eyes burning from the intense heat and smoke, Judd tried to make his way down the hall and toward the door. But he was having trouble seeing through the thick, white smoke. He felt for something ... anything ... that would lead him toward the kitchen.

Goddamn, it's hot in here.

Finally coming into contact with what he thought was the sofa, he knew he needed to turn left in order to make it to the kitchen. Just as he did, he heard someone call his name.

"Judd!" It was Blackie. "Judd!"

"Here!" he coughed out, feeling relieved when he felt his older brother grab hold of his arm and pull him through the kitchen and out of the house.

Coughing the smoke out of his lungs, Judd doubled over and did his best to breath in fresh air. He'd just caught his breath when Blackie punched him in the gut and shoved him to the ground. "You stupid, fuckin' asshole!" he hollered, "what the hell were you tryin' to do, get yourself killed?"

Judd looked up at his brother's face, seeing a combination of worry, concern, and a hell of a lot more anger than had been there in a long time. "I didn't expect the house to catch on fire, Blackie!"

Blackie ran a frustrated hand through his thick, sweat-soaked hair. "What the fuck did you think was gonna happen, Judd? That was an incendiary grenade! Once it explodes, it burns hotter than an acetylene torch for Christ's sake; that's hot enough to burn through a 1/2 inch steel plate! You're lucky you weren't incinerated!"

Judd had known that. But at the time, all he could think of was doing what he could to make sure his father didn't get away. "Save it, Blackie, I don't need a damn lecture!" he spat. At the moment, he was more concerned about how badly their other brother was hurt. "Where's Rebel?"

"I'm over here," he called from twenty feet away; sitting in the grass with their grandfather, he was still holding Blackie's shirt against his wound.

Judd got up, flashed Blackie a dirty look, and ran over to Rebel. "Are you okay?"

"He's fine," their grandfather answered. "The bullet just grazed his neck, but did take out a chunk of skin." He turned to Rebel. "You should have that looked at, son."

Judd held out a hand to his brother. "He can get it checked out at the hospital. I have to get back to Dusty."

"What about Jay?" Blackie asked from behind him. "Don't you want to go pick him up?"

"We probably should, but I've been gone too long. I want to be there when she wakes up. Since Dad's—" he wanted to say, 'probably dead', but wasn't sure how his grandfather would take it.

"Dead," the older man finished Judd's sentence. "That boy always was a bad seed."

"Granddaddy—"

"It's the truth, Judd. I failed you boys something terrible. I knew a little about the way he treated you and your mother, but didn't find out how bad things were until it was too late. Your mother was dead; Blackie was in prison, and you," he pointed to Judd, "were well on your way to following in your brother's footsteps. If I'd paid more attention over the years, maybe things wouldn't have been so bad for you."

"The way we were treated wasn't your fault, Granddaddy."

"No, but I should've paid more attention. I just thank God that Blackie was able to keep you two boys safe. If it wasn't

for you," he said to Blackie, "Dolan would've killed your brothers for sure."

Judd glanced at Blackie, and didn't know what to make of the expression on his brother's face. Was he surprised that their grandfather had given him a compliment, or that the older man had been aware of what Blackie had done?

Shaking his head, Blackie held his hand in the air. "Granddaddy, I ain't no better—"

"Don't talk that way, boy!" their grandfather yelled, surprising all of them. "It don't matter to me what you boys have done or where you been. It's where you are and where you're going that counts. All three of you have turned into something I'm proud of. And your grandmother—God rest her soul—would've been proud, too."

In all his life, Judd could never remember receiving a compliment from his grandfather. He'd been yelled at, cussed at, chased off his property, and disciplined by the man ... but never complimented. He didn't know what to say.

The faint sounds of sirens in the distance broke the silence. "You boys get on out of here, now. I'll handle the law."

Torn between rushing back to Dusty's side and leaving his grandfather to deal with the police and fire department, Judd remained still.

"You can't get in trouble for killing a dead man, Judd," his grandfather assured him. As far as the law is concerned, Dolan McCassey died twenty years ago. I'm just here because I was driving by after visiting my great-grandchildren at

Rebel's house, and heard an explosion. Don't know what caused it, but figured I'd better check it out."

Judd smiled and received a wink from his grandfather in return. "I may be seventy-seven years old, but that doesn't mean I'm not past telling a white lie or two when need be."

"Thanks, Granddaddy."

"You boys get on out of here, now." He shoed at them again. "Go. And make sure your baby brother gets that wound checked out."

All three boys nodded, and Judd chuckled inwardly at the phrase his grandfather used to refer to Rebel. Baby brother. That was funny. Out of the three of them, Rebel was for sure the most reliable and responsible. Judd hadn't thought of him as his baby brother since he was seven.

As they walked out of the yard, Blackie tried to give Rebel a hand, but he waved his brother off. "I'm fine. Help Judd. He's walking like he's about to drop dead."

That was the truth. Judd's body was quickly becoming stiff and sore from the fight he'd had with his father. When Blackie looped his arm around Judd's shoulders, he didn't shake it off ... he gladly leaned his weight against his big brother's body and accepted the support.

"You probably ought to clean up a little before we get to the hospital," Blackie said to Judd when they finally reached his truck. "You look as bad as we all did after fightin' the Renegades."

Judd rolled down the window on the passenger side of Blackie's truck and glanced at himself in the side mirror. His brother had been right. His face was covered in soot, and the

mixture of dirt, blood, and sweat made him look like a character out of a bad horror movie.

Then he glanced at each of his brothers, who looked just as bad. "You're right. But the two of you don't look a hell of a lot better. We should all clean up. But let's make it quick, I want to get back to the hospital. On our way, we can call Gypsy and Angel and have them bring the kids up—since everything's safe now."

"Thanks to you," Rebel told him. "If you hadn't thrown that grenade out the window, Dad would've gotten away."

Judd didn't acknowledge the compliment. He simply nodded, relieved that they were all finally free to live the lives they were meant to.

* * * *

Judd and his brothers made quick work of scrubbing themselves clean in the creek—mostly because it was the end of October, the water was cold, and they were freezing their asses off.

Taking an extra minute to dunk underwater and scrub the ash out of his hair, Judd finished and trudged back up the hill to where his brothers—as dripping wet as he was—were leaning against the side of Blackie's truck waiting for him.

He stopped in front of them, said, "Let's go," and reached for the passenger side door.

Blackie's arm shot out and stopped him. "Wait."
"What?"

Sticking a cigarette in between his lips, Blackie lit up and inhaled deeply. "Why'd you do it, Judd? Why'd you pick up that grenade?"

Out of all the questions he'd ever been asked, that one was by far the easiest one to answer. Running a hand through his wet curls, Judd plucked his brother's cigarette out of his hand and took a drag. "I watched Dad pull the pin and knew I had at least six seconds to get it the hell out of the house."

"Normally, yeah. But if it had gone off early, you woulda blown yourself up. How could you take that chance?"

"How could I not, Blackie? I'll never forget how I felt when I thought he'd killed Rebel. And Dusty's and Jay's lives were at stake. Hell, all of ours were. It was obvious Dad wanted us dead. If he'd gotten away, who knows if we ever would've found him again? I didn't want us to have to spend the rest of our lives looking over our shoulders. I did what I had to. I did it for us, bro ... all of us."

Nodding his approval, Blackie blew a few smoke rings and tossed his half-smoked cigarette to the ground. "Let's get the hell outta here before we all catch pneumonia."

But as he turned to walk around to the driver's side, Judd reached out and stopped him. "Hold on," he said, "It's my turn."

Both his brothers turned in his direction, waiting expectantly.

"I owe you both," he told them. "You boys didn't have to be part of any of what went on the past couple weeks, but you stood by me anyway, even knowing that things could've turned out a lot worse than they did."

Blackie smiled and punched Judd in his sore arm. "That's what brothers are for, asshole. And since there ain't no more of us, it looks like our days of runnin' around with guns, chasin' guys all over town, are over ... at least until Jade and Lily start datin'."

Judd laughed, remembering the day they stood on the side of their grandfather's barn joking about Rebel having to beat men off Jade with a stick.

"Come on," Blackie urged, putting his hand on Judd's neck and guiding him toward the door. "Get in the damn truck so we can get you back to Dusty. You still look like shit, but at least you ain't gonna make the babies cry when Gypsy and Angel show up at the hospital with them."

Judd shrugged out of his brother's hold and took a step forward, intending to walk to the other side of the truck. At the last second, he grabbed a handful of Blackie's long hair and tugged hard before letting go.

"Ah! Son of a bitch!"

Even as sore as he was, Judd took off running. Blackie came after him, just as Judd had known he would.

Nothing in the world was better than having brothers.

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Epilogue

One month later...

Staring at himself in the mirror, Judd tugged at his bowtie.

"Pullin' on it ain't gonna make it look no better, little brother."

Judd turned away from the full-length mirror and came face to face with Blackie. Standing behind him was Rebel, wearing a tuxedo that matched the ones his older brothers had on.

Laughing, Judd shook his head. "Why did I agree to let Rose plan this wedding?"

Blackie walked up behind him and brushed at his shoulders, talking to Judd's reflection in the mirror. "Because Dusty almost died and you've had a lot on your mind the past month. Because you wouldn't know how to plan a weddin' if you read a damn book. And because Rose has been like a mother to us since Mom died, and you love her too damn much to say no."

"True," Judd admitted, because he really did love Rose. She'd tried to be a mother to him and his brothers since their own mother died—and she had been—as much as they had let her. "Still, I should've known she'd try and turn this into a royal event."

"What's wrong with that?" Blackie asked. "They say everyone should do at least one thing in their lifetime that they'll never do again. I think wearin' these monkey suits more than qualifies."

"Great." Feeling as though he was being choked, Judd pulled at his bowtie again. Blackie's laughter was grating on his nerves, and what he really wanted to do was knock his brother on his ass. "You wouldn't think all this was so funny if you were in my shoes."

Blackie squeezed Judd's shoulders and winked. "Yeah, well I ain't in your shoes, little brother. So, from where I'm standin', it's pretty damn funny."

Rebel stepped up beside them. "If you think you're uncomfortable, you should see Dusty. She's spent the last hour tugging at her dress, begging Rose to let her put on a pair of jeans."

Judd could picture that. Dusty probably felt as out of place all dressed up as the rest of them did. Still, there was something about all this whole I-feel-like-I'm-playing-dress-up thing that made the day more special ... it was definitely one they were all going to remember for a long, long time. "As soon as the ceremony's over and we take all those damn pictures, these clothes are history."

"Ahem," came a voice from behind them, "am I interrupting?"

Judd could see her reflection in the mirror.

Hardly able to believe the sight before him, he turned around slowly. His brothers stepped to the side, making room for Judd to walk toward where Dusty was standing in the doorway.

Nearly breathless, "Oh my God," was all he could think of to say.

Dressed in a lacy, white wedding dress, she was the most beautiful woman he'd ever laid eyes on. "You look ... amazing."

She smiled, and even though she lowered her head, she couldn't hide the slight blush that turned her cheeks bright pink. "I've got so many layers of petticoats on that I could make myself an entire wardrobe ... if I knew how to sew."

"You don't know how to sew?" Judd asked with mock sarcasm.

Dusty playfully hit his chest. "I'm uncomfortable, Judd, I feel like I've taken up residence in someone else's body."

Still tugging at his bowtie, Judd agreed. "You and me both."

Dusty raised her hands and wrapped them around Judd's neck, then turned and looked at his brothers. "Can we have a minute?" she asked them. "I snuck away from Rose, but have a feeling she's got every one of the girls looking for me. Sixty seconds may literally be all I have."

"No worries, Dusty," Rebel said with a wink. "Me and Blackie will stand guard by the door. If a female comes anywhere near here, we'll handle them."

She grinned. "I just bet you will."

Nearly tripping over each other to leave the room, Blackie and Rebel each placed a quick kiss on Dusty's cheek as they passed by.

When they were gone and the door had been closed, Judd and Dusty stood still, staring at each other. "You look really handsome," she said, smiling. "Who knew?"

Judd laughed. "I guess we both clean up pretty well, huh?"

"We all do. I hardly recognized your brothers. You should see everyone, Judd. Have you ever been anyplace with so many well-dressed people?"

"Court." He shrugged. "But I don't think that counts."

She hit him again and he laughed, leaning forward to kiss her forehead. "It feels good to be close to you again," his lips whispered onto her skin, "to touch you."

"Mmm..."

"Even though it's been a month since your surgery, those first couple weeks were tough. Not being able to touch you here," Judd laid a hand on her chest, "just about killed me. And here," his hand traveled slowly down to her abdomen, "and especially here." But as his hand touched her thigh, she stiffened and tried to pull away. Unfortunately for her, she wasn't fast enough.

"What was that?" he demanded sharply.

"What?"

Judd reached forward to try and touch her thigh again, but she did her best to back away. He reached out and grabbed her arm, refusing to let her go anywhere. Pulling her to him, he touched the area on the outside of her dress where he'd felt the hard object. "That."

Releasing her arm, he leaned over and reached for the bottom of her dress, fighting the layers of material to try and get to her legs.

"Judd, don't!" She swatted at his arms, but he wasn't giving up. She had something hidden under there, and he wanted to know what it was.

"Judd!"

Ignoring her, Judd continued to fumble with her dress until he made contact with actual skin, running his hand up her right leg until he finally found what he was looking for. Wrapping his hand around both the Velcro band and leather holster, he ripped them free. When he got a look at the 9 millimeter, he was dumbfounded. Holding the weapon in the air, he waved it angrily in her face. "Afraid I was going to back out at the last minute?"

She lowered her head. "Judd—"

Judd put a finger under her chin and tilted her head up until she was looking directly into his eyes. "Look at me, Dusty." When her gaze dropped, he said it again. "Look ... at ... me," he drawled out. "My father's dead. You're safe now, Jay's safe. I'm not going to let anyone hurt either of you ever again."

Tears welled in her eyes, and then she blinked rapidly. "But—"

"But nothing. I could've kept you safe before if you'd let me know what was happening. My brothers and I could've taken care of our father before he had a chance to ever lay a hand on you or Jay. From now on, Dusty, you have to talk to me; tell me what's on your mind and what you're afraid of. You can't handle everything on your own, just like I can't. But we can do it together. Understood?"

She smiled through her tears and nodded. "Understood."

Judd laid the gun on the table next to him and pulled Dusty close. When he released her, Judd stepped back and reached into his front pocket. "Instead of that gun, why don't you carry this?"

When he handed Dusty his old pocketknife—the one he and Rebel had confiscated from her the night she'd stabbed the Drifters at Ten Acres—she held it in her hand for a moment, used her thumb to gently caress the metal where his initials were carved, then tucked the knife into her cleavage. "How come you're giving this back to me?"

Judd couldn't help but smile ... Dusty Zamora was the only woman he knew who would carry a knife inside the cleavage of her wedding dress and think nothing of it. "Because I figured it must be pretty important to you. After all, you did hang on to it for ten years."

"I'm sorry for taking it," she apologized. "I just wanted something to remember you by."

"You were carrying my baby, Dusty."

She smiled shyly. "Yeah, but at the time, I didn't know it."

"I have something else for you, too," he said, reaching into his other pocket. "Here." He held up a thin, silver chain with five small rings dangling from it.

Slowly, tentatively, a teary-eyed Dusty reached out and took it from him, staring at the rings. "The rings my sisters and I made when we were little. I thought I'd lost them. Where did you—"

"A few days after you left, we all went up to Ten Acres to clear away what was left of the cabin. The rings were lying in the clearing close to where we found your gun the night the Drifters showed up."

She nodded silently, handed the necklace back to Judd, and turned her back to him. He looped the jewelry around her neck, fastened the lobster claw clasp, and turned her around.

"You mean everything to me, Judd. I'm so glad I missed when I fired at you the first night I was back in town."

So was he. Judd chuckled and shook his head, pulling her close again. She wrapped her arms around his waist, and he did the same in return, marveling at how thin she still was. All the weight she'd lost since her surgery a month earlier had been very slow in coming back.

When they finally separated, his gaze traveled the length of her body, studying it.

"What's wrong?"

She must've seen him eyeing her slim figure, because she tilted her head and smiled. "You know, Judd," she said seductively, slowly running her index finger all the way down the left side of his face until it came to stop under his chin. She tilted his head up so he was looking directly into her eyes. "There's a very easy way for me to gain weight. In fact, I might even put so much on that you'll be wishing I was back to my skinny little self."

He shook his head. "There's no way I would wish that, Dusty. You're so thin right now that it scares me. If there's a way you can—" he stopped abruptly and froze, tilting his head slightly to the side, squinting. "Wait a minute, what exactly are you trying to say?"

Good, he'd gotten the hint. "I want to have another baby, Judd. I want Jay to have a brother or sister he can be close to. I want to see that same expression on your face when you look at your infant son or daughter as you do when you look at Jay ... like you love him, appreciate him, and can't believe he's yours."

A baby. A baby with Dusty, the only woman he ever loved—ever wanted. And this time, he'd be there every step of the way. "Are you sure?"

She nodded. "Other than wanting to become your wife, I've never been more sure of anything in my entire life."

"Then let's do it," he said, pulling her into an embrace, "let's have a baby. We don't even have to stop at one. We can have as many as you want."

She smiled, and without warning, Judd leaned down, picked her up, and swung her around. "You'll never know how glad I am that you came back to Hagerstown. My life never would've meant anything; never would've been complete, without you in it. I love you."

"I love you, too, Judd. I'm sorry I stayed away so long, it's just that—"

Judd put a finger to her lips. "Shh. We've already been over that. It's done, it's over. We're together now, and that's all that matters."

Dusty nodded and melted back into Judd's arms, and hung on tight.

"It looks like my brothers and I are going to have to recruit a few more McCasseys to help us finish rebuilding your house. It's crowded enough at Rebel and Gypsy's with you and me living in the basement and Jay bunking with Raider. I'm not sure there's room for one more ... even if it is just a little baby."

A knock at the door separated them. "What the hell is it now?" Judd yelled, thinking it was one of his brothers.

The door creaked open and Jay stuck his head in. "Sorry, Dad, but Aunt Rose said it's time to start. And I think you better get out here. I wasn't supposed to say anything, but Uncle Blackie and Uncle Rebel are right behind me. If you don't get out here—"

"Outta my way, Little Judd," Blackie said as he pushed the door open and eased Jay to the side.

Rebel stepped in behind him, ruffling Jay's hair as he walked by.

Coming to a stop directly in front of Judd, Blackie held his hands out to the side and shrugged. "You two waitin' on an engraved invitation or somethin'? What the hell is takin' so damn long?"

Judd knew his brother was joking, but he acted like he took the bait anyway. "None of your damn business, asshole. If my wife and I want to spend time talking about making you and Rebel uncles again, we'll do it, dammit. You're just going to have to wait."

Crossing his arms in front of his chest, Blackie leaned his weight on his left foot and stuck his right one out in front of him. "She ain't your wife until your asses walk down that aisle and—" he stopped short. "What?"

Judd smiled, more than happy that Blackie—the brother who had something to say about everything—was finally speechless. "We've decided to have another baby."

Jay, who had been so quiet that Judd had nearly forgotten he was there, let out an excited whoop. "Yay, we're having a baby!"

"No," Judd corrected, motioning from himself to Dusty and back again several times, "we're going to have a baby ... eventually. That means you, are going to be a big brother."

"Yay, I'm going to be a big brother!" the nine-year-old shouted as he danced around the room. Then he stopped suddenly and turned to gaze at his mother's tiny waist. "Wait a second. You don't look like you're having a baby. How long is 'eventually'? Is it soon?"

"I—" She started to respond to Jay's question, but didn't know exactly what to say.

Thankfully, Rebel came to her rescue by stepping forward and pulling Judd into a bear hug. "That's pretty cool, man. I guess this means we're going to have to haul ass to get Dusty's house finished, huh?"

Judd laughed. "Something like that."

When the two men ended their embrace, Rebel turned to Jay. "Well, before you can be a big brother, you have to be a best man. Do you think you can convince your dad to get his ass out there, so Blackie can give your mom away and we can get the party started?"

"I'm on it, Uncle Rebel." Jay saluted and crossed the room, taking his father's hand. "Come on, Dad, let's go get married."

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Look for The Long Road Home (The Final McCassey Book) available from Whiskey Creek Press in September 2008

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About the Author

Lauren Sharman, who was voted BEST ROMANCE AUTHOR in the 2006 Annual Preditors & Editors Reader's Poll, has been creating characters and writing short stories since she was a little girl. But it was her love of reading that finally inspired her to write novels. At home in Maryland, she and her husband live on three acres of land with their two amazing kids, and share a passion for classic cars, music, steamed crabs, and spending time with their friends.

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In addition to Dusty Rose (The McCassey Brother's Trilogy: Book 3), Lauren's other award winning releases from Whiskey Creek Press include:

Growing Up Little (May 2006)

#3 BESTSELLER at Whiskey Creek Press, June 2006

2006 Predator's & Editors Reader's Poll Top Ten Finisher

Her Shadow (A short story in the HATE Anthology) (August 2006)

#9 BESTSELLER at Whiskey Creek Press, September 2006

No Worries (The McCassey Brother's Trilogy: Book 1)
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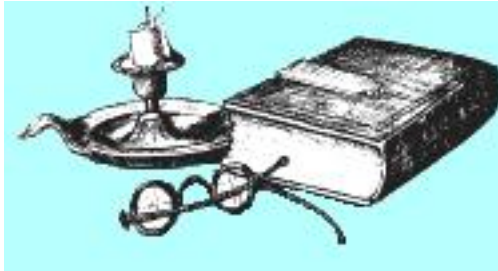
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