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TRADING FACES

DENISE BELINDA McDONALD



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Dedication

Thanks to my regular crew: Sandy Jones, Amie Stuart, Lynn Matherly, Michelle Miles and the Faulkners—you guys have always been the BEST support team.

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Chicas ~ write-on!

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Chapter One

“Are you sure you’re up for this, Elyse?”

Elyse Cabot looked at her sister then out the window as a steady rain fell, blurring the other cars in the parking lot. The rhythmic tattoo lulled her into a melancholy mood. The drive through Fort Worth went smoother than she had anticipated, despite the Friday afternoon traffic, making her and her sister arrive at the funeral home sooner than she had expected. She thought she would have more time to prepare.

Cara repeated the question. Elyse took a deep breath and nodded, not altogether sure if she meant it. It would be difficult to go to her ex-husband’s memorial service. Even though they had been divorced for three years, a small part of her heart ached with loneliness. She would never see Matthew Lee Cabot again.

She tried to remember the last time she had spoken to him. The most recent conversation she could recall was the night he phoned to wish her happy birthday four months ago. He’d been a week late as usual.

“Well come on then, let’s get this over with.” Cara opened her car door, popped open her bright golf umbrella and got out.

Elyse marveled at the contrast of the dreary funeral day and the huge red and yellow umbrella. The dance of colors in the rain mocked her mournful mood as her sister rounded the front of the car.

The unpredictable Fort Worth weather had brought rain and cold, cold winds, colder than Elyse could remember for the middle of October—the week before it had been in the low eighties. She shook her head. The places her mind went trying to avoid what lay ahead.

When Cara made it to the passenger side of the car Elyse's numb fingers fumbled with the latch on the door three times before she gained purchase and opened it. She huddled with Cara under the umbrella and together they dashed for the front door of McPhilbert's Funeral Home. At the door, Elyse paused to take another deep breath.

Can I do this? Can I go in there? Elyse wondered.

"You okay, honey?" Cara asked, water dripping and splashing around them.

Elyse tried to paste on a reassuring smile but tears welled up in her eyes and threatened to spill. She looked away from her older sister's close scrutiny and nodded. Cara squeezed her hand and pushed through the front doors.

A stiff-shouldered man stood in the bright foyer and moved toward the two women as they removed their raincoats.

"We're here for the Matthew Cabot funeral," Cara said.

"Yes, ma'am. Right this way."

At the last viewing room on the right, Elyse backed away from the door. "I can't go in there. I don't want to see him." Her sister grabbed her arm before she could bolt for the front of the funeral home.

Elyse had never been to a funeral home before. In all her thirty-two years, she'd somehow avoided the ritualistic chore.

"You're going in there." Cara's grip tightened. "You told me yourself the only way you could believe he's dead is if you saw him with your own eyes. It'll take two minutes and then we'll go."

"I changed my mind."

"Coward."

Cara's admonition stiffened Elyse's spine. As children, her four older siblings often got her to do things she didn't want to by taunting her with similar names. She narrowed her eyes at her sister.

"That's not fair."

"Such is life. Now let's go. Craig is watching the girls and the Stars play in—" she looked at her watch, "—an hour and a half. If I don't get back in time they'll drive him nuts."

"Ah, poor baby. Wouldn't want to miss Modano out on the ice."

It was Cara's turn to glare. "You know damn well he offered to come with us. Which is especially kind of him considering how much he detested Matthew. Not that he would wish him dead," Cara added quickly, looking at the ceiling as if apologizing to heaven.

Elyse shook her head. *You're looking in the wrong direction.*

"Sorry. I'm a little on edge." Elyse loved her brother-in-law, all three of them in fact, but she never could understand why none of them got along with Matthew. She released a heavy breath. "Okay, I think I'm ready." She fisted her hands, her nails digging into her palms to ground her growing nerves.

The carpeted floor muted the sounds her shoes made as she moved through the room. Cool air prickled her skin. She tried to focus her attention on the mahogany casket, but as Elyse entered, the murmur of conversation stopped. She noticed the groups of people around the room watching, staring at her. Every now and then, someone whispered her name. Thankfully, no one approached her; no one appeared to want near her. She glanced from one face to the next and all eyes darted away from hers. Embarrassed or ashamed to be caught, she didn't know.

All except one pair of eyes, she noticed. They studied her and followed her across the room.

Staring at the blond-haired man in the corner, Elyse slowed her pace. An air of familiarity washed over her, but she couldn't place him. Before she could delve too far back in her past, Cara tugged her arm, pulling her mind back to the all-too-quiet room.

Elyse's breath caught when she looked inside the satin-lined casket. The man she had loved for many years, the man she had married and divorced, lay still. Elyse freed her pent-up breath.

The fear and anxiety over seeing him fled quickly and curiosity filled its place. Elyse studied his face, studied planes of his cheekbones and jaw, and the lines that traveled from the corners of closed eyes. Every aspect of his face was familiar—yet not. He seemed different somehow—changed from the last time she had seen him. She couldn't put her finger on it, but something inside her twitched with an uncanny notion that it wasn't really Matthew.

But it had to be.

She wondered if death had somehow altered him, other than the obvious ways. Was it that death somehow released the tension he seemed to always carry with him? She imagined that must be it. But still, a niggling in the back of her mind told her it wasn't Matthew. She would be able to tell. A wife could tell—even an ex-wife.

“Ridiculous.”

It had been a long time since she had seen him face to face. They divorced three years earlier and found little reason to encounter one another. Could she have become so unfamiliar with a man she had known intimately for nearly ten years?

Matthew had a scar under his chin. If she could just see it, it would prove to her it was Matthew Lee Cabot lying in the satin-lined box. Problem was, it was on the far side of his face. She couldn't see it from her vantage point. She had to know.

Gulping in a lungful of air, she steadied her nerves and reached for the dead man's face. Her fingers paused on the cool skin of his chin. A jolt of utter revulsion spread through her. Nausea rolled her stomach.

Can't stop now, she told herself.

Elyse ran her fingers over Matthew's chin.

“Elyse, what in the hell are you doing?”

She jumped back and stifled a shriek. Her cheeks burned with embarrassment when she turned to face her sister. Their eyes locked.

“That’s not Matthew,” Elyse said, barely above a whisper.

“You want to explain to me what in the hell you’re talking about?” Cara demanded the minute they were in the confines of her late-model Mercedes. She had apologized to the people standing near them and, to Elyse’s great embarrassment, dragged her from the funeral home.

“I... Cara, I don’t think that was Matthew.”

“What? What? Honey, I know this is hard for you, but you need to get a grip.” Cara leaned across the car and took Elyse’s hand in her own. “You know as well as I do that Matthew was found sho...dead in his office. His brother found him. Remember?”

“I know the damn details, Cara.” Of course, she remembered. She had memorized the article in the paper which had pored through Matthew’s death, fact by fact, leaving his life a mere statistic in the evils of random violence.

Elyse rubbed her temple with her free hand when a headache sprang up unexpectedly. “I always thought we were so linked. Like a part of me would disappear when he died. Like I would know the exact minute he died. But knowing he was gone and looking at him, I felt nothing. Absolutely nothing, Cara.”

“You’re in shock, that’s all.”

“No. He seemed different.”

“You’ve been divorced for three years. And you haven’t seen him in over six months. That’s to be expected.”

Elyse sighed. “Why won’t you listen to me?”

“No, you listen. You’re under a lot of stress. I know you still have feelings for him.”

“Not the way you think,” Elyse mumbled under her breath. Cara didn’t seem to hear, or if she did, she ignored the comment.

“It’s got to be a shock to see him like that, that’s all.”

“I don’t know.” For the first time since seeing the body in the casket, doubt of her confusion crept into her conscious. “I...that’s why I was touching his face. Matthew

has...had a scar—” she motioned to the underside of her chin, “—from a fall off a skateboard when he was thirteen.”

“Was it there?”

“I don’t think so. But you scared the crap out of me the minute I touched him. Now I’m not so sure.”

“Do you want to go back in there and try again? So you can be sure.”

The question seemed amiable, but the tone in which her sister delivered it, condescending, patronizing, made her want to sink in the seat. She really did need to get a grip.

The chasm of doubt widened at her sister’s certainty she was blowing this out of proportion. Elyse only wished she could get the niggling, uneasy feeling out of stomach, to let herself mourn in the proper fashion a former wife should.

“Whatever the hell that means.”

“What did you say, hon?” Cara started the car.

“Nothing. You’re right. I’m just drained from the stress of work and this just pushed me over the edge. I’m making this out to be something it isn’t.” Elyse swiped a stray tear from her cheek and glanced back at the building. “After the burial service tomorrow I will be done with Matthew Cabot forever.”

Chapter Two

The sun burned bright, at war with the slight breeze, causing the trees surrounding the cemetery to sway in a sad dance. Elyse listened to the rustle of leaves, tried to block out the inane conversations filtering through the clusters of over-dressed, indifferent mourners.

Her stomach growled and quickly she looked around to see if anyone noticed. But no one was paying attention to her. She hadn't eaten breakfast, afraid she wouldn't be able to keep it down. She hadn't eaten dinner the night before either, and lunch had only been a small salad. She made a mental note to grab a snack on her way to her parents' house after the funeral.

Gripping her purse tight to her body, she waded through the sea of dark suits and dresses. Adjusting her sunglasses, she took a deep breath and peeked at the casket suspended over the grave.

Sadness filled her, but not because she missed Matthew. She was saddened he had wasted so much of his life. He never had children, not with her, and not with the scores of women rumor linked him to since their divorce. Granted, children, or lack thereof, had been a sore spot in their marriage, but she never could understand why he never had any.

"At least the sky has cleared up," someone in the crowd around the gravesite mumbled.

"Yeah I was afraid I would have to reschedule my golf game later."

Elyse stared at the men's backs, horrified. Did they have no respect? Couldn't they wait half an hour to chitchat? Though why she was surprised she didn't know. Most of the people there were Matthew's clients, not necessarily friends. Her opinion of them, tainted by the many social functions Matthew had dragged her to, left her scrambling to get away. She hadn't liked to rub elbows with them then, and now it held even less appeal.

Being the top accountant with his firm, with a client bankroll list that could end world hunger—forever—warped Matthew's view on life. His elitist attitude only stayed in this hemisphere because Elyse wanted a normal life. No over-the-top house, no brand new luxury car every year. Elyse had even clipped coupons, which, on more than one occasion, had thrown Matthew into a tizzy.

"We can afford whatever you want. Why do you need to save twenty-five cents on butter?" he had once asked. He canceled the newspaper subscription the next day. "No more coupons."

Shaking her head to block more unpleasant memories, she moved away from the men, trying to find a closer position—not that she really wanted a better view. A few feet away however, a man—the one from the funeral home the day before—stepped in front of her, blocking her route.

"Excuse me." She moved to her left and so did he. She moved to her right and so did he. She huffed out a tiresome breath and looked up at him.

He towered over her by at least a foot despite her mid-heeled shoes. Hulk and brawn oozed from beneath his suit. Surrounded by many people, he didn't seem threatening, but she suddenly regretted coming alone to the burial service.

"Elyse? Elyse Cabot?" the man asked.

He knew her name? Of course he would. Most of the people there did. They looked at her, pointed at her, talked about her. You would have to be deaf and blind not to know she was the ex-wife. She had even heard a few pointed comments suggesting she had no business being at Matthew's funeral.

When they divorced, her ranks within the moneyed society fell to near the bottom of their food chain. They treated her as if she didn't exist. Which was fine by her, she couldn't care less what they thought about her, but she also couldn't help her nerves skittering around them.

"Mrs. Cabot?" the man asked again.

"Yes."

"I'm sorry for your loss."

"I, ah, th...thank you." Her throat tightened. Few people had spoken to her. This man was the first to consider she may be hurting. Who was he? A co-worker of Matthew's? Or a client? He looked like many of Matthew's clients. Nice, tailored suit and expensive leather shoes. She knew the look. Matthew had had a closet filled with the same style.

She wracked her brain, going over the many parties she had attended. It had been so long ago and she couldn't place him. "And you are...?"

He extended his hand. "Jack Walling. I'm a friend of Jonathan's. I met you about thirteen years ago."

Elyse shook his hand without hesitation, her manners ingrained. "Jack?" Jonathan, her ex-husband's twin, was a nice man, but they hadn't socialized much. "I'm sorry the name doesn't ring a bell."

She looked Jack over. His sandy blond hair—a little too shaggy to go with a thousand-dollar-plus suit—accentuated rather tanned skin for the middle of October. Up close, she could see a thin white scar that ran from the corner of his mouth out about three inches. She was certain she would remember meeting him.

"It was at a Christmas party over at Jon's girlfriend's house in ninety-five."

Jack? Jack? Still, nothing was coming to her. The only friend of Jonathan's she ever remembered meeting was a nerdy guy who had just come home from boot camp.

"Sorry." She started to move past him but her curiosity made her pause. She stared at him, the sights and the sounds of the party coming to her.

The house flashed in her mind. The grand tudor had had red and green Christmas lights strung from the front eaves. Bales of hay decorated with garland and holly dotted the front yard.

It had been unseasonably warm that day, reaching highs in the seventies. The party's theme, a down home Christmas, had all the partygoers sweating the night away clad in heavy western attire.

Still, the only friend of Jonathan's at the party was the nerdy Marine. Of course, his date was a knockout. She'd thought he was much too skinny to be a Marine. The man standing before her couldn't be the same man. He was anything but skinny.

She studied him closely. Jack Walling seemed solidly built. Despite the suit jacket, she could tell he had broad shoulders and chest. Large hands poked out from the cuffs.

She tried to focus on his facial features. She couldn't see his eyes because of his dark sunglasses, but as far as she could tell, despite the scar on his mouth, he had no remarkable features, just an average man—although put together quite nicely. Other than his hair, about the same color as nerd-boy, there was very little similarity.

Yet...

"At the Christmas party, did you and I dance?"

A shy smile broke across his face. "Yeah, have your feet recovered yet?"

Oh my God. Her eyes widened, thankfully hidden behind her glasses. It was nerd-boy. It'd been painful to dance with him. He had two-stepped all over her brand new Nacona boots. The next day, it had taken her an hour to get all the scuff marks off.

Boy oh boy, how he had changed.

His smile faded and he pushed his hand through his hair. "Like I said, I'm sorry for your loss."

"Yes, well." Again, his kind words tightened her throat. "I... Thank you for showing your support to Jonathan by coming today."

Geez, could I sound more pretentious?

"Have you seen him?" Jack looked around the large crowd of people. "I can't find him. I wanted to let him know I'm here."

“No, sorry. I haven’t been able to find him either, but I haven’t been looking real hard. I’m a little scatterbrained today.” Saying that, she dropped her purse, spilling the contents on the hard ground.

A small squeak escaped Elyse’s throat. The tears that had threatened the past two days flooded her eyes and ran down her face. She all but fell to her knees and shoved her wallet, a compact and other sundries back into her purse.

“Calm down, Elyse... Mrs. Cabot.” Jack knelt down beside her.

“Calm down? How can you say that? Everyone’s watching me. I can’t stand everyone’s eyes on me.”

He put his hand on hers, stilling it instantly. “Take a deep breath. It’s okay. Don’t worry what these people think. The only reason they’re upset is because they have to find a new accountant,” he whispered. “Don’t let them get to you.”

Elyse looked up. Her image reflected in his dark sunglasses. Pulling her hand free, she frantically swiped at the tears on her cheeks. Then looking away, she removed her own sunglasses and wiped her eyes with a tissue from her pocket.

“Is there someone I can get for you?” Jack asked.

“I’m here alone.” She barely spoke above a whisper as she put the glasses back on.

“Where is your family?”

The harsh, accusatory tone of Jack’s words snapped Elyse’s gaze back to his. “I’m here alone,” she repeated.

“No one came here with you? Why?” If possible, his tone grew more severe. “Someone should be here to support you at your husband’s funeral.”

“Ex-husband.”

His eyebrows rose above the rims of his glasses.

“My family didn’t think I should come today so I lied and told them I wasn’t.”

“I’m sorry.”

She looked at Jack Walling for a long moment, touched by the complete—well not entirely complete—stranger’s concern for her in a way she didn’t think possible.

“Don’t be,” she said, not sure, if the words were for him or her. Instead of dissecting her words, she just stood and walked away from him, not looking back.

A hush fell over the crowd as the minister approached the casket, which hovered over the dug out grave. Elyse watched Jonathan walk several steps behind with his head bent, dark glasses covering his eyes.

Her heart lurched and butterflies swarmed in her stomach. Poor man. His last remaining family member lay stretched out in a mahogany coffin ready for interring while many people who barely knew him stood around not mourning, but gawking.

The minister kept the service short. Not a single soul offered to speak on Matthew’s behalf. Several people did, however, look at Elyse as if waiting for her to, but she shook her head and the minister read the benediction.

After a hearty amen, Elyse raised her head and studied Jonathan across the grave. It struck her again, how much he and Matthew looked alike. Even though they were identical twins, she’d never had trouble in the past telling them apart. How odd that in death they would confuse her so.

An eerie sensation filled her when she noticed Jonathan watching her—or just near her, she couldn’t tell because of his sunglasses. She glanced around to see who he might be looking at. There had to be a dozen people standing in the thirty or so feet that spread out between them, but no one stood anywhere near his gaze, just her.

Jonathan removed his glasses and winked at her. A jolt of awareness raced through her. The storming butterflies in her stomach morphed into fanged creatures gnawing at her insides trying to make an escape.

“Matthew?”

“Did you say something, Mrs. Cabot?” Jack came up behind her. Something so sad about her had struck a cord in him. He had an overwhelming urge to talk to her again.

She didn't answer, just stood frozen in her spot.

He moved next to her and looked to where she stared. He found Jonathan standing next to the minister but looking straight at Elyse.

"What in the hell is going on?" Elyse asked.

"Mrs. Cabot? What's wrong?" Jack took her arm. He didn't understand what had gotten into her all of the sudden. She hadn't made a peep throughout the service, standing stoic despite all the nasty stares from the crowd. But now she ripped off her glasses and stood rigid.

At the funeral home the day before, when she and the other woman had bolted, he chalked it up to overwhelming grief. This was different somehow. She seemed nervous, frightened even.

Jack looked back and forth between her and Jonathan. Some kind of silent communication seemed to be going on between them, raising his curiosity. Whatever it was clearly upset Elyse. Jonathan winked at her and a sad smile crawled across his face. Elyse sucked in a breath and all the color drained from her face.

"Matthew." Elyse jerked her arm free from Jack's grip, continuing to stare over the grave at the man beside the minister. Turning his attention back to Jonathan, Jack watched him. His old friend nodded slowly to Elyse. Jack might not have even detected it if he hadn't been looking directly at the man.

His eyes shot back to Elyse as an eerie sound, a muffled cry, sprang from her.

Her early question played in his head. What in the hell was going on?

"Mrs. Cabot?" Jack asked again, trying to get her to turn her attention to him. He desperately wanted to know what was going on.

She didn't answer and took a step away. Back and forth like a tennis match, his volleyed gaze went. Why he didn't just leave the pair alone, he couldn't say. Something, some perverse curiosity, kept him routed to his spot.

Jack watched Jonathan speak to the minister, then looked at Elyse again before turning from the grave, walking away.

“Have to...go to...Matthew,” Elyse said in a low, breathy voice before she collapsed.

Chapter Three

“Mrs. Cabot!” Jack lunged for her but he couldn’t catch her in time. She hit the ground with a solid thud. The few stragglers standing around did nothing but gawk. Not one person attempted to help. Several walked right past her on their way to their cars.

Someone even said, “Drama queen.”

“Assholes,” Jack swore under his breath as he scooped the woman off the ground and into his lap.

“Mrs. Cabot, can you hear me?” Jack smoothed the hair off her face, careful not to touch a plum-size lump, which grew on her pale cheek.

“Should we call an ambulance?” a woman dressed in a full-length mink coat, and ungodly dyed blonde hair, asked a few minutes later. Strong perfume radiated from her. Jack’s wrinkled his nose.

Although the question sounded considerate, the look on her face said she would rather leave without being bothered to help.

Jack shook his head. “She should come around any minute.” He didn’t actually know whether Elyse would need medical attention or not, but there was no reason for Ms. Rodeo Drive to hang around. He was completely capable of dialing 911 if need be.

“If you’re sure.” She didn’t wait for him to comment, but turned on her extraordinarily high heels and walked away, leaving him alone with Elyse Cabot.

While he watched the stranger's brassy hair bop on her shoulders, the woman in his lap moaned.

"Mrs. Cabot, can you hear me?"

"Huh? What...what happened?" A pale hand fluttered to her forehead.

"You passed out."

"I did?"

"Yeah." How many times had he imaged her lying in his arms? He had to fight the urge to run his hand through her hair. Swallowing the lump in his throat, he continued. "How do you feel?"

"I, ah...dizzy." She pressed her hand to her stomach. "Queasy too, but I haven't eaten since yesterday."

"That'll do it."

"Head hurts."

"You have a nasty bump under your eye. You hit the ground pretty hard when you fell."

She winced when her fingers ran over the knot. She had yet to open her eyes and looked almost as if she might go back under.

"Can you talk to me? Do you know where you are?"

"I was, uh, at a, uh, funeral at the Wheylands Cemetery. Is that where I am?"

"Yes." Jack leaned his face closer to hers. "You're still at the cemetery."

"Cemetery... Matthew!" Her eyes flew open. She sat up, smacking the top of her head on Jack's jaw.

"Ow. Damn." Jack rubbed the spot.

Elyse leapt to her feet faster than Jack would have thought possible for a woman who, just moments before, was dead to the world. As if to prove his point, she wobbled on her feet and threatened to topple back onto him.

Jack sprang to his feet and grabbed her elbows steadying her. "Careful, Mrs. Cabot."

"Would you please quit calling me that? My name is Elyse." She pulled her arms from his grip, then looked over her shoulder at him for a long moment, studying him

almost, before turning her attention back to the mound of dirt ready to cover the still open grave.

It was the first time he noticed her eyes—the sunglasses had hidden them earlier. He'd forgotten the warm, liquid color. They were a shade darker than whiskey. And intoxicating. Eyes the color of whiskey could only be described as intoxicating. Coupled with her light brown hair and pale skin, despite the huge purple blemish on her cheek, she was quite beautiful.

He couldn't believe he'd forgotten how beautiful she was.

Again, he noticed, she wore not a dab of makeup. Most women wouldn't walk around the house without any makeup, much less go out in public. But not Elyse.

Thinking back to the Christmas party thirteen years earlier, he remembered she wore no makeup that evening either. She had a natural beauty. No enhancements needed for Elyse Cabot. Which only added to her allure.

His own date that night, however, had had garish amounts of makeup piled onto her face. As the night wore on, the heat unabated, she melted like a Madame Tussaud's wax figure left in the desert.

He'd watched Elyse all night, wishing she were his date instead of Muffy. Or was it Buffy? He didn't care. He'd been so focused on Elyse, what's-her-name left with one of the waiters when he didn't respond to her pouting. He'd also been watching when Matthew pulled her from the main living room and out onto the terrace. Her beautiful face flushed with laughter. A fierce, but brief flash of jealousy ripped through him when the couple kissed under the mistletoe.

A jolt rocketed through Jack. Not only did he think it was inappropriate to consider his friend's sister-in-law, ex or otherwise, but having his pants tighten in a wide-awake wet dream at a funeral had to be a major taboo.

He cleared his throat and his thoughts. "You should probably go to the hospital and have the bump checked out."

"What? Are you a doctor?" She turned around and faced him.

Again, Jack had to fight the unfamiliar urge to touch her, even if just to dust the twigs and dirt that clung to the front of her ankle length black dress. He was never a sucker for a sob story, the past feelings aside. Somehow though, she hacked right to his gut with the pain in her eyes.

“No, actually I’m a PI. But you took a nasty fall and you were out of it for a bit.”

She eyed him a moment. “Fine. Thanks.” She pushed past him and scanned at the parking lot. “Damn.”

He turned to see his Toyota, the lone car at the edge of the drive.

“Where’s your car Mrs....ah, Elyse?”

“Huh? What?” The look in her eyes appeared a million miles away.

“How are you going to get home?” he spoke slowly. “I don’t see your car out there.”

“I took a cab,” she said, finally turning her attention back to him. “I... I was afraid to drive myself. My hands haven’t stopped shaking.”

Involuntarily, he looked at her hands. Fingers intertwined, she held them close to her body.

“Well, where do you live? I’ll drive you home.” He reached in his pocket and grabbed his keys, but stopped at the look on Elyse’s face. “What?”

“That’s not necessary.” Her pale face blanched more if possible. “I’ll call another...”

“Elyse, it’ll take a cab company an hour to get out here.” He looked past her to the brightening horizon. “And by then it’ll be pretty hot. Do you want to be stranded here in all this heat? It’s supposed to be a scorcher.”

A war of emotions ran across her face. She rubbed her hands together and gnawed on her bottom lip. Eyes drawn to her mouth, his blood warmed. Why did the woman have this effect on him? And in a cemetery, no less.

“Okay. Thank you,” she said finally. “I appreciate the offer.” She moved past him and headed for his car.

Other than telling him where to turn, Elyse said nothing to Jack the entire ride to her house, only stared out her window.

“The last house on the right,” she told him when they pulled onto her street.

She lived in a nice, older neighborhood, only blocks from his. He was surprised though, he’d been expecting a really nice neighborhood, maybe something gated. Not a small, affordable house in the far north Fort Worth neighborhood which he called home.

If he remembered correctly, the last time he’d spoken with Jonathan, Matthew had just made partner at his firm and earned a hefty raise. He couldn’t believe Elyse hadn’t finagled more from the divorce, at least enough to live in a more expensive neighborhood than here.

When he pulled up in front of her house, he noticed two interesting things. The first thing he noticed was a “For Sale” sign.

“Moving?”

“Huh?” She looked at the sign then back at Jack. “When, and if, the owners sell it, I’ll have to. I just lease it.”

Huh? What the hell? Not only did she not live on the posh side of town, but she rented her home.

The second thing he noticed stood and took several steps toward the car. A smile spread across Elyse’s face. She waved at the young man then turned to Jack.

“Thanks for the ride home.” She jumped out of the car and hugged the scowl-faced young man. He had to be at least ten years her junior.

Jack guessed she didn’t have any trouble replacing Matthew when they divorced. Of course, the young guy might have been why she now had to rent her house, might have caused the divorce.

Jack shook his head. *What do I care?*

He sat, watching as the guy pulled back from Elyse to look at the welt on her cheek. Even in the fading evening light, Jack watched as Stud-boy’s face turned a brilliant shade of crimson. He’d never seen a face redden so fast.

He couldn't hear what the two said but the young man pointed at him and Elyse shook her head. Whatever she told Stud-boy must have convinced him, because he put his hand in the middle of Elyse's back and walked her up to the front door. Twice, though, Stud-boy looked back to where Jack sat in his car. The look had probably meant to terrify Jack, but as he drove away, he just laughed.

Thank God he didn't have to deal with Elyse Cabot anymore.

Chapter Four

“Thanks, Cody. You really didn’t have to wait for me.” Elyse shut the front door. Raw nerves buzzed throughout her body.

They stood in the small living room. She didn’t want to make small talk but she also didn’t want to be rude to Cody.

Cody Roberts, her oldest nephew at twenty, took on a pseudo role of older brother with Elyse even though she had an older brother—and three older sisters. Somehow, being the youngest of five children growing up, Elyse’s station in the family had been relegated to charge. And even as adults the others watched over her, which spilled over to the next generation. Fortunately, only Cody took his post seriously. The other nephews and nieces were more concerned with being children than worrying about poor Aunt Elyse.

“Please. If I left without making sure I saw you, Mom would have had my hide,” Cody said with a genuine smile. “I was headed over to her house for lunch.”

Elyse smiled. He might have left adolescence behind years before, but his mother’s cooking would always bring him home.

A skittering noise sounded on the hardwood floors, pulling Elyse’s gaze to the hallway. Monty, Elyse’s ninety-eight-pound mutt, rounded the corner. Seeing Cody, he loped over and planted his large front paws on the boy’s shoulders. Monty’s tongue worked overtime wetting Cody’s chin.

“Monty, down boy.” Elyse grabbed his collar and pulled the dog away. “Sorry.”

“S’okay. Dang, I think he grew since the last time I saw him. What are you feeding him, Aunt Elyse?” Cody squatted and boxed at the dog’s wet nose. “What’ve you been eating, wonder-gut?”

“Let’s see. Yesterday he ate my new sweater.” Elyse relaxed talking with Cody. She always did. “And the day before it was the neighbor’s plastic trash can. The day before that...”

“Okay, I get it.” He laughed and rubbed his chin across Monty’s head. “Wonder-gut,” he said again to the dog before patting him one last time. Then he stood and faced Elyse again.

Her stomach knotted at his close scrutiny.

“You went to the funeral didn’t you?” he asked, his eyes narrowed.

She nodded and looked down at her shoes.

“Aunt Elyse, you know one of us would have gone with you. Why’d you go alone?”

“I needed to say goodbye.”

Cody eyed her for a moment longer. “You know mom would have gone with you? Or Aunt Cara, or...”

“I know. But I wanted to go alone. And for whatever reason, your mom and the rest of them didn’t think I could handle it.” Elyse dropped her purse on the couch and shoved her hands on her hips. “I’m tired of feeling like I’m twelve years old. I don’t need a babysitter.”

“Hey. Calm down, Aunt Elyse.” Cody held his hands up in front of him. “Believe me. I know how overbearing Mom can be. Why do you think I got my own apartment?”

“You’re a good kid.” She stood on her tiptoes and ruffled his hair.

“I’m not that much younger than you.” He swatted her hand away but smiled. Then the smile faded and hard lines spread between his brows. “Who was that man that drove you home?”

Why does everyone in my life feel the need to protect me? Am I that pathetic?

“Jack Walling. He’s a friend of Jonathan’s.”

Jack. She couldn't believe nerd-boy had filled out into quite a man. The Marines must have agreed with him. What was it he said he did? He wasn't a Marine anymore but a cop. No, a private eye.

"Now, explain again. How did you get that nasty shiner?" Cody broke into her thoughts.

Elyse lightly touched the knot on her right cheekbone. How had it happened? She'd fainted after seeing...Matthew. How could she have forgotten? She turned away from Cody so he couldn't see her face. She wasn't sure she could hide the mixture of fear and anger that must show.

Matthew, not Jonathan, had stood next to the minister as he read the eulogy.

What in the hell is going on?

Confusion ripped through her for the second time that day. She'd been right. When she'd told Cara the man in the coffin looked unfamiliar to her, he was.

"Aunt Elyse?"

"Oh. Sorry, Cody." She forgot her nephew had asked her a question. "I, uh, fainted. I haven't eaten since yesterday. Must have used my face to break the fall." She turned back to him and pasted on a smile. "You know, I think I want to lie down for a while. Tell your mom I'll call her later."

"All right, but eat first." She nodded and Cody leaned down and kissed her forehead. "You know where to find me."

Elyse slumped down onto the couch after locking the door behind Cody. She ran her hands through her hair then wiped away the tears which wet her face.

"Matthew's alive," Elyse said aloud.

The phone woke Elyse from a deep sleep. She'd gone to bed an hour after Cody left. Tossing and turning, she'd lain awake for what seemed like hours. Sleep must have come, because as she fumbled for the phone in her pitch-dark room she noticed the illuminated numbers of her alarm clock lit up to two-thirty.

Her pulse jumped from the late night intrusion. “Hello?”

“Elyse, honey. Did I wake you?”

“Matthew?” Elyse sat bolt upright in the bed, her heart pounding in her ears. “Of course you woke me. What in the hell is going on? I don’t under—”

“Shh. Let me try to explain. That was Jonathan.”

“I kind of figured that out when I saw you at the cemetery. Why does everyone think you died? Why didn’t you tell the police in the first place? What are—” The questions rolled off her tongue until Matthew interrupted her.

“I found him shot in my office. I panicked and switched the IDs.”

“But why? What’s going on? Why would someone kill him?” She put her hand on her chest, fearing her heart would rupture under the stress of talking to a not-so-dead dead man.

“It was a mistake. I was the target.”

“What? Why?” Elyse’s hand tightened on the phone until her knuckles ached.

Matthew didn’t say a word.

“Why? I want to know what’s going on.”

The silence grew on and Elyse’s nerves hummed.

“Hello, Matthew... Matthew, are you still there?”

The dial tone buzzed in her ear. Frantic, she flipped on the lamp by the bed and looked at the caller ID box to see where Matthew had called from.

She read the unfamiliar number from the display labeled as “Unknown Name” and dialed it back. It rang and rang with no answer. Finally, after ten minutes and as many calls someone answered the phone.

“Yeah?”

“I’m trying to reach Matthew.” Hope filled her.

“Sorry, lady. Ain’t no one on here but me.”

“Wh...who are you?”

“Who the hell are you? I ain’t givin’ my name out to you.”

Changing tactics she asked, “Where are you?”

“At the Texaco on Rufe Snow and Hightower.”

Elyse sat up straighter. That was less than three miles away.

“Is this a payphone?”

“Yeah. Who the hell did you think you were calling?” This time, the click resonated through the phone when the man hung up.

After replacing her receiver, she sat staring at the wall across from her bed, but she didn’t see the print of Renoir’s *Two Sisters*. Her mind flashed to the viewing—and how unfamiliar the man in the casket had seemed to her. She’d been right after all. Jonathan Cabot lay dead among the satin lining, not her ex-husband Matthew.

“I must be having a nightmare,” she said aloud finally, wanting to wish it true. “The whole thing, the viewing, the funeral,” she said, rubbing her hand across her face. The sharp jolt of pain tore through her when she rubbed the welt on her cheek.

She got out of the bed and paced the floor.

“I need to call the police.” She spoke to Monty, who slept at the foot of her bed. He picked up his head, yawned and put his head back on his paws, his eyes following her movement around the room.

“But why didn’t Matthew? All he had to do was tell them what happened.” She looked at Monty for agreement. She took his steady gaze and lack of opposition as a sign she was right. “And why was someone after him?”

She tried to run her hands through her hair but a rubber band stopped her. She growled at the sight of herself in the mirror. Her hair sat in a crooked ponytail on top of her head. The bruise on her cheek stood out against her pale skin and the dark circles under her eyes reminded her of what a shitty day it had been so far. And in the wee hours of the morning, the next day didn’t seem to be starting off any better.

“Why? Why? Why?” she ranted.

She wanted to ask “why me”, but this wasn’t about her. It was about her dead ex-brother-in-law and his shit-for-brains twin. Three years after their divorce, Matthew still managed to insert himself in her life and make himself the focal point.

What was going on—and why?

“Can’t think straight.” She rubbed her eyes with the heels of her palms. “Need caffeine,” she told Monty

Elyse stuffed her feet into her slippers and went to the kitchen to make coffee. She slammed through cabinet after cabinet until she found her shopping list on the front of the fridge, coffee number one on the lined sheet. Once she declared the house devoid of any form of caffeine, she grabbed her keys and an overcoat. She headed out of the house at three in the morning.

“I’ll be back in a bit, Monty,” she called from the front door.

In a crouch, Jack looked over the freshly made pastries lining the case at Dunkin Donuts, but his thoughts, as they had since earlier that day, turned back to Elyse Cabot. In his mind’s eye, he could still see the haunted look in her eye at the funeral. He remembered how his stomach had lurched when she fainted. He still wanted to kick himself for not catching her before her face smashed onto the hard cemetery ground, marring her creamy skin.

The bell on the door clanged, awakening him from the memory. He didn’t turn to see who had come in, but continued to stare blindly at the display case.

“A large French vanilla coffee, a pound of ground hazelnut and the usual,” a woman said from behind him.

Jack stood up from his crouch. Now he imagined the woman sounded like Elyse.

“I was sorry to hear about your ex, Mrs. Cabot,” the young clerk said.

“Thanks, Kevin,” she answered.

Jack turned to find Elyse Cabot in the flesh. Her hair pulled up in a lopsided ponytail, she stood in front of the register. She wore an overcoat and what looked like flannel pajama pants. On her feet, he found a pair of those clomping shoes all the women wore. His eyes traveled slowly back up. He’d watched her throughout the funeral, but for some reason seeing her in the middle of the night, dressed in PJs made his gut tighten worse.

“That’s a nasty bruise you got there,” Kevin said.

Her hand touched the spot on her cheek. “I...uh, had a fall.”

Kevin must have noticed Jack staring at the two because he looked at him and asked, “Did you decide yet, Jack?”

Jack shook his head as Elyse turned and looked at him. Her eyes widened for a brief moment.

“Hi, Elyse.”

“Jack. What are you doing here?”

“Buying donuts,” Jack tried to keep the amusement out of his voice.

She opened her mouth to speak but Kevin interrupted, “I’ll get your coffee, Mrs. Cabot.” Then he disappeared into the rear of the shop, leaving them alone at the counter.

Elyse nodded at the young clerk’s departing back then narrowed her eyes at Jack. She lowered her voice, “No, I mean here in my neighborhood.”

“I live just around the corner on Fox Chase.”

“Why didn’t you tell me when you dropped me off?”

“You didn’t ask.”

Elyse rolled her eyes.

“I’d ask if you come here often, but that sounds like a line.” Jack smiled, but still she only looked at him. The dark circles under her eyes stood out in dramatic relief against her pale skin. “Trouble sleeping?”

“No, I like to roam around the neighborhood in the middle of the night. My nocturnal side.” She finally twisted her mouth into a lopsided wan grin.

The sarcasm in her voice was so thick Jack couldn’t help but laugh.

“You?” she asked dryly, apparently not enjoying her own humor.

“I always stop in after a long stakeout.”

“Stakeout?” Her perfectly arched eyebrows pulled together. “Oh, that’s right you said you were a detective.”

“I prefer the term private investigator,” Jack said.

She nodded and looked down at her hands.

His chest ached when he got a good look at the knot on her cheek. He rubbed the spot and although he'd like to say it was indigestion, he knew it wasn't. It killed him to see her beautiful face with such an ugly bruise. The purple welt looked darker and more swollen than earlier that day. Reaching out, he ran his finger under the edge of her cheek. "Does it hurt?"

Elyse's eyes snapped to his. Realizing he still touched her, he pulled his hand back and cleared his throat. "Did you go see a doctor?"

"I don't mean to be rude, but..." she paused.

"But..." he prompted her.

"But I don't really think it's any business of yours."

Jack started to say he wanted to make it his business, but Kevin returned with Elyse's order, not giving him a chance. She paid and left without saying another word.

Chapter Five

By Friday, a week had passed. Elyse had looked everywhere she could to find where Matthew might be hiding. It wasn't as if she could ask someone, "Hey, have you seen Matthew? I've been looking for him and can't seem to find him anywhere."

They'd lock her up in one of those padded rooms.

She did try to find Jonathan, assuming Matthew was posing as him. Still no luck, though.

She tossed and turned over the idea of calling the police, but what proof did she have? An inkling at the viewing that Jonathan lay in the casket. A glance at a man from more than twenty feet away. A late night phone call. None were concrete proof the man had switched identities with his dead brother.

And if Matthew were truly in trouble, she didn't want to attract attention from whoever killed his brother. In a perverse way, she wanted to protect him.

She sat at her desk in the back of the store she managed. Simply Threads catered to the slightly less adventurous dressers, such as herself. It carried classic styles and tried and true favorites, but since Elyse took over, the store offered a wider variety of color. Business stayed steady and with a decent commission percentage, she was satisfied with the work.

Smoothing her hand down the side of her teal sheath dress, she smiled at her accomplishments since divorcing Matthew. Her own home, though rented. Her own car,

though a few years old. Her own job, though she'd rather own the place than be the manager. Still she had accomplished a lot—by herself.

She only wished she could accomplish finding Matthew. She sighed, crossing off another set of places he could be, but wasn't.

Unwrapping a piece Halloween of candy, ready for the next week's trick or treaters, she popped it in her mouth. Ah chocolate. Calms the soul, she thought, letting her eyes close. The candy dissolved in her mouth. She was reaching for another piece when the phone rang, but by the time she reached for it, it stopped.

"Elyse, telephone." Her assistant manager leaned on the doorframe. The jet-black-haired beauty eyed her for a moment full of concern. "Are you okay? You've been so distracted lately."

If you only knew, Elyse thought. She hid her notebook under a stack of sweaters on the corner of her desk. "I have a lot on my mind, but I'm fine."

Debbie seemed to want to say more, but only stared at her boss, then finally said, "Line two."

"Thanks, Deb." She pushed the speakerphone button and waved Debbie away. "This is Elyse. How may I help you?"

"Mrs. Cabot, I am Rita Bonner. I'm calling in regards to Matthew Cabot."

The heat drained from Elyse's cheeks. She snatched up the receiver.

"I've been unable to get in touch with your husband," the woman continued.

"O...oh, o...okay," Elyse stumbled over the words. She had no clue what to say. Did she tell this woman Matthew was supposedly dead? Did she mention she was trying to find him herself, with no luck? She didn't think so, so she played dumb—and at that moment, that wasn't too far a stretch. "H...how can I help you?"

"Your safe deposit box is due for renewal at the end of the month."

Elyse looked at the calendar hanging by her desk. Five days. Then she tried to remember having a safe deposit box. She and Matthew had opened one eight years ago after a fire had swept through his parents' house and destroyed everything.

Matthew had insisted on keeping the family treasures somewhere safe and had rented the box. They had kept their marriage license and birth certificates as well as some negatives of photos, but no family treasures. They had never managed to collect any in the few years they were married.

She had completely forgotten about it, too. Why hadn't he closed it and gotten another when they divorced? Her mind quickly switched gears from the past to the present. She wondered what he might have kept in it. Maybe she would find a clue to his whereabouts.

"Can I come in and pay it up?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"And my signature card is still on file?" Her question might sound suspicious so she quickly added, "I haven't been in in a while."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Okay great. I'll be in as soon as possible."

After hanging up with the woman from the bank, Elyse sat at her desk staring blankly at the wall. Why wouldn't Matthew have closed the box? He had been so adamant about separating their belongings as quick as possible when they divorced; this was out of character for the selfish bastard. Thoughts swirled in her head, bombarding each other until she couldn't stand it any longer.

The only way she would get an answer was to open the safe deposit box and look inside.

After the woman at the bank left Elyse alone with the safe deposit box, she sat just staring. The cold, recycled air pricked her skin in the claustrophobic room. Swallowing, she forced herself not to notice the narrowing walls that wanted to close in on her. Instead, she focused on the closed metal box laid out before her on the scarred wooded desk. She was afraid to open it, afraid to find out why Matthew kept it after all these years.

What secrets did it hold?

Finally, with shaking hands, she pulled the lid back and glanced inside. A film packet and an old jewelry box she'd had as a child were the only two items inside. She thought she'd lost the box years ago when she and Matthew moved into their first house.

Curious, she pulled the pictures out of the small folder. She gasped. Her honeymoon photos? Warmth spread through her. He'd kept them. Their love hadn't been a novelty after all. Matthew really had cared about her.

Flipping through the photos, her warm euphoria sank and a cold, barren ice age set in. The first three pictures were indeed from their honeymoon trip to Cozumel. Most of the roll was of tanned women with the exception of several shots of a woman with a large floppy hat. Elyse didn't immediately recognize her, though there was something about her she couldn't quite put her finger on.

Damn Matthew.

She remembered the trip like it was yesterday—who could forget their honeymoon, especially when you were sick as a dog laid up in a hotel in a beautiful part of Mexico? Matthew had said, despite the fact they were newlyweds, he didn't want to be too cooped up and stay with her when she got food poisoning on their second day.

Apparently, Matthew had decided to entertain himself. Any hope she had denying it was just after their wedding was dashed when she saw he had on the flamboyant Hawaiian shirt she'd bought him just for the trip. The few shots of him in the arms of the hat-decked woman turned Elyse's stomach. Not only had he wasted their film on his exploits while on their honeymoon, but he also had the nerve to keep the damn things.

"Asshole."

She slammed the photos back inside, knocking over the small jewelry box. Several glass shards, which she had collected as a child and stored in the box, spilled out. When she was six, Elyse would hunt for treasure in the alleyway behind her house. Small green and clear glass shards sprinkled the ground in various places. With an overactive imagination, she would pretend the glass from broken bottles and windows or windshields from vehicles were treasures for her to hunt and find.

All she collected went into her very own jewelry box. It was the first “special” gift she had as a young girl. Having something all to herself in a house full of siblings was a rarity she had relished with all her heart.

Finding it in Matthew’s safe deposit box confused her and cheapened her memory. Why would he keep a child’s plaything—and for so many years? Elyse picked up a handful of the glass with the intention of putting them back. Before closing her hand around them, a sparkle, unusual for broken glass, caught her eye.

She raised her hand closer to look at them, her skin prickled more. They looked like...

“No, it can’t be,” she said aloud in the empty room.

Lying mixed in with the broken glass shards were rounder, more defined, pieces. Elyse picked up one clear orb between her fingers and held it up to the light. A wonderful array of color leapt from the object.

“Diamonds?” she gasped. Her mind reeled. It wasn’t possible. They must be fakes. But why would Matthew go to the trouble of stashing fakes? She clutched the handful to her chest.

Elyse looked around the small room, expecting large men with crooked noses and guns to come in and take the diamonds away. But nothing happened. No one busted through the door.

Confused and a little bit angry, Elyse took the three photos of her from Cozumel, leaving the rest behind. Then she placed the jewels and broken glass back into the small wooden box, stowing it in her purse. A friend of her parents was a jeweler. It was about time she dropped by for a visit.

“H...how much?” Elyse tried to hide the astonishment as it swept through her.

Zacharias Bancroft moved the loop from in front of his eye. “Approximately eighty thousand dollars.” He handed her the diamond.

Elyse had found three similar emerald-cut diamonds in the small jewelry box, all together adding up to nearly a quarter of a million dollars.

That in itself was overwhelming. But what floored her most was the round diamond Mr. Bancroft estimated at a couple of thousand dollars higher. Her mouth dried when she thought of the forty-nine other similar diamonds which sat in her underwear drawer.

She did a quick calculation in her head. *Carry the two, that makes... No*, Elyse thought, *that can't be right*.

"C...can I borrow that calculator for a minute?" she stuttered.

Mr. Bancroft nodded and slid it across the desk to her. She had only brought one of each cut for him to appraise, honestly and truly believing they were fakes, or at the very least not very expensive. With stiff fingers, she pushed in the totals. Watching the number climb, she was aware that Mr. Bancroft was speaking to her.

"The three-carat round and the five-carat emerald-cut diamonds both have magnificent cut. And what remarkable clarity. The color is rated an 'E', that's the second highest. Both are nearly flawless. I would say VVS2—some, but very little inclusions.

"Excellent quality," he continued. "Your friend made a smart purchase. I would suggest, though, that 'your friend'—" he eyed her for a long moment, "—has them appraised *before* paying for them next time."

"Yes, next time," she said. She stared at the figure on the calculator. She must have pushed the wrong buttons. Clearing the screen, she re-entered the numbers. The same staggering number came up, four and a half million. *Four and a half million dollars*. In her underwear drawer.

Spots formed before her eyes and her breath hitched in her lungs. She tightened her fingers around the small plastic gadget in her hands.

"Are you okay, Elyse?" He put his hand on her shoulder. The mere contact from him managed to snap her back.

"I'm fine. Thank you so much, Mr. Bancroft. I'll tell my friend what you said."

Halloween morning, she paced the floor in her den. She had stewed and debated over what she needed to do for several days, but came up with nothing. Elyse wasn't prepared to store over four million dollars worth of loose gems with her undies. And she didn't want to hand them over to the authorities until she knew for sure what Matthew had gotten himself into.

The ring of the telephone stopped her in mid-stride.

"What have you done?" Matthew's voice growled through the phone before she could even speak.

Elyse's heart pounded in her chest. "Matthew. What are you talking about?"

"The diamonds. Where the hell did you put them?"

"Oh." *Damn, how did he find out so fast?*

"Yeah, 'oh'. I want them back now."

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize dead men could have diamonds. I thought once you died, you pretty much had to relinquish all your worldly possessions. This must be a new twist."

"Don't be smart with me, dammit. This is not a game."

"Tell me what's going on."

"No."

"Then I can't help you." She slammed the phone down before he could say anything.

Elyse parked at the store in the strip mall. She arrived two hours before the stores opened, and the only other cars in the employee lot were behind the bagel shop five stores down. She scooped up the small wooden box and ran to the door with her keys ready.

She didn't want to have the diamonds easily accessible in case Matthew tried to come over and sweet-talk her out of them. She knew it was possible. In the seven years of their marriage, he had managed to convince her he was a faithful, loving husband. She was afraid she would again fall for his conniving, lying ways.

Inside the store, she hurried to the back and deactivated the alarm. She remembered, when she started working at the store, she'd failed to punch in the proper code. The silent alarm had notified the local police department even though she didn't know it had been tripped. She nearly wet her pants when she walked into the front of the store to find two officers with their guns drawn.

An involuntary shudder ran through her at the memory as she stored the diamonds with the glass shards in the company safe. Only she and Dory, the storeowner, knew the combination. And Dory was on a three-month cruise to parts unknown with her husband.

Elyse sighed, relieving some tension in her chest. "The money's safe," she said aloud in the empty stock room. She laughed. "Ha, safe. Elyse, you are so funny." She laughed even harder. Anxious nerves relaxed by the time tears came to her eyes.

Half an hour later, Debbie came in, ready to unload the rest of the shipment that had come in the day before. "Hi, Elyse, I didn't expect to see you here yet. You're not in until noon, right?"

"Yeah, but I thought I'd help you get some of this stuff put up since I wasn't much help yesterday."

"That's okay. I understand." Debbie squeezed Elyse's shoulder. "Oh, guess what. My mother-in-law made the cutest costume for Libby. It's Libby's first Halloween, so I hadn't planned on dressing her up, but Betty made the most adorable sunflower costume."

A pang of jealousy knocked Elyse in the gut. She adored Debbie's daughter Libby, but every time she looked at her she thought of all the children she didn't have. And would never have.

Everyone she knew had children. Hell, she had thirteen nieces and nephews, a fact that her mother brought up as often as possible. You would think that with thirteen grandchildren already, Diane Zweller could focus on other things, but having her youngest child produce more heirs to the Zweller clan was first and foremost on her mind.

If she only knew...

Diane had even taken to fixing Elyse up on blind dates without getting Elyse's consent, or knowledge, for that matter.

The first time a man had shown up on her doorstep unannounced, she stood, mouth gaping open, staring at the hideous plaid trousers he wore with the orange golf shirt. Elyse had imagined it had been quite a look when he had purchased the outfit—in the mid seventies, but at his age and new fashion trends, he was quite a sight.

And of course, she couldn't be rude to Mr. Madison. He was an Elder at her mother's church. Whatever had possessed her mother to think that, at thirty-two, Elyse would date a sixty-year-old man was beyond her.

From then on, she made a habit of keeping the front porch light off and she stayed out of the front rooms of the house after two other men had come knocking. Luckily they'd left finally when no one answered. She begged her mother not to fix her up on any more dates without asking first, but there was always a possibility.

"Hello, Elyse. You in there?" Debbie waved her hand in front of Elyse's face. "I asked you if you had any plans for Halloween this year."

"No. Since we're giving out candy here at the store, I decided not to do it at home. I don't want to give my mother a chance to send another doofus by. And, God forbid, this time he might come in costume." She shuddered at the thought.

Chapter Six

“Really, Gwen, I don’t want to come over for dinner.”

“Elyse, it’s Halloween. Come see the kids’ costumes.”

“Aren’t your kids too old to dress up?”

Elyse’s sister made a rude noise on her end of the phone. “They’re going to a party.”

“Well, then, they won’t be there for me to see.”

“Quit being such a brat and get over here.”

“Yes, ma’am—give me half an hour.” Elyse smiled as she hung up the phone. Even though she and her siblings were grown, they still followed rank order. When Gwen told one of the other four to do something, by golly, they followed orders.

She didn’t mind getting out of the house. She’d been a little stir-crazy sitting all alone, cooped up, while kids of all ages went door to door soliciting candy. Other than Cody, Elyse hadn’t seen much of her nieces and nephews lately, even though all thirteen of them lived pretty much in the same area.

The doorbell rang as she gathered her purse and jacket. She frowned and looked toward the front of the house, wondering if a wayward trick-or-treater had decided to try the unlit houses. Or worse yet, if one of her mother’s “dates” had dropped by. She waited a few minutes for the person to give up then she went out the back door to her car parked on the side of the house.

As she stuck the key in the car door, something bumped her from behind. She turned to find a person wearing a Freddy Kruger mask.

“Sorry, I don’t have any candy,” she said, trying to keep the quaver out of her voice.

Freddy stayed silent.

“If my mother sent you, I’m sorry you wasted your time. She doesn’t seem to understand that as nice as you all seem, I’m not interested in dating anyone at the moment.”

Freddy still didn’t say anything, but bumped her again, making her drop her purse and jacket.

Okay, not one of Mom’s fix-ups.

Then who was it? Elyse sucked in a deep breath. A lush, floral perfume filled her nose. The perfume was expensive, but she couldn’t place it. She quickly looked over the person before her. Freddy stood only a few inches taller than her and was small framed. A woman was dressed as Freddy? Okay, she thought, but why?

Freddy stood toe-to-toe with Elyse. And although her palms sweated, she didn’t like be pushed around, literally or figuratively. She narrowed her eyes and shoved Freddy back. Freddy, however, didn’t like being shoved either and produced a gun, pointing at Elyse’s mid-section.

Elyse’s heart pounded. She held up her hands. “I give up. W...what do you want?” She licked her lips and took in several quick breaths. A gnawing of fear rumbled her stomach.

“Hi, Elyse, how are you tonight?” a neighbor called from across the street before Freddy could answer.

“Doing great, Jackie. How about yourself?” Elyse asked quickly.

“Fine, thanks,” Jackie answered.

“How are the girls doing?” Elyse asked. *Keep her talking, so I can get out of here.* She thanked God for the distraction. Freddy backed up and hid the gun. “I haven’t seen them around much.”

Elyse bent down and retrieved her things while Jackie regaled her with her daughters' recent achievements. Elyse unlocked the car door and shoved Freddy out of the way. "Great, great. Give me a call and we'll get together sometime."

She thrust the keys in the ignition and drove away. Her shoulders tensed expecting any second for the rear window to explode with a gunshot, but it didn't. She was halfway down the block before she remembered to turn on the car's headlights.

Several blocks from her sister's house, she had to pull over. Her chest was so tight she could barely breathe. She got out of the car and bent at the waist, trying to get as much oxygen into her lungs as possible. She hadn't had a panic attack in two years—she'd come close at the jewelers, but managed to suppress it. However, having met up with Freddy and having a gun drawn on her, it was a wonder the attack hadn't come sooner. But she had kept her wits about her long enough to safely get away.

Her therapist had told her the panic attacks were self-induced. That when in a crisis, her body would take charge and get her out. It wasn't until the danger passed that she would freak out.

Thanks, Doc. A lot of help that does to control it after the fact, she thought.

She managed to have herself calmed by the time she pulled into her sister's driveway. When Gwen opened the door, she was none the wiser that a few short minutes before her baby sister had stared death in the face.

"I'll go get the kids. You'll love their costumes," Gwen said.

"As long as they're not dressed up as Freddy Kruger." Elyse shuddered at the mention of the hideous costume.

"No," Gwen laughed, "That was ten or fifteen years ago." She turned her face to the hall. "Kids, Aunt Elyse is here."

Several days later, Elyse was sitting at her desk in the back of Simply Threads, when the phone rang. Since it was an hour before the store opened she debated on letting it ring, but the annoying trill of the phone and her over-active curiosity won out.

“Hi, Mom,” Elyse said once she heard the voice on the other end.

“How are you holding up today, dear?”

“Fine, Mom. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Darn it. I knew you’d forget, but Dad said I’d better call just in case. You know how he is, once he gets something in his head he can’t let it go. He badgered me from the moment we woke until I agreed to call you.”

Elyse laughed. She could imagine her father hounding her mother. It had been his way when she was growing up as well. Her and her siblings often asked for a swift, even if harsh, punishment rather than the nagging they would get from their father. Don Zweller, champion nag, her brother Lance would say. And at sixty-six, he showed no sign of letting up.

“Mom, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Didn’t you look at the date on the calendar? Today’s November eleventh.”

“Yeah, I know what day...” Elyse trailed off. A groan hung in her throat. How could she have forgotten Matthew and Jonathan’s birthday?

“I totally forgot.” A sharp pain pricked behind her eyes. She rubbed her temple, knowing it would build and build until a full-fledged migraine emerged.

“Maybe you should call Jonathan, you know, maybe to cheer him up. It must be horribly difficult for him to go through this alone.”

Jonathan. Hearing her mother say it only reignited the grief and pain which enveloped her when she thought Matthew had died, only to be magnified tenfold when she realized Jonathan actually lay in the ground, not Matthew. Again, she asked herself, *How could Matthew do something so horrible?*

“Uh, yeah, Mom, I’ll do that. Look I need to go.” She hung up before her mother could comment further.

She put her head down on the desk and tears fell. Her shoulders shook with the sobs until she exhausted all her strength. By the time Debbie arrived, Elyse had washed her face and looked fresh as always.

“Deb, I need to run out for a while. Do you think you can handle the store by yourself?”

“Sure.” She eyed her boss briefly.

Elyse was afraid she’d ask of her plans, but when she didn’t, Elyse grabbed her keys and waved. “Thanks.”

She sat in her car for twenty minutes before starting it up. Then, for another twenty minutes, she drove around her neighborhood, not knowing what she wanted to do. She needed to find Matthew. Once and for all, she needed an answer from him of what was going on.

He refused to tell her anything. And he hadn’t contacted her again since she took the diamonds from the bank. Right after the incident on Halloween night, she entertained the thought that Matthew had tried to scare her, but the more and more she thought of it, the more she was certain it had been a woman in the Freddy Kruger mask. Elyse convinced herself it was random, a total mistake.

Yeah, the way “Matthew’s” death was a random act of violence.

Her stomach grumbled when she drove past the Dunkin Donuts shop near her house. Her mind flashed to Jack Walling, thankful for the diversion of her thoughts. She couldn’t believe he had changed into quite a hunk in the thirteen years since she’d seen him.

Maybe she should talk to him. He was some kind of detective. No, she kept forgetting, he was a private investigator. She could hire him. Wasn’t there some kind of client-investigator privilege? If she told him Matthew was still alive, he wouldn’t be able to tell the police.

With a plan in mind, she drove home to look him up in the phone book. She just hoped he remembered her.

Chapter Seven

Elyse Cabot. Why couldn't Jack get her out of his mind? The last thing in the world he needed was the haunted-eyed female who had bought enough coffee to keep his former regiment awake for a week. And while wearing her pajamas no less.

Every time he closed his eyes, her face popped into his mind.

As if to prove a point, he closed his eyes and her face swam into view, bruise and all. He rubbed his weary sockets with the heels of his hands. "Go away, already."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

His eyes flew open. "Elyse." He blinked once then twice just to make sure his vision hadn't morphed from his head and projected itself on the wall by the door.

But no, Elyse Cabot stood, in the flesh, in front of his desk. Her light brown hair hung loose around her shoulders. She had on a purple sweater-set that made her face absolutely glow. Her short, black skirt hung inches above the knee.

It was the first time he had seen her legs. At the funeral, she had worn a long skirt which came just above the ankle and later that night at the donut shop, she had on PJ pants. Her creamy pale legs were far shapelier than he had imagined. His mouth dried as his brain tried to remember how to speak.

"I'm sorry. The receptionist wasn't at her desk, so I came on back. I can leave if you're busy."

“No.” She jumped at his response. “I mean, no, I’m not busy. And I don’t have a receptionist. At least not for another three weeks—she’s on her honeymoon.” Another reminder of how terrible marriage was. Now it was messing up his work environment.

He got up and walked around the desk to stand in front of her. He reached toward her once, wanting nothing more than to touch her, but he hesitated. Temptation won out and he took her elbow and urged her to the guest chair.

“What brought you to my humble enterprise?” He rounded the desk and sat, lacing his fingers together on the two-year-old desk calendar.

“I...I want to hire you—to find somebody.” She ducked her head and he watched her fumble with the edge of her purse.

Such dainty hands, he thought. *Dainty? Did I just think “dainty”?* He was becoming a sorry guy if dainty rolled through his thoughts.

He cleared his throat. “Well, I’m your man.” Oh, he hoped that didn’t sound as suggestive and desperate to her ears as it did his own. Or then again, maybe he did want her to think that. *Get a hold of yourself, Jack*. He cleared his throat. “Who are you looking for?”

“Well, I...” The telephone rang, stopping her in mid-sentence.

“Sorry, hold that thought. Walling Investigations,” he said into the phone.

“Jack. Whatcha up to?”

“Hey, Johnny,” Jack said. As he spoke, he watched the color drain from Elyse’s face. She looked not all too different from the day of the funeral service just before she took a header into the hard-packed ground. “Look man, I got a client in here now. I’ll call you back.”

He hung up and hurried to the mini-fridge where he kept water. “Here, drink this.” He handed her a bottle and knelt in front of her. She took several small drinks then looked at him.

“You feel better?”

She nodded, but he wasn’t altogether convinced. He checked out her eyes to make sure she was telling the truth. They looked clear, the faint look was thankfully gone, but

still, she looked a little peaked. He noticed for the first time that both her cheeks had a rosy glow, probably from the cold wind outside.

“Hey, your bruise is gone.” He ran his fingers over her cheek, over skin as soft as rose petal. *Geez, when did I become a walking talking cliché?*

He pulled his hand away, his fingers immediately yearning to touch her again. “What’s wrong? Can you tell me? You looked like you were about to faint again.” His knee ached, but he didn’t want to move far away from her.

“That call. You were talking to... Was that Jonathan?” She paled again.

“Johnny? No that was a guy I was in the service with. I haven’t spoken to Jonathan in months. Why’d you think it was him?” He thought hard for a minute trying to figure out why her ex-brother-in-law would warrant a faint. Then he remembered the date.

“It’s their birthday, today,” he said.

She nodded, and then big fat tears rolled down her cheeks.

Oh, no. A weepy female. He waited for the normal revulsion he usually got at the sight of tears. Instead, he wanted to comfort her, to protect her. He stood, despite the painful popping of his knee, and hauled her from the chair into his arms.

“Take it easy. I know you miss Matthew. But it’ll be all right.”

Elyse’s shoulders shook and it wasn’t until she snorted did he realize she was laughing. Not quite the reaction he expected.

He pushed her back to arms length and looked at her. She swiped at the tears under her eyes, now falling from the hearty laughter roaring from her.

“I’m sorry. It’s just that...” She took a deep breath. “It’s just that the person I want you to find is...Matthew.”

Jack said not a word, but just stared at her. He released her arms so fast she fell back into the chair.

The concerned look left his face and a hard, unreadable one hung there.

He must think I’m a nutcase.

“I think you should leave now.” Jack pulled her up by the elbows and led her past the receptionist desk to the front door.

“Wait. I know you think I’m crazy, but I’m not.” She took a deep breath. “Matthew’s not dead. I can prove it.”

He stopped, released her and crossed his arms over his chest. An eyebrow rose up under the sandy hair that fell over his forehead. “Go on.”

“I don’t have actual physical proof—” He opened the door. “—but if you’ll just give me five minutes I’ll explain what I know. If you don’t believe me then no harm done, right?”

“Yeah, right,” he said under his breath as they walked back into his office.

Jack settled in behind his desk.

Elyse tried not to be put off by his sudden lack of manners. But did he have to treat her as if she just broke his collectable Elvis plate that hung on the wall behind the desk? She took another swallow of the water he’d brought her. She pulled at the label on the bottle and took a deep breath.

“I know what you must be thinking,” Elyse said, finally raising her eyes to his.

“You have no idea.” Jack leaned back in his chair, putting his feet up on the corner of the desk and looked down his nose at her.

“Let me take a guess.” She wanted to stall while she came up with a compelling argument. All she could think about, however, was “because I say so”. She didn’t think he’d go for it. “You think I’ve lost my mind because you saw him go in the ground a few weeks ago.” A wry smile tugged at the corner of her mouth.

“Pretty close.”

“Okay, let me start at the beginning. Matthew and I divorced three years ago. We haven’t seen much of each other over that time, but I was married to him for seven years, so you know I would recognize him if I saw him. At the viewing, there was something that didn’t seem quite right.

“I let my sister convince me it was all in my mind. Then at the funeral who do you think was standing next to the minister?”

“Jonathan—Matthew’s grieving brother.” Jack dropped his feet to the floor and got up to retrieve a bottle of water for himself.

Elyse waited until he had situated himself again before she spoke. “I thought so, too—at first. Then he took off his glasses and I realized it was Matthew not Jonathan. Jonathan was in the coffin.”

Jack’s raised eyebrow again disappeared in the fall of hair on his forehead.

“I know my own hus...ex-husband. I knew I would feel something when he died and when I didn’t...I knew that Matthew was standing there looking at me. I got so confused and flustered that I passed out.” She reached up and touched where the welt had stained her cheek for weeks. “When I came to he was gone, so I couldn’t speak to him. Then he called me on the...”

“A dead man called you?”

Elyse took another drink of water. *This isn’t going well.* She knew he would be skeptical, but she was telling the truth. Couldn’t he see that? “*Matthew* called. He told me that he was the one that was meant to be killed. That Jonathan had been a mistake.”

“Go on,” Jack leaned forward.

He was interested. A glimmer of hope shined.

“That was pretty much it. Then we got cut off. The number he called from was on my caller ID. I called it back but some other man answered. It was a payphone outside a gas station.”

“When was this?”

“The night of the funeral. About two in the morning—” she paused, “—it was the night I ran into you at Dunkin Donuts.”

His eyes widened briefly then he rubbed his chin. “You did seem pretty freaked out,” he said more to himself than Elyse. He turned his chair away and stared at a black and white photo of a man dressed in military clothing. After a moment he turned back to face her. “That’s all pretty compelling,” he began, “but it doesn’t prove a thing. I need proof. I can’t go on your feelings and one supposed late night phone call. Sorry, Mrs. Cabot, but I can’t help you.”

Her heart sank as his eyes held hers, just staring. Elyse fondled the purse in her lap. He wasn't going to help her. What now? What would she do? She lost the staring contest when she pulled her eyes away, looking at her purse. Her palms sweated. She knew there was only one way to convince him.

She stored up her courage and looked for the small velvet bag in the bottom of her knock-off Gucci purse. She set it on the desk in front of Jack. "Open it."

Jack sighed then opened the drawstrings at the top of the bag and dumped the contents into his hand.

He looked up at her, his forehead scrunched in confusion.

"It's a diamond. A real one."

A real one? What a stupid thing to say. He already thinks I'm nuts, now he'll just think I'm an idiot to boot.

He held it up to the light, turning it this way and that. "I can see what it is. What does that have to do with anything?"

"A week after the funeral, I got a call from a bank. They wanted to know if I was going to renew my safe deposit box."

Jack rolled his hand at her, his face tight with impatience.

"I thought Matthew closed it years ago. I was curious what was in there, so I went and renewed it, hoping I would find information about what's going on. I found this—" she paused, "—and more."

Jack stared at her without blinking. Then the look of skepticism crossed his face yet again. "Right, the diamond fairy left a handful of diamonds for you out of the goodness of her heart."

"I knew you wouldn't believe me." She pulled out a stack of Polaroids and the appraisal slips from Mr. Bancroft. "That's why I brought these." She slid the papers and pictures across the desktop to Jack.

He seemed to study them and then let out a low whistle. When he finally returned his gaze to her, he narrowed his eyes and said, "You're awful trusting with this."

"I did some checking. You're a stand-up guy."

“You checked me out?” Jack looked offended.

“Well, yeah. You didn’t expect me to walk in here with a diamond worth three times what I made last year without knowing whether or not you’d just knock me over the head and take it. I may be gullible where Matthew is concerned, but I’m not stupid.” She shrugged when Jack rubbed his chin again. “Plus, I moved the rest to a safe place. Wouldn’t want someone to steal them before I can smoke Matthew out.”

“Smoke Matthew out?” Jack asked looking incredulously at her.

“Yeah, you know, make him come out of hiding to get the diamonds.”

“I know what it means. It just sounds ridiculous coming from you, that’s all.” He went back to reading the papers.

He insulted me. Elyse pursed her lips and fisted her hands in her lap. He may not want to take her case, but he didn’t have to treat her with such disrespect. “You don’t have to be offensive. Are you always this rude to your clients?”

“You’re not a client.” He continued to look through the folder. “You don’t listen well. I said I couldn’t help you.”

“But I didn’t think you meant it.” She thought they were haggling, like you do at the flea market, so she could get an adequate rate.

Panic seized her gut. “You have to take me on as a client. If you don’t, the client-investigator privilege won’t apply. You’ll be able to tell the police what I said, and I don’t want Matthew arrested.” *Not yet.*

He laughed for the first time since she entered his office. “Look, Missy, there is no such thing as client-investigator privilege. That only works for lawyers. And I don’t have to take on any client if I don’t want to.” He handed the stack of papers back to Elyse. “And I don’t want to.”

“You don’t believe me?” Tears filled her throat. “You won’t help me?”

“I didn’t say I don’t believe you—exactly. But this is a matter for the police. He switched his identity with his brother, essentially faking his own death—assuming you’re right. They have tests they can run on...the body.”

Jack got a pained look on his face. Was it the first time he realized his friend had actually died and not Matthew?

“They would better be able to find him. Not me.”

She hung her head. She was certain he would help her locate Matthew. Then she wouldn’t constantly worry she might run into him when she least expected it. Even though she knew which of the twins was really dead, the idea of coming across Matthew in the dark of the night chilled her to the bone.

She thought of her Halloween visitor. “Do you suppose that someone knows about the diamonds?”

“How in the hell would I know?”

All right, another stupid thing out of her mouth. She wondered if she really should be locked away.

His curiosity must have been piqued because the look on his face changed and he asked, “Why?”

“Halloween night, I was headed over to my sister’s house and someone was waiting outside—with a gun. One of the neighbors came by and I left but...”

“Someone pulled a gun on you? Did you call the police?” Jack’s brow furrowed and he shifted in his chair.

“No, I didn’t call the police. What am I supposed to say? Freddy Kruger just pulled a gun on me.” She ran her hand through her hair. “At first I thought it was another blind date my mother arranged.”

He frowned at her.

“Don’t ask.” She waved the comment away. “Then I thought maybe it was Matthew, but I think it was a woman. She wasn’t much bigger than me, and I could smell a ritzy perfume.”

Jack stared at her for a long moment. “I tell you what; I need some time to think about this. Give me your number and I’ll get back to you.” Jack took down her home and work phone numbers.

“In case you decide to accept the job, here’s a check for a retainer.” She dropped the check on the desk and left his office with her fingers crossed. *Please let him call.*

Chapter Eight

Jack slammed down the phone. He tried for three days to track down Jonathan Cabot's whereabouts. He had left eight messages on his home phone, and received no return call. Jack learned Jonathan had called into his office, the day after "Matthew's" death, to take an extended leave of absence, but offering to do work from home.

Jonathan's position with his public relations firm consisted of a lot of travel, so working outside the office was not unheard of. It had taken Jack an hour to sweet talk the company's resource manager into giving him Jonathan's itinerary for November only to discover Jonathan had called and rescheduled every appointment to be done over a web-chat. Apparently, he'd played up the sympathy card and the clients bought into it no questions asked.

Jonathan had been a damn fine PR man.

Jack rubbed his hand over his face. When had he moved to referring to Jonathan in the past tense? He had told Elyse he believed her, but he hadn't truly been convinced until he came up with a big fat zero trying to track down his friend's movements.

Now he needed to call Elyse. He should apologize for the way he had treated her when she had come into his office earlier that week. He had been so attracted to her, and then she dropped her bombshell, blowing his mind. He wasn't sure if he was madder at her for ruining his image of her with her crazy talk or at Matthew-Jonathan for making it impossible for him to date her. He had a steadfast rule not to mix business with pleasure.

He had moved past the fact that she was the ex-wife of his friend's brother, enough to remove her from the don't-date-your-friend's-ex category, but this new wrinkle was immovable. He had considered not taking her on as a client, but he had to admit, this was more exciting than many of the cases he'd been working on lately, and he didn't want to pass it up.

And begrudgingly, he had to admit, too, that Elyse had done a good job with the diamonds. It took fast thinking to get them appraised and moved so that Matthew couldn't get his hands on them. Not to mention it took guts, considering she didn't know what Matthew had involved himself in.

Jack cradled the handset on his shoulder and dialed Elyse's home number. He jotted down notes in the case file he'd started for Matthew-Jonathan Cabot.

She answered after three rings. "H...hello."

"Elyse, this is Jack." His brow scrunched, she sounded funny. Not that he had become an expert on the way Elyse Cabot sounded.

"Oh. Jack, hi."

"What's wrong?" He lowered his pen and sat up straighter in his chair.

"N...nothing."

She sounded like a little kid left home alone. He imagined her curled up on her bed with the covers pulled up to her chin. A sudden urge to crawl under the covers with her snuck up and bit him on the ass. He shook the image from his head.

"It doesn't sound like nothing. Did something happen?" His knuckles ached from his tightening grip on the phone.

"No. Nothing like that. I just..." A sneeze echoed through the line, blasting his eardrum. "...have a little cold."

Before he could stop himself, laughter erupted, relieving the tension which had built when he thought she was in trouble.

"Are you laughing at me?" Elyse asked. "I don't think it's the least bit funny."

Jack stared at the phone when a click and subsequent dial tone echoed in his ear. Elyse hung up. Despite himself, he laughed even harder.

He redialed her number only to get a busy signal.

“She must have taken the phone off the hook,” Jack said to the empty office, his smile wide. He replaced the handset and the phone rang immediately.

“Calling back to apologize for hanging up on me,” he said into the phone when he picked it up.

Familiar female laughter paused him and his smile disappeared.

“No, honey. Did one of your lady friends hang up on you?”

“Mom, to what do I owe this honor? Am I getting another new step-daddy?” Jack didn’t even attempt to keep the sarcasm from his voice. His mother seldom called. When she did, it was usually to inform him of her impending marital status. To date, he’d had six different stepfathers since his eighth birthday and at last count, he had gone through fourteen stepbrothers and stepsisters.

“You be nice. Is that any way to talk to your mother?”

It is, if she’s Brenda Head Walling Stuebing, something, something, something, something Sullivan.

“What’s new, Mom?” He added a pseudo chipperness to his voice.

“I just wanted to check in with my son. See how you’re doing.”

“Well, gee, Mom, I’m swell. And yourself?”

“You know, you get nastier every year,” she said, but her voice still held an air of humor. “I didn’t raise you to be so insufferable.”

No, Mom, you didn’t raise me at all, he thought. Step-Daddy one, two and three did. The first two were good men who tried their hardest to do right by Jack, but his mother was never satisfied. She always had to move on to “bigger and better” things, and usually on to a new man.

The third man, however, liked to beat anyone smaller or weaker than himself. When Jack had finally grown in the twelfth grade, he stood up to old Rick What’s-His-Name. Rick didn’t like the idea of fighting someone able to defend themselves, so he packed up and left before Brenda had even grown tired of him. Jack didn’t wait until the ink dried on the divorce papers and left for college on an academic scholarship.

“Jack,” his mother broke into his reverie. “I called to let you know that Timothy is going to be a grandpa,” his mother said in a wistful voice.

Timothy, husband number seven, had two grown daughters, Jack recalled. Polly and what? He couldn’t remember the other girl’s name. If he remembered correctly though, they were both nice enough when he met them at the wedding a few years earlier. “Great. Tell him I said congratulations.”

“Thank you. Now that Susie...”

That’s right. Susie, he thought, not really listening to his mother anymore.

“...when you might be considering it?” she finished.

“Considering what?”

“Having children.”

“Oh, geez, look at the time, Mom. I gotta run. I have a client waiting for me to drop off some papers. I’ll talk to you later, bye.” Jack hung up before his mother could get a word in edgewise.

What now? Brenda had her grand-maternal instinct settling in? She did a horrible job mothering him and now she wanted little grandbabies to fuss over. *Please*.

Staring down at the paperwork laid out across his desk, his thoughts shifted from his mother back to Elyse Cabot. He gathered up the folder and turned on the answering machine. Heading out the door, he needed to make one stop on his way to Elyse’s house.

“Go away,” Elyse mumbled at the knock on her front door. Her mother had been by, as had two of her sisters. It was about time for Megan, her other sister, or Amber, her sister-in-law, to drop in. Wouldn’t that just plop the cherry on her day?

Her muscles ached. Her nose leaked. And the bags under her eyes had packed their own overnights to match. She didn’t want to see any more well-meaning family members. All day, she fantasized that she lived on a deserted island with no family or ex-family to worry her. Her own private beach to lie back and contemplate the meaning of

the universe or better yet, to ponder why a three-hour cruise, off a port of Hawaii, would require so much luggage.

The knock sounded again as she crossed the living room. "I'm coming, don't get your knickers in a twist," she said, using her grandmother's favorite saying.

When she opened the door, she nearly dropped the afghan draped over her pajama-clad shoulders. "Jack. What are you doing here?" She sniffled then sneezed, making the ponytail on the top of her head flop into her face.

Elyse pushed the hair out of her eyes and looked at Jack, staring in amusement at her. "If you've come here to laugh some more or gloat in person, you can just leave." She started to shut the door, but Jack put his hand up and stopped her.

"I brought a peace offering." Jack raised a sack from Dunkin Donuts. "Isn't it starve a fever, feed a cold? I don't know. I can't remember, but you can always eat donuts."

She eyed him skeptically at first then took the bag from him and opened it. She counted three crullers and three chocolate covered donuts. "How did you know what my favorites are?"

"That night at Dunkin Donuts you ordered 'the usual'. One cruller and one chocolate covered. I am a PI; I get paid to be observant."

"But there's three of each in here."

"I wouldn't want you to eat alone." Jack smiled. "Are you going to let me in or not?"

Elyse moved away from the door to let him in. He followed her through the living room to the back of the house. He looked around the room and she tried to imagine the house from someone else's point of view.

Her den was her main living area. She kept her television and computer there. She sat on the cast-off sofa from her parents. As a teen, she had spent many a night lying on the now under-stuffed sofa watching MTV when it sat in the living room at her parents' house. And despite what little time she actually spent at home, she had managed to add her own personal touches.

Knickknacks, from childhood up, adorned the mantel over the marbled fireplace. Photos of all thirteen of her nieces and nephews crowded her otherwise plain white walls.

She motioned for Jack to take a seat on the other end of the sofa. “Sorry if I’m not Little Miss Merry Sunshine today, but I’m sick,” she said, her voice a little more pathetic than she cared for.

“Yeah, you sounded pretty bad on the phone. I decided to come over in person to cheer you up. I’m going to help you out with Matthew.” Jack handed her the folder. “I’ve actually been working on it already. It seems ‘Jonathan’ took a leave of absence from work but is still in communication with his clients.”

“Super, thanks.” She dropped the folder to the floor and leaned her head on the back of the couch.

Elyse had wanted Jack to help, so why was she disappointed? Maybe it was because he hadn’t believed her at first when she thought, of all people, he would. Maybe it was because he only came to see her about a job. Or maybe, it was her fever making her emotionally numb.

Opening an eye, she peered at Jack. Her fever burned hotter. *Nope, emotions aren’t numb.*

Jack caught her looking and smiled at her. “You look terrible.”

“You sweet-talker, you.”

Jack reached across and laid his hand on her forehead. “God, you’re burning up.” He looked around then got up from the couch.

Chapter Nine

A noise from the front of the house drew Jack's attention. "Dog-boy is here," a man shouted.

Jack stood in the doorway of the kitchen and watched a dog jump up on the sofa and onto Elyse. Its tongue worked overtime licking her face. Wrapped up in her the blanket, she couldn't pull herself free.

"Down boy," the man said, pulling the dog by the collar.

"What's going on out here?" Jack came from the kitchen, carrying the glass of water and a bottle of Tylenol he had retrieved from over the sink. He pulled up short when the stud-muffin who had been outside her house the day of the funeral stood next to the sofa. "Oh, you have company." He waited for Elyse to free her hands then he handed her the water and pills before heading for the door.

"Jack, wait."

He slowed and watched Elyse struggle trying to get up from the couch as Stud-muffin opened the back door and went outside with the dog. Shaking his head, he turned and continued to the front door.

"Jack."

He finally stopped halfway across the living room, looking at her.

"What's wrong? Why are you leaving?"

But before he could answer, she started sneezing and the water from the glass sloshed over the rim.

“Elyse, go lay down, will ya? And you can let Stud-boy take care of you. I don’t even know why I came over here,” he muttered under his breath then he turned again to leave.

“Stud-boy? Cody?” Elyse started laughing.

Jack stopped with his hand on the doorknob as her laughing turned into a coughing fit. She coughed so hard that half of the water in the glass disappeared, soaked into her clothing.

She looked up at Jack and drank the rest of the water in the glass. “He’s my nephew, Jack.”

“Nephew?” *She’s not old enough to have a man for a nephew, is she?* “How old is he?” Jack’s eyes narrowed and he put his hands on his hips.

“He turned twenty over the summer, why?”

He remembered her mentioning her sister. “And he’s your sister’s kid?”

Elyse nodded. “One of many. Sisters and nephews,” she said.

Jacks scrunched his brows. “How’s that?”

“I have three sisters and one brother, all older than me. And from that, I have thirteen nieces and nephews.”

Dear God, what did I get himself into? Jack wondered. Then he amended that; he hadn’t gotten into anything. She was a client, not a prospective date. He had to keep reminding himself that.

“Aunt Elyse.” Her nephew stood in the doorway to the den. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah,” she said then sneezed several times. “Come here, I want to introduce you.”

Cody shuffled his feet over to where Elyse and Jack stood. “Cody this is Jack Walling. Jack, my nephew Cody Roberts.”

Nephew, he couldn’t believe it. His jealousy had jumped to an atrocious conclusion. Jealousy, he kept reminding himself, totally unwarranted.

He shook the younger man's hand and eyed him, sizing him up. Jack categorized the resemblance once he got a good look at Junior. They had the same shape eyes and the same light brown hair. But, whereas Elyse had light, ivory skin, her nephew had a darker, more olive skin tone.

Both Jack and Junior turned their attention on Elyse when sneezes, then coughs, broke out. Jack took her by the elbow and led her back into the den and onto the sofa. "Sit," he ordered.

Cody stood next to the sofa, like a sentry guarding the queen's jewels. He put a hand on Elyse's shoulder and narrowed his eyes at Jack. "What did you need with Aunt Elyse?"

"It's business."

"Jack's here to discuss the new cabinets Dory wants put in the stockroom at the store."

Jack tried to keep an even expression on his face, amazed at the ease with which she lied.

"Wasn't he the guy who dropped you off after Uncle Matt's funeral?"

Junior didn't miss a beat, did he?

"Cody, I think I hear you mother calling."

"I get it. Butt out. Okay, fine, I'm out of here." He leaned down, kissed the top of her head, then headed for the front door.

"Thanks for picking up Monty at the vet for me."

Cody waved over his shoulder and all but slammed the front door.

Jack took her glass in the kitchen and refilled it.

"Sorry about that," she said when he returned. "But I told you, my family is a bit overprotective."

"Overprotective? I'd call him your guard dog." Jack sat at the end of the sofa. "That's why you told him I'm here to build cabinets for you?"

"Yeah. If he knew you're a PI, he'd tell his mom. Then she would tell my mom who would tell everyone else and they'd hound me until I told them why I hired you." She

broke off into a sneezing fit. "And I guarantee, not one of them would believe me about Matthew. They'd have me committed or something.

"What made you finally believe me?"

He smiled. "What makes you think I didn't the other day?"

"Because I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen Matthew with my own eyes." She snuggled into the sofa. "Besides, I saw the look on your face. You couldn't get me out of your office fast enough."

Jack wanted to laugh. That was probably true enough. "I did some checking after you left. While I'll admit I haven't seen Jonathan much over the last few years, I know the way he is and low key isn't it." Jack laid his hand across her forehead again then nudged the glass of water until she drank more.

A loud scratching drew Jack's attention. He'd forgotten about the dog.

"Jack, would you mind letting Monty in?"

He opened the door and the huge mutt trounced on him, panting madly. "Not much of a guard dog is he?"

"Not unless you want the bad guy licked to death." Elyse smiled. "Jack, I'd like you to meet Monty, the wonder-gut.

Jack looked at her.

"It's a wonder he can stand after what he eats. Chairs, shoes, garbage cans." She shrugged and laughed which turned into coughing.

Jack's heart bumped another notch. Not only was Elyse sick and not complaining like anyone else would have, she looked damn cute all bundled up on her couch wearing the same pajamas from the other night. Sitting close to her, he could see the print. Against a red background, dogs of all shapes and sizes sat, begging, laying down, on chairs. It looked like something a child might wear.

"Cute PJs." He wiggled her sock covered foot.

Elyse looked down at her clothing and smoothed out the hem. "One of my nieces gave them to me for Christmas last year. They're really comfy and soft against my aching body."

I'll bet.

Monty shoved his head under Jack's elbow. Jack rubbed the dog between the ears, getting a low moan in return. "What kind of dog is this? I see some Lab but I can't tell what else."

"The pound said his mother was a pure yellow Lab and the one they think is the dad was part Chow and part Sheltie." Elyse rubbed her foot across Monty's nose. "His momma had less than discriminating taste. I have one eclectic mutt. Right, Monty?"

"Why'd you pick Monty for a name? That's kind of a strange name for a dog." Jack thought of Mr. Poo-Poo, the dog he had as a child. Maybe Monty wasn't so strange after all.

He looked at her waiting for an answer. Even under her fever-pinkened cheeks, he detected a trace of embarrassment.

"Monty was a guy I had a crush on in high school. He wouldn't give me the time of day so I thought it was fitting to name an animal who likes to lick his own butt after him." She smiled and ducked her head when Jack laughed.

He couldn't imagine any guy not giving her the time of day. But in high school he'd been more interested in sports than girls and by the time he gotten around to noticing girls, they had turned into women, who were a breed in and of themselves. He learned to tread carefully, not to step in emotional time bombs. Often, he would sit and observe as he decided if he wanted to approach a woman.

And Jack liked to watch Elyse. She enjoyed just messing with her dog. He remembered when he met her the first time, he'd pegged her for the snotty, standoffish type, like Matthew. But she couldn't have been farther from that fastidious jerk.

Matthew. That brought Jack to the matter at hand.

"Back to Matthew and Jonathan." He neutralized his tone. "I don't think if Jonathan were the one alive, he'd be out of circuit for so long. Even if his brother died. When his folks died back in '96, he took the day of the funeral off and the very next day he was back in the thick of things at work."

Elyse nodded. “So was Matthew. I know they loved their parents but they both lack the sentimental gene. I guess that’s why he can take his brother’s place without batting an eye.” She finished off the water and handed Jack the glass. “What do we do now?”

“We don’t do anything. You will go to sleep and let me do some more checking. I’ve tracked down some of Jonathan’s clients and I seem to be one step behind the man. All his client meetings have been online. Apparently Jonathan’s used the service before when he had the flu and had to stay away from people.”

“I remember that. That was right before Matthew and I...” Elyse looked away.

Man, divorced for three years and she still had it bad for the guy, another reason not to get involved with her no matter how attractive he found her. He didn’t want to be some woman’s consolation prize because she couldn’t have her husband.

She wiped at her eye. He hadn’t even realized she was crying.

“Shouldn’t we just go to the police? I know I didn’t want to in the beginning, but since Matthew hasn’t come after the diamonds, maybe they’d have better luck finding him.”

“They would have no reason to look for him. I doubt they’d believe you.”

She sat up straighter. “But you did. Why wouldn’t they?”

“I know Jonathan, and by association, Matthew; they don’t. I checked with a buddy of mine at the police station, he looked up the case for me. It was ruled burglary. That area had been hit several times before. They figured the guy didn’t realize someone was in the building.”

“But...”

Jack held up his hand to stop her. “Since Matthew switched the ID and identified the body, they had no reason to doubt him. He must have known who Jonathan was having dinner with that night because he told the police and they checked it out. Obviously, other than you, no one seems to be the wiser he switched places.”

Elyse nodded and her eyelids fluttered. Yawn after yawn came and she seemed to fight harder each time to open her eyes. Jack was so mesmerized by her he couldn’t help

but watch. Finally, though, he stood. “I’m going to run now. You get some rest.” She nodded but didn’t open her eyes. “Monty, you take good care of her.”

Monty lifted his head from the floor and as if understanding, jumped up on the couch and nuzzled with Elyse. Jack smiled at the two cozied up on the couch.

After refilling her water, Jack set the glass next to the sofa and walked to the front door. He turned the doorknob lock before letting himself out. Checking the knob to make sure it locked, he laughed at himself. He had never nursed anyone before. It was pretty cool.

Chapter Ten

“What are you doing here?” Debbie asked when she walked into the stockroom Friday night and found Elyse at the desk.

Elyse pulled her sweater tighter around her shoulders, still getting bouts of chills but otherwise felling better. Before she could answer, Debbie started talking again. “You were supposed to take it easy. I told you, we’ve got things handled.” She waved her hand at Carie, the part-time high schooler who worked Friday through Sunday.

“I know.” Elyse had rattled around her house as long as she could, but to keep from going totally insane she came into work and finish the paperwork she’d left behind on her desk. “I needed to get the orders out by tomorrow morning. I stayed home all day yesterday,” she said, hoping to placate her assistant. “I took real good care of myself and didn’t move from the couch.”

Elyse didn’t want to tell Debbie she’d had a nurse for part of that time. Or that he had made her fever heat up ten degrees.

She’d been disappointed when she woke to find herself alone. A vague memory surfaced of Jack telling her he was leaving, but she’d been in the fuzzy before-sleep mode and couldn’t quite carry a conversation.

She had waited all day for him to call her and update her on any new findings concerning Matthew, but secretly she just wanted to hear his voice. She shook her head. It was just the germs talking. She’d be crazy to fall for a man like Jack Walling. Even if

she were in the right place to start dating, which she wasn't. She remembered the type of woman he dated. There was no way she could forget the Barbie Doll he'd brought to Jonathan's party thirteen years earlier. And that was when he was scrawny and geeky.

She could only imagine the busty, brassy women he must attract now. He would never in a million years be interested in a Plain Jane like her. That was what Matthew had always called her—Plain Jane.

"You need to do something with yourself, Elyse," he had said. "You're just a Plain Jane, no one notices you. If you can't spruce yourself up some more, I'll be forced to leave you here the night of the company party."

And he had.

Elyse had refused to change the way she dressed just to impress his clients. If they didn't like it, screw 'em. She wanted to be taken seriously for her mind not how much cleavage she could leverage out of a dress. *Lot of good that did me.*

Tapping her pencil and staring at the open file she'd pulled up on the computer, she tried to concentrate on her orders for the next shipment. But her mind kept shifting back to Jack. Every time he spoke to her, the scar on his mouth wiggled and jiggled. Many times she'd speculated the way in which he might have earned it: a violent battle fighting enemy soldiers, an irate cheating spouse bent on revenge, a drunken brawl in a shady bar fighting over a woman.

She shivered, wondering what kind of man would fight over his woman. She had surely never experienced such a fierce loyalty which would make a man lay down his life for his one true love. With Matthew, she often thought of the old Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young song, "Love The One You're With". He'd treated her as if he only married her so he didn't have to be bothered with finding someone else more suitable.

Tears welled in her eyes, her head pounded. Setting her pencil down, she laid her head down on her desk, pillowed by her forearms. The soft purr of the computer enveloped her like a soothing hum, pushing thoughts of the rest of the world to the unimportant section of the brain. All she wanted was a moment of peace. She could get back to the order in a minute. She needed to rest for a bit first.

“Wake up, sleepy head.”

Elyse moaned. *Where am I?* She raised her head from her arms.

“You fell asleep at your desk.”

Elyse opened her eyes and found Debbie standing over her with an amused look on her face.

“What time is it?” Elyse rubbed her sore neck.

“Almost ten.”

Elyse sat up straighter in her chair. “What? Why didn’t you wake me up sooner? I’ve been sleeping for hours.”

“You looked like you could use the rest. Besides, I did try to wake you and you kept saying, ‘Five more minutes, Mom’, so I left you alone.”

Elyse ran her hands over her face, trying to wipe away the residual effects from her nap. “Guess I was more worn out than I thought.”

“Yeah, I’d say. You were snoring like a steam shovel.”

Elyse stuck her tongue out.

“We’re done up front. We’re just about to leave, you coming?”

“No, I didn’t get any of the orders finished yet.” She wiggled the computer’s mouse to refresh the screen, shuffled the papers in front of her, and willed her eyes to focus on the columns of numbers. She removed her heavy sweater, suddenly too hot.

“Do you want one of us to wait with you?”

“You don’t have to. It’ll only take me about an hour to get this finished.” *Once I can see again*, she thought, rubbing her eyes with the heels of her hands. “You and Carie go on.”

“You’re sure?” Debbie asked, but proceeded to put on her coat and shoulder her purse.

Elyse nodded and again rubbed her hands over her face. “It’s Friday night. Get a baby sitter and go out on the town with your hubby.” *At least one of us should have some excitement.*

Debbie laughed. “Don’t work too hard tonight, boss-lady.”

Minutes later, her co-workers yelled their goodbyes as they let themselves out the front door.

The all-too-quiet stockroom distracted Elyse as much as if the TCU marching band conducted practice there. She reached over the desk and flipped on her CD player, which sat in the corner. Emerson Drive filled the air as she reordered her waning stock and few new items for the Christmas season.

Tapping her toe along with the beat, she finished her order before the last song ended. Pleased with herself, she hit the send command and shut down the computer.

She couldn’t believe she’d managed to work for almost an hour without once thinking of Jack. But now that her mind was fixated on him again, she would call him. She needed an update on Matthew. It wasn’t as if they were dating or anything, so it would be okay for the woman to call the man.

She rolled her eyes. *Where my mind goes.*

She pulled her cell phone from her purse, along with the paper Jack had left beside the glass of water yesterday afternoon with his phone number.

Her fingers didn’t want to cooperate. She had to dial his number three times before she got it right. On the fifth ring she about gave up, but he finally answered, sounding out of breath.

“Jack, are you okay?” She regretted asking when female laughter filled in the background. She interrupted him during...

“Elyse, yeah, hi.”

She could hear him shushing the woman then another round of giggles sounded. She debated hanging up, but pride made her stay on the line for fear of looking like a jealous female. Not that she had any reason to be jealous if Jack had a girlfriend. Nope, not her.

“Hey, what can I do for you?”

"I...I was just checking in to see how your investigation was going." While she spoke, she pulled her purse on her shoulder and headed for the back door.

She turned out the lights and set the alarm, then dashed out, the door locking behind her. Jack had started talking but she was so distracted by the terrible chill in the air she didn't hear a word he said. She'd left her sweater on the back of her chair. She could wait until the morning to get it, but it was her favorite sweater.

She huffed and turned back to the store. She jolted when Jack spoke in her ear. She'd forgotten about the phone.

"What are you doing? You didn't hear a word I said."

"I'm at the store, just leaving in fact. But I forgot my sweater and..."

The phone fell from her hand when someone shoved her from behind. The keys dug into her palm as the side of the building kept her from falling to the ground. Someone pushed her flat to the wall, her face scraping on the rough brick surface.

Panic seized her breath, but then the self-defense class she'd taken four years earlier kicked in. She stomped on her assailant's foot, and then shoved her elbow into the gut. When the person sucked in a breath of air, Elyse shoved back, putting as much room as possible between her and the wall. She rushed for the door, praying she could get the key in before she was attacked again.

Luckily, on the second try the lock turned. She opened the door and ran through the stock room for the front of the store. Heavy breathing rasped right behind her, but no one touched her. Ducking down behind a row of clothes and dropping to the floor, she used her knowledge of the store's layout to her advantage and crawled toward the front door.

Behind her, several clothing racks fell to the tiled floor, then there was absolute silence. Elyse held her breath and listened intently, but it was quiet. Counting to a hundred, she waited in her spot near the front door, and then counted again, slower. No other sound, no breathing or rumbling sounded in the entire store. She was still afraid to move, so she counted to a hundred yet again.

Finally, she got to her feet, but kept her body bent low. Her eyes adjusted to the darkened storefront. Nothing out of the ordinary stood out as she peeked over the top of

the rack of shirts hiding her. Daring to make a run for it, she slunk back down and duck-walked the ten feet to the front door. From her crouch, she stretched her arm and tried to reach the lock, but it fell about two inches two short.

Damn Grandma Verna's short genes, she said. Then mentally she apologized to her long-dead grandmother, being superstitious of speaking ill of the dead.

Steadying her nerves, she stood to her full height and twisted the lock. She practically fell through the door when she opened it. Before she could take more than a couple steps, two arms wrapped around her waist and dragged her to a dark corner of the shopping center.

Chapter Eleven

A hand smashed over Elyse's mouth and warm breath tickled her neck. She struggled against the arm wrapped around her waist, clawing at the fabric, but not gaining purchase with her fingers. Her feet well off the ground, she tried unsuccessfully to kick her assailant. Her heart pounded and she was afraid she would pass out from the panic attack seizing her breath.

A spicy-scented aftershave assaulted her nostrils and she stilled in that instance. Only one thought filled her mind. *Jack*. She had never been aware of his scent before, but as they stood hidden in the darkness, the certainty of her capturer, now considered rescuer, elated her.

"Are you okay?" he asked, his breathing harsh in her ear.

She nodded.

Jack lowered his hand and turned her around to face him. "What happened?" He kept his voice just above a whisper.

"Someone attacked me." She got weak-kneed and fell against Jack just thinking about it. Instead of pushing her away, like she would have expected had it been Matthew, he wrapped his arms around her and held her tight.

"Take it easy. I've got you."

She released a heavy breath—almost a sob—and nodded. “I didn’t get a look. Whoever it was, snuck up on me from behind. But I think it may have been the same woman as Halloween night. I smelled the same funky perfume.”

“Are you hurt?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. I’m not sure.” She brushed her hair back from her face and she winced, sucking in a breath. Pain lit the side of her face on fire.

Jack released her enough to get his face in front of hers. A quick burst of light blinded her. “You have a nasty scrape across your cheek.”

Plunged back into darkness when the small penlight went out, she relived the ordeal. She remembered being flattened against the wall. But all thoughts and images fled her mind when Jack’s lips gingerly touched her injured cheek. Shock stole any cognizant thinking, and she was lucky her body functioned enough to breathe.

Jack must have shocked himself, too, because he pushed her to arm’s length and cleared his throat. Before either could speak, though, blue and red strobe lights lit the entire storefront. Taking a hold of her hand, Jack walked toward the first car, pulling her with him.

“Cops.”

Well duh, she wanted to shout at him, her adrenaline still on a roller coaster ride. “The silent alarm. I forgot about it.”

Elyse wanted to revel in the warmth of his hand around hers, but the pace in which he pulled made it hard enough to stay on her feet, let alone enjoy his touch.

“When he asks, just tell him you tripped the alarm by accident, nothing more.” He looked back over his shoulder long enough for her to nod, then turned his attention to the office emerging from his car.

“Sorry to have to bring y’all out here. Mrs. Cabot forgot to turn the alarm off.”

Elyse watched Jack. She hadn’t been around him much, but he seemed more casual than she had ever seen him. He stood with the officer like they were buddies having a beer.

“You know women,” he told the officer. “They’re not good with mechanical things.”

Elyse rolled her eyes and hoped the officer didn't see.

Officer Jones, as his nametag read, called into the security service and Elyse gave the password. They wrote her a warning ticket.

When Jack pulled the officer aside, Elyse was grateful. The shakes had started and she didn't want either man to see. She stepped into the shadows just as her gaze narrowed to pinpoints and her breath rushed in and out.

She was unsure how long the two spoke. Fortunately, by the time they said their goodbyes, Elyse was almost back to herself, though her nerves still hummed. It wasn't until the taillights were no more than firefly bright that Elyse turned her attention on Jack. She slapped her hand on his arm—needing someplace to direct the rest of her energies.

“‘You know women.’ What the hell kind of thing was that? I'll have you know, I have only set that alarm off one other time and that was when I started working here two years ago.” Her fear and anxiety turned to anger, in need of a place to go.

Jack stood back with an amused look on his face. “Are you finished, Miss Overly Dramatic?”

Elyse put her hands on her hips. First, the insufferable man treated her like a little woman, and then he had the nerve to say she was overly dramatic.

“Would you have rather me told him what really happened?”

“Yes.” She thrust her chin in the air. Then lowered it. “No, I guess not.” She hated to admit he was right.

Telling the police at this point, when they were trying to find a man officially considered dead and buried, seemed too late in the game. But, why did he have to look so smug about it? And why did he have to look so damn irresistible wearing a pair of ratty old jeans and a Marines sweatshirt? Her mind switched subjects at warp speed. She was furious with herself for the path it took. Irresistible indeed.

A thought occurred to her. “How did you know where I work? I never told you.”

“I checked you out.”

“You what?” Heat rose in her checks, but she wasn't sure if it was from anger or embarrassment. “You had no right to do that.”

“Sure I did. *You*—” he tapped the end of her nose with his index finger, “—are part of Matthew’s history. But this is not the time or the place to discuss it. C’mon.” He motioned for her to follow.

She ignored Jack as the heat in her cheeks notched up another degree. *Definitely anger*. “Mine and Matthew’s relationship is a completely different matter.”

“Not true, darlin’. You come included as part of the package.” He shoved his hands in his pockets and rocked back on his heels.

“From the point of my divorce on is no, I repeat *no*, business of yours.” Her voice rose higher with every word.

Her anger had blossomed. She couldn’t imagine what she had found so attractive about him before. All she saw was a man who took advantage of his professional skills looking into her personal life. It was bad enough she had a smothering, overprotective family, although she did love them, she didn’t need a friend-of-a-friend picking through her life.

She looked around. “I am not having this conversation in a parking lot.” The stress of not-dead men calling her and a mystery perfume-wearing Freddy Kruger attacking her finally caught up. She rubbed her temples before she turned and walked back toward her store and called over her shoulder. “As a matter of fact, I am not having this conversation at all.”

Jack caught up to her and took hold of her arm. “Where do you think you’re going?”

She balled up her fists at her sides, ready to blast him again, but her mind went blank with whatever she was about to say. All she wanted to do was go home, maybe eat half a pint of her favorite ice cream and go to bed. The last thing she wanted was to have a verbal sparring match with a sexy-as-hell man who nosed into places he shouldn’t.

“Elyse?” He shook her arm. Not hard, but enough to make her feel like a recalcitrant child.

She released a long, drawn out sigh. “I’m going to straighten up the clothes and then I’m going home.”

“No you’re not. You’re leaving. Right now.”

She ignored him and righted a fallen clothing rack. Sweaters littered the floor around her feet. But before she scooped up the scattered wool, she remembered the open back door. She left the sweaters and hurried to close and lock it.

Her right eye twitched as she approached the door. Fear that the intruder may still be near slowed her, but didn't stop her determination. No one would be stupid enough to hang around the store when the police arrived. She sucked in a deep breath and peeked her head out—just to see if she could handle it. The tension eased in her chest by degrees. Nothing stirred in the empty lot. Reaching for the door, her toe bumped something. She found her cell phone lying next to the doorjamb. A little scratched, but no worse for the wear, she put it in her pocket.

Quickly, she slammed the door and turned the locks.

Nerve spent, she rested her forehead on the door for a moment before she turned to leave the stock room and smashed right into Jack, her face pressed to his chest, breathing in a musky cologne and man scent. Putting her hands against strong muscles, she shoved him away from her.

"See—" Jack's hands skimmed up her arms to her shoulders, "—you need to go. Rest. It was a rough night."

"I'm fine."

"Elyse, quit acting childish. You..."

"Childish!" She clenched her teeth together and counted to ten, but it didn't help.

"Get out of my store." She shook free of him.

Jack furrowed his brow, but didn't move.

"Please just go." She pushed at him. Maybe she was acting childish. Mentally she was waving her hands yelling, *I give up*. She needed Jack to leave so she could regroup. She pushed harder.

When he still didn't move, she didn't know what else to do, so she said, "You're fired. I don't want to deal with this anymore." That ice cream was all but screaming her name now. She wanted to eat the entire pint, slip into a chocolate chunk haze and forget Matthew Cabot ever existed. And, for that matter, Jack Walling.

“You don’t have a choice. You’re going to deal with it. And now.” Jack grabbed her by the arm and tried to pull her along, but she fought him.

The next thing she knew, he hoisted her up on his shoulder and carried her through the store. “How do you lock this?”

“Jack.”

“Elyse.”

No one spoke for a moment. Elyse considered arguing, despite the blood rushing to her head. But what good was it? Did she really think he’d put her down and let her go about her own merry way? “Here.” She handed him the key ring still clutched in her hand.

Jack locked the door and headed across the lot. Elyse craned her neck to see where he was headed—her car was in the other direction. He walked to a large Dodge Ram truck, unlocked and opened the door and, not so gently, dropped her onto the seat. She sat up and tried to shoot her best “die-scumbag” look at him, but he ignored her and handed her the seatbelt. He stared back at her for a moment. “Buckle up. And shut the door.” With a quick shake of his head, he rounded the truck and got in.

Elyse shut the door just as he slammed the truck into gear and sped out of the lot. When Jack should have taken a right, he went left. “Where’re we going?”

“My place.”

“Why?”

He didn’t answer.

“Jack.” When he still didn’t answer, she tried a different track to engage him. “What happened to your car?”

“Nothing.”

“Where is it?”

“At home.”

His blunt answers annoyed her.

“What about the woman you were with earlier? Won’t she be upset if you bring another woman home?” She remembered the giggling when she’d spoken to him on the phone. The same slash of jealousy cut through her again.

“What...” Jack looked confused. “Oh, Hannah.”

Hannah. Hmph.

Elyse stared at Jack, waiting for him to continue. He had the nerve to smile.

“No, I doubt she’ll mind. She might actually like you if you stop scowling.” Jack’s grin widened—like the Cheshire cat.

Elyse’s mouth dropped open. What a jerk. An odious jerk.

She had half a mind to make him stop the truck and let her out. *And go home all alone?* That stupid little voice jumped in and reminded her of why he was taking her to his house—guests and all. To be honest, she didn’t want to be alone at the moment, not after the attack at the store.

If she went to one of her family members, they would hover over her until she broke down and told them what was going on with her and she couldn’t risk them finding out. Her parents had been so disappointed when she and Matthew divorced. If they knew he was alive, and Elyse was trying to find him, they might have false hopes she would reconsider the divorce and wanted to get back with him, which couldn’t be farther from the truth. Matthew made sure she would never want him again.

“We’re here.” Jack pulled into a driveway. He’d said he lived in the same general area as her, but when she realized what street they were on, she couldn’t believe how close they actually lived to one another.

“How long have you lived here?” she asked.

“About a year.” Jack turned off the truck and got out. “You coming?” he asked before shutting his door.

Elyse sat there for a moment, just as an I’ll-come-when-I’m-darn-good-and-ready. About two minutes of acting like a two year old was all the indignation she could muster. Jack waited for her on the front porch like he had all the time in the world. With a loud huff, she met him at the door.

The inside of his home surprised her. She expected a mish-mash of garage-sale furniture and cinder blocks, maybe a few beer cans scattered about. Instead, Jack's furnishings were comfortable—homey even.

The tan leather couch and matching easy chair looked inviting and warm. Elyse shivered and her teeth chattered.

Jack must have noticed, because he pulled a throw from the couch and looped it over her shoulders.

"I'm so cold."

"Come sit down." Jack guided her to the couch. "You're probably in shock." He took her hands and rubbed them between his. The warmth of his touch spread through her. She looked up into his eyes and was stunned to see desire in them. She thought he found her foolish and flighty, not a desirable woman.

"W...where's your friend?" she asked, not at all comfortable with his look.

Chapter Twelve

My friend? Jack blinked once, then twice, and tried to figure out what Elyse was talking about. Why would she ask about one of his friends? She didn't even know any of his friends.

Hannah.

He had left in such a frantic hurry to get to Elyse that he had given no more concern to his company. Her safety had been his only thought—his pulse raced a steady beat as he whipped past the street lights on the short drive to her store as fear tightened his gut. He'd never been as relieved as he had been when she stumbled out of the store.

Then all he wanted to do was take her in his arms—hold her, comfort her. And he had. And that stupid kiss on her cheek. He wasn't sure who was more shocked—him or her. The jolt was enough for him to realize what a fool he was and he'd forced his training to kick in.

Once they left the scene behind—and nestled into the confines of his small abode—all the desire and want flooded back. Elyse sat shivering on his sofa in his living room and he had to go and touch her—and now he wanted nothing more than to lay her back and have his very imaginative way with her. But her wide amber eyes looked at him for answers—not a roll in the hay. Damn, a fool twice in one evening.

He hoped he hid the desire from his expression. Was that a spark of awareness that crossed her face? Was it desire, too? Did she want him as bad as he wanted her?

Then her face changed. “Jack. What about your *friend*?”

Judging by Elyse’s narrowed eyes and tight mouth, she was jealous. His heart sped up a beat. A smile wanted to curl his lips, but he suppressed it.

No. Man, get a hold of yourself.

He had to remind himself she was a client and nothing else. Nothing on any level other than business. He couldn’t—wouldn’t—get involved with her.

He had to make sure she didn’t get the wrong ideas about his feelings. The last thing he needed was her developing feelings for him. “My *friend* must have got tired of waiting and left. Not to worry, I’ll call her in the morning and straighten everything out.”

Elyse removed her hands from his and pulled the blanket tighter around her shoulders. “Why did you bring me here?”

“We needed to talk and I didn’t want to do it while watching you straightening up clothes.” Jack switched mental gears—back to business. “You said you thought it was the same woman from Halloween night.”

Elyse nodded. “I smelled the same perfume both times. When she had me pressed up against the wall, she was so close. I couldn’t help but smell it. And it’s a pretty unique scent.”

A thought hung in the back of Jack’s mind but he couldn’t quite get at it. Instead, he focused on the scratch on her face. It was in almost the same place as the welt she had after the funeral. Elyse kept getting the raw end of the deal—he wanted to kiss her, let her forget all the shitty things that had happened so far.

Stop thinking about her like that, he warned himself. “I’ll be back in a sec.” He needed to put some distance between them, to let the air between them thin out. He went to his bathroom and retrieved the first-aid kit.

Standing in front of his sink, he looked in the mirror. “She’s just a client. She’s just a client,” he said to his image in the mirror. Now if he could just make himself believe it.

He shook off his thoughts and returned to the living room with the first-aid kit. “Let me clean that cut for you.” He opened the box.

Elyse touched the spot and winced. “No, that’s okay. It’ll be fine.”

“I’ll just get the dirt out.” He poured some antiseptic on a cotton ball and touched it lightly to her cheek.

“Ooow. Damn.” Elyse chewed on her lip and tears welled in her eyes.

God, he knew how bad that shit stung. He felt like an ass having to use it, but the cut needed cleaning. He wetted another pad and repeated the process just to ensure the wound was clean. When he finished, he gently blew on it to cool it off.

Elyse closed her eyes. He watched color stain her neck and cheeks. He’d give anything to know what she was thinking. Instead, he stood away from the couch. “I’ll just... I’ll put this back.”

Who was he kidding?

He was a fool to think he could bring her here and keep it “strictly business” between them. He’d found her desirable when he met her as a nineteen year old just burgeoning into womanhood. But as a thirty-two-year-old woman, she was magnificent. She stirred notions of suburbia with a house and yard and happily ever after. A feat no other woman had ever accomplished.

It was his mother’s fault. She’d called yesterday with the news of his stepsister’s pregnancy and bugging him about when he might settle down and have kids.

That’s it—subliminal programming. Had to be. Because he didn’t ever want to get married or—God forbid—start a family.

When he returned to the living room, he found Elyse with her head back on the arm of the couch. She’d pulled her feet up under her and breathed in slow, deep breaths—sound asleep.

He couldn’t help but touch her. He skimmed his fingers across her jaw, her skin warm to the touch. Jack sat on the coffee table and watched her sleep. Matthew Cabot must be the biggest ass to let a beauty like her get away from him.

With a sigh, he tucked several fallen locks of hair behind her ear. He got another blanket from the hall closet and laid it over her legs. In the kitchen, he started a pot of coffee. He didn’t think he’d be getting much sleep tonight.

Elyse awoke, burning up. A blanket, tangled around her legs, kept her immobile. She hadn't meant to fall asleep. Then her adrenaline plummeted after pumping full speed, her body shut down and took the only recourse it could to combat the manic mood swings—sleep.

Why didn't Jack wake her? He would want to discuss what was happening with Matthew. Jack seemed like a talker. But he kept getting that funny look on his face and then he would make himself scarce.

Did he think she was useless with the situation?

Matthew thought she was pathetic and finally a waste of his time. After a while, she managed to convince herself it was just him—not her. But, Jack couldn't even stand to be in the same room with her. All the more reason she needed to fire him. And make it stick. He couldn't keep working on the case if she fired him. He'd be out of her life.

Why disappointment flooded her, she didn't understand.

What time is it? She looked at her watch and couldn't believe it was nearly one in the morning. Tossing the blanket from around her, she checked her pockets trying to find her keys. Then she remembered Jack all but hijacked her.

Letting out a heavy sigh, she got up from the couch and went in search of her absentee host.

With his back to her, he sat at a huge table in the dining room. Papers were littered halfway across the dark red wood. Jack bent his head and rubbed the back of his neck.

He must have worked for hours while she slept. Without thinking, she walked up behind him and put her hands on his shoulders, like she used to do for Matthew after a long day at work.

Jack tensed as she massaged the stiff muscles under her fingers, but then relaxed and let his head drop to his chest.

"Your muscles are so tense. Have you been sitting here the whole time I was asleep?"

"Hmm," Jack mumbled.

Elyse squeezed his shoulders a bit too tight and he snapped his head up.

“Yeah. I was working on some new information I got today.”

“But, I fired you. You have no reason to go over any of it.”

“I didn’t accept your discharge.” He stilled her hands and removed them from his shoulders. “Would you like to know what I found, or do you want to keep pretending you aren’t interested?” He looked up at her. “Even though I can feel you trying to read over my shoulder.”

Elyse smacked the top of his head and moved to his side. “What did you find?”

“Matthew has been using Jonathan’s credit cards. He stays at a hotel for no more than two nights. They’re kind of pricey. The first one, in Chicago, ran him five hundred a night.”

“Sounds like Matthew. He always wanted the best.” Elyse thought about all the expensive dresses he’d bought her. All of which had hung in her closet with the tags still on. She wondered what he did with them when she moved out.

Jack stretched his arms over his head and let out a noisy yawn.

“Why don’t you drive me back to my car? You need your sleep.”

He put his arms down abruptly. “You’re not going anywhere.”

“I...I can’t stay here.” She would go nuts if she had to be under the same roof with the man.

“Elyse, whoever is after you has been to your home *and* work. Both times you got very lucky, but your luck can’t hold out that long.” He stood and put his hands in her shoulders. “Look, I know this is an inconvenience for you, but it can’t be helped. Whatever Matthew got himself into, he dragged you in it with him.”

“And you’re sure the attacks on me are related to Matthew?”

He tilted his head and looked at her. “Do you have any other enemies?”

“Well no, but...”

“And when did the first attack happen?”

“After I moved the diamonds from the safe deposit box.” A shudder ran through her. “Do you think Matthew sent that woman after me?”

“I don’t know. It’s possible. Or she knows about them and wants it all for herself. There’s no way to know yet.”

“Do you think she’s the one who killed Jonathan?”

“Maybe. It’s feasible. And if she did, there’ll be no way to stop her from coming after you—yet again. She has nothing to lose. That’s why I want you to stay here where I can protect you.”

“For how long?”

“As long as it takes.”

“You can’t be serious. What about my family? They’ll worry. And Monty. He’s there all alone.” *It’s a good thing I never had children, I can’t even take care of a dog.*

“Did you leave him inside or out?”

“He’s out, because when I left, I thought I’d only be gone a couple of hours.” She tugged at her lip. “And my car is still at the store.”

“I’ll take care of everything.” Jack went into the kitchen with Elyse trailing behind him. “Will Monty go to someone he doesn’t know?”

Elyse snorted, an unfeminine trait that Matthew had hated. “Yeah, he’ll go to anyone. He even liked Matthew.”

Jack gave her a pointed look.

“He came over about a year after I got Monty, trying to talk me into some get-rich scheme—which I didn’t go for. The dog went right to him. He’s not very discriminating. Of course, as soon as Monty slobbered on his Italian shoes, Matthew had a fit and ordered me to put him outside. I put Matthew out instead.”

Jack laughed and picked up the phone. Elyse listened to his end of the conversation.

“Casey, it’s Jack.”

“Yeah, yeah I know what time it is. Listen I need you to do me a favor... Don’t give me that. You owe me... Yeah we’ll call it even. There’s a store, Simply Threads, on North Beach, I need you to pick up a dark green Dodge Intrepid...”

Elyse listened while Jack gave his friend, Casey, the plate numbers from her car and her home address, all without looking it up from the file she had seen with her name on it

in the dining room. She didn't know if she should be impressed or frightened that he could rattle off her personal information at will.

"While you're there can you pick up the dog in the back yard? Gentle as a lamb." He looked at Elyse and she nodded vigorously. "I promise. His name's Monty. I'll get him tomorrow."

"What about my keys?" she asked when he hung up. "You still have them."

A shy smile tipped up the corner of his mouth. "He won't need them."

"Gotcha." She wasn't entirely certain she wanted to know anything else so she kept her thoughts to herself. She turned to head back to the living room and her stomach growled.

"Hungry?" Jack asked.

She looked around the immaculate kitchen, wondering if Jack even had any food. The counters looked too clean ever to have held food. But, instead of telling him that, she nodded.

"Sit down and I'll fix you something."

"You can cook?" *Wonders never cease*, Elyse marveled.

Chapter Thirteen

Jack narrowed his eye at Elyse. “Of course I can cook.” What did she take him for, some kind of moron?

He didn’t argue the point when he noticed her pale skin and the dark circles under her eyes. He opened the fridge and pulled out the ingredients to make an omelet.

He poured water into the coffee maker and moved over to the stove to warm up the skillet. His curiosity about her overprotective family was too much to squelch for very long. “Tell me why your family feels the need to treat you like they do.”

For the longest time Elyse appeared as if she wasn’t going to answer, so he spoke again. “You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to.”

“No, it’s not that.” She sighed so deeply he expected if he turned around, he’d see a tear or two glistening in her eyes. “I’m just trying to think of the best way to start. Tell me where the plates and stuff are and I’ll explain my family while I set the table.”

Jack pointed out the cabinets and returned to the stove.

“I am the youngest of five children. Do you have any brothers or sisters?”

More than you can imagine, he thought of saying but instead stuck to the immediate truth. “I have two stepsisters, but I’ve only met them a few times.”

Elyse nodded and sat at the table and divvied out the cutlery.

He wondered what she thought of the fact that he’d only met his stepsisters a few times. A sudden surge of guilt, and want for her approval, swept over him. He didn’t

know why. Shaking his head, he blocked the thought from his mind and listened when she continued.

“When I was ten, I got real sick. It started out as the flu. But after missing two weeks of school, I got worse. My mom took me to the doctor and they put me in the hospital immediately. I had pneumonia.

“I was in the hospital for several weeks. And even though they never said, I think I was close to dying.”

Jack watched her shiver. Poor kid, Jack thought. Other than a car accident when he was twenty-five, he had never had anything worse than a cold, so he couldn't image how horrible a ten year old would feel—or how scared.

“The doctors would come in with these grim looks on their faces.” She shrugged at him when he looked to see why she had paused. “And they would always whisper to my parents. Even as weak as I was, it would make me so mad. Why did they have to keep secrets from me?

“I did get better. Obviously. But it took a while. When I came home from the hospital, my brother and sisters babied me. I guess kind of like if you found a fallen baby bird. Someone was always playing nursemaid with me.”

Jack took the skillet from the stove and set it aside while he made some toast.

“It took a while until I was a hundred percent. By the time I was in junior high, my sibs started having kids of their own, so it wasn't too bad. I had a pretty normal life after that. Then right after high school I met Matthew.”

Even hearing the man's name churned Jack's gut.

“I decided I would work my way through college so my parents didn't have to worry about it. They'd put my brother and two sisters through school already, so money was tight—but I know they would have paid for it if I asked them to.”

“What about you other sister, didn't she go to school?”

“No. Megan got pregnant right after high school and her jerk boyfriend took off. She wanted to keep the baby, which left another drain on money in our house even though

Mom and Dad were more than happy to help. And, geez, Alexander is fifteen now. I can't imagine our family without him. He's such a character."

Jack watched her face soften when she spoke of her nephew. Hearing her speak so fondly of family members who obviously meant so much to her made him ache. Again, a longing for the house with a huge yard popped into his mind. Damn, why did Elyse bring these feelings out in him?

But then her face hardened and he worried she might have said something he missed. Before he could ask, she continued.

"When Matthew and I started having problems, my parents were so disappointed. They thought I'd found quite a catch, especially since he didn't 'make me work', as my mother put it. I don't know why she couldn't understand I wanted to work."

The far-off look returned to her eyes. Then she rose from the table and filled the coffee mugs he'd set out.

"Naturally when I called it quits..."

"*You* did?" That's not the information Jack had found delving into Matthew's past.

"Yes. We were separated for a short time, but I finally filed for divorce the day after our seventh anniversary."

The woman at Matthew's company said that *he* had kicked Elyse out and *he* had filed for divorce the very next day. It seemed to have to come as a surprise to everyone there. They had had no idea things were rocky between the two.

"When I got divorced, my family just knew I'd never be able to take care of myself, having been the pampered wife for so long."

Sarcasm and anger tainted her words. Jack was beginning to think he might have misjudged Elyse. Not necessarily a good thing if he expected to keep his hands to himself.

He dished the food onto the plates and motioned for her to sit.

"I'm sorry if I sound angry or ungrateful, it's just that no one has ever given me a chance to stand on my own. When I got the job at Simply Threads, it was the first thing I ever did all by myself."

“But you worked your way through college.”

“Not the same. I had scholarships so I didn’t need that much. And I worked for a friend of the family. I think he gave me the job because he and my dad go back to high school.

“My job now, I went out, found it myself and worked hard. Worked my way up from a part-time employee to assistant manager. It made me my own person finally.”

Jack nodded. He understood about independence.

“That’s why when Matthew and I divorced, I didn’t take a dime from him. I wanted to start fresh.”

Jack choked on his coffee. *What? No money?*

Elyse jumped from her chair and smacked Jack square on the back. “Are you okay?” She flattened her hand and ran it in small circles like she did when her nieces and nephews were infants and she needed to work a bubble loose.

Jack waved her away but she didn’t get two steps before he grabbed her wrist. He took a few deep, but raspy, breaths then leveled his gaze at her.

“What do you mean you didn’t take money from him?”

“Just what I said. I wanted a clean start. I knew I would be okay, I didn’t want him to feel obligated to pay me money considering... Well, I mean he didn’t owe me anything.”

“That’s why you rent your house?” he asked releasing her hand.

She returned to her seat and picked at her food again. “Yeah. I lived with my parents until I had enough money saved up for a deposit on a house. I couldn’t stand the idea of living in an apartment.” She took several bites.

“When I saw the ad in the paper for the house, I jumped on the offer. But now the owners are selling it because they’re moving out of state and don’t want to mess with it anymore. I can’t afford to buy it, so I’ve been trying to find something else in my price range.”

“Because you left Matthew without getting a dime in a settlement?”

Geez, what's gotten into him? It wasn't a totally foreign concept to not take money in a divorce. Elyse knew another couple who, when they split amicably, they took what they brought into the marriage and not a penny more. Maybe it wasn't typical, but no one seemed to think anything was wrong when Elyse walked away with nothing.

Why did Jack act like it was the first time he'd ever heard of such a thing? And why did she care that his manic personality seemed to flip-flop every time she brought up Matthew? As long as he stayed hired, she didn't care how he did what he did as long as he got results—*finding* Matthew.

"This is really good," Elyse said after eating half her omelet. "I can cook, but just simple things. We ate out a lot. Matthew insisted." Again, she justified her former life with Matthew to Jack. As if she needed to get his acceptance that she didn't live a shallow life.

Jack only nodded but didn't look up at her.

She did it again, even though she didn't know what *it* was. Jack was back to the cold shoulder. For some reason it hurt her more than she thought possible. Tears welled up in her eyes again for the hundredth time since Matthew's supposed death. She couldn't remember ever being so weepy.

Jack stood and took his plate to the sink. With his back still to her, he started talking. "Tomorrow, we'll go check out Matthew's condo. As far as I could tell, Matthew hasn't taken any actions to settle his will. Unless he did it beforehand, the condo probably won't be cleared. And I doubt he did."

"Did you say 'we'?" Elyse joined him at the sink. Her shoulder bumped up against his hard bicep when she set her plate in the ceramic sink. A jolt of electricity rushed through her. "I thought I was just a client. You did all the work."

"That was before you were attacked—again. I don't want to let you out of my sight until I have a handle on what you—we—are up against." He turned toward her, their gazes locked.

It would be so easy to lean up on tip-toes. Finally taste the mouth that had haunted her.

Elyse's brain worked overtime, telling her to step back, move away from him, but she couldn't. She didn't need the complication of a relationship with a man like Jack Walling.

Then she did a mental headshake. There was no relationship. He was essentially her employee. He'd taken it upon himself to become her pseudo bodyguard. At the moment though, the only body she needed to be protected from was her own, which threatened to spontaneously combust.

To make matters worse, Jack gently rubbed his fingers across her cheek. "Does it still hurt?"

"Hmm?"

He put his fingers under her chin and lifted her face. "Are you okay? Maybe you bumped your head, too." He tilted her face from side to side looking into her eyes. Then he ran his hands through her hair and massaged her scalp. She all but moaned when he pulled his hands free and his gaze searched hers. "We should probably go bed."

Elyse's eyes widened. The slow fire he ignited with his touch erupted into a four-alarm inferno. In that moment, she'd agree to anything Jack Walling had to offer. "Okay."

"I have the guest bedroom ready for you. You should be comfortable."

Fizzle. Nothing but evaporating smoke.

"Right. The guest bedroom." She followed him down the short hallway to the first door on the left. Inside she found a full-size bed with a denim comforter. The pale green walls had several framed movie posters, all with the same theme, Gene Kelly and Debbie Reynolds in *Singing in the Rain*, Gene Kelly and Frank Sinatra in *Anchors Aweigh*, and Gene Kelly and Cyd Charisse in *Brigadoon*.

She eyed him over her shoulder. Had she misread him? Was he gay? She shuddered at the thought of all the wasted masculinity which oozed off the man.

"You like Gene Kelly, huh?"

He shrugged. “The bathroom is across the hall and my room is at the end. Sleep tight.” He held her gaze a moment. The intensity made her mouth go dry. He didn’t say a word, but turned abruptly and left.

Elyse glanced up at the posters and then at his departing back. *Gay?* No way in hell. If a man who could look at her like that—make her weak in the knees—was gay then she might as well turn in her girl card because she didn’t need it any more.

She climbed into bed and entertained the thought through one more round of analysis, but the fatigue she had held off returned full blast. She fought to keep her eyelids open, and her limbs weighed her down. Body and soul grew weary. Yawning, she shut the door and lay on the bed. A line from *Gone With the Wind* stuck in her head. “Tomorrow is another day.”

Chapter Fourteen

Saturday morning, Jack grumbled around his bathroom. He didn't think he'd gotten more than an hour's worth of sleep. Knowing Elyse slept just feet away kept him tossing and turning. She'd gotten up and had gone into the bathroom three or four times.

Each time, he had wanted to go to her and drag her back to his bed. Common sense and fear he might start something with her he'd never be able to stop, were the only things that kept him in his room. And it scared him more than anything. He'd never had to force himself to stay away from any woman before.

Staring at his face in the mirror, he wiped shaving foam across his cheeks, chin and neck. Why did she have to defy everything he thought he knew about her? She wasn't some pompous, pampered princess who expected everyone to cater to her whims. She worked hard. She didn't whine about her life, just stated the facts and moved on. She did what she needed to do.

Though, from all accounts, she had made a hefty profit during the pre-divorce stage, so when they went to court all she had to do was plead no-contest.

But not according to her.

He didn't think she was lying. For whatever reason, he believed everything she said. Why had Matthew lied to his co-workers? What would he gain if it looked like his wife had drained his finances during the divorce?

Moreover, why had she left?

He asked himself that over and over. The terms of the divorce, labeled as “irreconcilable differences”, could be anything from someone snoring too loud to depraved indifference to just short of domestic abuse. That’s what the court printed when you didn’t want to air your dirty laundry.

Rumor around the office building, though, had Elyse spending time in a mental facility. Several in fact. Matthew couldn’t take it any longer and had paid her off to leave without making a scene. Jack had found evidence that Elyse had gone to unnamed clinics for specific periods of time in the marriage. It supported Matthew’s claim.

He couldn’t reconcile himself with it.

After Elyse’s first absence, the rumors had started flying. A quite talkative secretary said she thought Matthew himself had started the rumors. It made absolutely no sense. *Of course*, Jack reasoned, *so far nothing in this case was what it appeared to be*.

Jack had a hard time wrapping his mind around Elyse being in a padded room. But...

“Ow. Shit.” Jack nicked the side of his chin. He needed to stop thinking about Elyse and Matthew for five minutes so he didn’t bleed to death before he solved the puzzle.

After washing his face and doctoring his cut, he dressed in jeans and a T-shirt and headed into the kitchen. Expecting Elyse to be still asleep after their late night, he was surprised to find her at the table with a cup of coffee and the newspaper.

“Good morning.”

She jerked in her chair, but a sweet smile crossed her face when she looked up at him. “I didn’t hear you come in. I made some coffee. I hope you don’t mind.”

He waved away her comment. “Did you get any sleep?”

“Some. I could probably use about a week more.”

“I know what you mean.”

Elyse smiled then got up from the table and retrieved a cup of coffee for Jack. Holding it out to him, she narrowed her eyes and stepped closer. When he took the cup from her, she ran her fingers over his chin, sending jolts of electricity through him. He nearly spilled hot coffee down the front of him, which would have put quite a damper on the stirring in his pants.

“You got yourself pretty good, huh.”

“Uh, yeah.” He moved away from her and over to the table. He caught a look on her face. If he had to describe it, he guessed she looked disappointed. “You want me to make you something to eat?”

“No thanks, I’m fine.” She walked out of the kitchen.

Jack followed her into the living room where she sank onto the couch. She picked up the edge of the blanket and played with the seam. A huge sigh preceded a quick glance up at him. She started to say something but stopped.

Jack stood at the end of the leather couch watching her.

“Where’d you get that scar?” she asked out of nowhere.

Jack rubbed the mark on his jaw and sat next to her. “Car accident.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Was anyone else hurt?” Elyse leaned forward and put her hand on his knee.

The surge returned, but instead of moving her hand like he should, he enjoyed the warmth of her touch. Then he remembered his accident.

Jack snorted. “No, just me and my stupid pride.”

Elyse looked at him with eyes wide and eyebrows raised.

“I swerved to miss a deer and hit the tree he was standing next to. And of course, I wasn’t wearing my seat belt. I got thrown ten feet from the car.”

“Oh.” She sat back, taking her hand away.

“You sound disappointed.”

“Sorry, no. I just imagined you in a bar fight with a mean biker dude. He hit you with a beer bottle when you tried to protect a woman’s virtue. Sappy romantic stuff.”

“I like your version much better. I could take on a biker or two.” Jack set his coffee on the end table and flexed his arm. His muscle bulged under his T-shirt sleeve—or he hoped it did, it’d been a while since he bothered to go to the gym.

Elyse laughed. “Oh, my hero.” Her eyes lit up and her face flushed the way he remembered from the Christmas party years before.

Jack's heart pounded. He had to touch her. Desire forced him to brush the hair away from her face and tuck it behind her ear.

Her reddened cheeks darkened more as his hand hovered by her face. Instinct took hold and he moved closer to her. He let his eyes linger on hers for a moment, gave her a chance to back away, before his mouth closed over hers.

She gasped and her lips softened under his, finally parting. She tasted of rich coffee as his tongue slid with hers. He moved his body closer, wrapping his arms around her.

Elyse's moan sent his hunger into overdrive. He ran a hand up her back. Then lowering it, he slid it under her sweater, seeking out the warmth of her skin. As he flattened his hand to her back, he pulled her close, so close the ever-increasing tattoo in his chest mingled with hers. She moaned again and ran her fingers through his hair—killing all his restraint in the process. He had to have her. Right then.

He drew her to the floor, dragged her on top of him. His blood pounded in his ears and drowned out any other sound.

Elyse pulled her mouth away. "Someone's knocking on your door."

Her husky, breathy voice excited him more. He kissed her ear and neck while he ran his hands over her firm bottom—God how many times had he thought of doing just this to her?

"Jack—" she shook him, "—someone is at the door."

Jack finally recognized the sound, not just his pulse ready to explode, but someone knocking on the front door.

"They'll go away." He took her earlobe in his mouth.

"JACK." She fought, but with feeble attempts and as many giggles.

Jack stilled as a key snicked into the lock. Only one other person had a key to the house. He tried to be graceful pushing Elyse off, but he ended up dumping her onto the floor. He needed to get to the door before...

"Jack? You still sleeping?" Hannah called as she walked through the door.

"Hannah..." Jack tried to cut her off, but she was too fast and walked in. She looked at Jack, then down at Elyse sitting on the floor and whose lips were still red and swollen.

She narrowed her eyes. “What’s going on?”

Before he could speak, Elyse jumped up and ran into the bathroom. He went after her, but she slammed the door in his face. He was lucky to get his fingers out of the way in time.

“Elyse, open the door. Give me a chance to explain.”

She didn’t answer.

“Can I talk to you a minute?”

The water in the sink ran, then the shower. He would give her a few minutes to calm down.

Yeah, like I have a choice, he thought.

Walking back into the living room, he caught the amused look on Hannah’s face. “Is she the same woman who called last night and made you run out of here like your shorts were on fire?”

He ran his hand over his face. “Yeah.”

“And is she why you called Casey at two in the morning to move a car and pick up a dog?”

“Yeah.” He looked down at his feet, embarrassed.

“And did I do something to mess that up just now?”

“Yeah. No.” He shoved his hands on his hips and looked at Hannah. “I screwed that up all on my own.”

Hannah! *The woman with Jack when I called last night has a key to his house.* Elyse sat on the side of the tub with her head cradled in her hands. Beautiful, six-foot-tall Hannah with long blond hair and baby blue eyes. The not-an-ounce-of-fat-on-me Hannah, with the super model figure and tan, tan skin.

How could she have been so stupid? How could she think someone like Jack would want her—want Elyse Cabot—not just an easy roll in the hay?

Matthew was right the day he told her she was too naïve for her own good. He proved that the day of their seventh anniversary.

They had been separated for only a month and Elyse took him at his word that he just needed some space. He would mentally work through their problem and then move back home with her. He'd told her he didn't blame her, but he wanted time to adjust, to get used to the idea. Being the sweet, understanding wife that she was, she agreed with him.

On that fateful day, she'd packed a bottle of Matthew's favorite wine, and the new briefcase he'd been eyeing at the mall, and headed over to the apartment he was leasing.

She had put on one of the dresses he'd purchased for her. Her nerves shook as she stood at the door waiting for him to answer. The shock of seeing another woman wearing Matthew's bathrobe had rattled her so much she had dropped the bottle of wine at her feet.

She had turned tail and ran, just like she did today when *Hannah* showed up at Jack's. And just like Jack, Matthew had run after her. "Let me explain, Elyse. It's not what it looks like," he had said.

"Oh! You're not fucking someone else on *our* anniversary?" she had yelled. "You told me you just needed time to figure this out, that you wanted our marriage to work, but you need time."

"Oh grow up, Elyse." His face had lost the innocent, let-me-explain mask and morphed to something ugly. Anger had glowed in his eyes. "Yes. I *am* sleeping with Jennifer. You just can't give me what I need, so I had to find someone else."

She slapped him so hard her hand had vibrated the entire drive to her lawyer's office. Elyse's lawyer had filed the divorce papers the next day.

Now, sitting in Jack's bathroom, the same humiliation filled her. Why did she let it happen? She could see it coming. But, like an out-of-control train, she was weak to stop it.

"This is why I haven't dated since I got divorced, I'm a lousy judge of men." She looked at her tear stained face in the mirror.

Taking a handful of water from the still-running tap, she splashed her face. Reluctantly, she turned off all the running water and put her hand on the knob. Opening the door, she found Jack poised to knock.

Chapter Fifteen

“I want to explain,” Jack said when Elyse came back into the living room with him.

“No. No need.” She wouldn’t meet his eyes. “We need to find Matthew as soon as possible. I want this over with so I can get back to my life.”

And away from me, Jack finished her unsaid words. God, how had he messed this up so bad? He needed to tell her the truth. Last night in the truck, he’d enjoyed the jealousy that sparked in her eyes when she asked about the woman he’d been with. He wished now he’d told her who Hannah was. He needed to rectify the situation.

“About Hannah...”

“Look, I don’t give a damn about her.” She looked at him then, her eyes ablaze with anger. “I am mad at myself for getting carried away with you. The kiss was a mistake.”

Don’t say that, he wanted to scream even though she was right. He had broken every rule he’d set for himself as a PI. Now she was giving him an easy way out of a sticky situation, so why did he want to kiss her until she understood how much he cared for her? He wanted to explain it to her, convince her, if someone could just explain it to him first.

Instead of telling her the things burning in his heart he just nodded, agreeing with her assessment of the kiss.

“Didn’t you say we were going to Matthew’s condo today?” She didn’t wait for him to answer. “Let’s get moving. The sooner this is over, the better.”

Elyse turned and walked out the front door and Jack found his pulse racing again. Even when she was pissed and dismissing him, she was one hell of a woman.

Jack knew how to pick a lock. Why was she not surprised? He pushed Matthew's apartment door open as he slid the slim, black leather case into his pocket. Jack turned and held up a finger to his lips, telling her to be quiet.

Well duh.

Jack left her standing in the middle of the living room while he checked the rest of the apartment. "All clear," he said in a low voice.

A knot grew in her stomach as she looked around at all of Matthew's things. A few were the things they had shared as husband and wife, but many were new, and obviously expensive, judging by their lack of taste. The flashier the better, Matthew had always believed.

Elyse followed Jack to the back of the apartment where they found his bedroom. The unmade, king-size bed took up most of the space. Thoughts of what Matthew did, and whom he did it with, flashed before her eyes. The humiliation of four years ago resurfaced and her cheeks burned.

She shook off her thoughts. This was not about her.

A small desk was nestled in the corner. Jack sat in the chair and shuffled through the papers scattered around Elyse dug through drawers. She didn't exactly know what she was looking for, but didn't want to stand around while Jack had all the fun.

A noise at the front of the apartment stilled her hands. She stood and looked toward the open door that led to the hallway. Before she could turn and say anything to Jack, he had one hand on her waist and the other covering her mouth. He pulled her through the bathroom and into the linen closet. He shut the door with barely a whisper of sound.

Jack slid his hands from her and put his mouth right next to her ear. "Don't make a sound." The whispered breath sent chills through her.

Don't make a sound? Does moaning count? Because if he keeps breathing on my neck like that, I won't be able to help myself.

The cramped confines of the closet didn't help either. Her backside pressed up tight against his rock-hard thighs. And his broad muscular chest rubbed her back with every breath.

Mixed with her fear, adrenaline pumped through her like mad. She pressed up harder against Jack. Someone was moving around in Matthew's room. He released a heavy breath when she wiggled to get her foot situated.

Her mind bounced back and forth between what was in the closet and what was out. She couldn't decide which was more dangerous, the devil she knew or the devil she didn't. Hearing papers rustle from the area she thought was the desk caught her attention. But the growing hardness pressed up against her hip raced a close second.

For a moment, she decided to be mean to Jack, to get even with him for dumping her on the floor when his girlfriend showed up. She shifted from foot to foot, rubbing her hip back and forth across his hardening erection. She had to fight a laugh when his breathing grew shallow and raspy. A smile creased her face when his hands clamped down on her hips, stilling her movement.

Yeah, this is neither the time nor the place to get all hot and bothered. The more she thought about it, it was very hot. And stuffy. Two bodies in a confined space was sucking the oxygen from the closet.

Then the smell hit her. The perfume. The same scent had assaulted her Halloween night as well as the night before.

She was here. In Matthew's apartment.

Elyse slid her hands to her chest. Pain radiated so intensely it burned. *Oh God, not now.* Her panic attacks had never come *during* something bad. They had always shadowed the event. Her body shook. She knew the order she broke down. Next came the panting, the heavy, noisy breathing.

Oh God, she couldn't make any noise.

Her shoulders rose and fell in a steadily quickening pace.

She closed her eyes and tried to clamp her hand on her mouth. But, her shaking made it hard to keep it covered. A soothing warmth pulled her mind back from obliteration. Arms wrapped tightly around her, holding her. Soft words feathered her ear.

Jack.

Jack was whispering to her, trying to calm her. She leaned into him and let herself dissolve with his words. Let him take over her mind.

“Think of your favorite place. Imagine you’re there now, relaxing.” His lips touched her ear. “Imagine your favorite person, your best friend, is with you. You are laughing, talking. The sun is setting and you watch the colors melt from one hue to the next.

“Then the stars come out one by one. A soft breeze floats across your face. Trees rustle, a rhythmic sound, making you want to sleep. You are so relaxed, your body feels weightless.”

Elyse could breathe easier, filling her lungs with air. The shaking subsided, but Jack didn’t loosen his grip. He held her, his cheek pressed onto the top of her head.

She wasn’t sure how long they stood in the embrace after her panic attack, but her knees hurt and her feet were numb. All she knew at that point was she was lost to Jack. He could do no wrong by her ever again. No man, no person for that matter, had ever been witness to her panic attacks. Instead of freaking out, though, he talked her through it in such a gentle way she wanted to cry once the fear had passed.

When his arms finally did move, a chill ran over her from the absence of his heat. He leaned his head next to her ear again. “I think the place is empty, but we can’t be too careful. There’s not enough room to switch places in here so you’re going to have to go first.”

He rubbed his hands up and down her arms. “When I tell you, I want you to hurry out then get behind me as soon as you can. You got that?”

Elyse nodded. She was too weak and too tired to argue. Jack gave her a reassuring squeeze then slowly opened the door.

He moved quickly, pulled her from room to room until he was satisfied the condo was empty. After he checked the front door to make sure it was locked, he walked over to Elyse and wrapped her up in his arms.

“Are you okay now?”

Elyse nodded again, not trusting her own voice. She was afraid she might cry if she tried to speak.

“Have you had many panic attacks before?”

Many? Wasn't one or two too many? She considered sloughing it off as no big deal, but the truth was she'd had too many to count.

“Can you tell me what caused it? Are you claustrophobic?”

She shook her head. “It was the perfume. It was the woman from last night.”

“And Halloween?” Jack grumbled. “And you're sure?”

“Absolutely.”

“We need to get out of here before any other of Matthew's friends show up.”

“Please.”

Jack released her, and lifted her face. He didn't say a word just gave her a quick, but searing, kiss. Taking her by the hand, he left the apartment.

Chapter Sixteen

They drove around for two hours, stopping once to refill the truck with gas. Jack wanted to make certain no one followed them. He didn't think the woman who had looked through Matthew's apartment knew they were hiding in the closet, but he didn't want to take any chances.

He had a vested interest in Elyse's safety now. He was falling for her. He couldn't say when it happened. But when she had her panic attack in the close confines of the linen closet, and he held her, calming her, he knew then it was too late to pretend he didn't or couldn't care. His heart was already there.

He looked across the cab of the truck at her. She hugged herself tightly with her head back and eyes closed. With her softened expression, he thought she might be sleeping so he didn't dare speak. Not that he knew what the hell to say to her if he did.

Plans. He needed plans. He wanted to take her back to his house but, still uncertain of her safety, he drove to another house. When he pulled into the drive and shut off the engine, she sat up blinking.

"Where are we?" She rubbed hands over her face and looked at Jack.

"At a friend's house. I wanted to stay out of sight a little longer." He ran his fingers across her cheek then got out of the truck. He walked around and helped her down.

Taking her by the hand, he led her to the front door. Ringing the bell, he knew he was asking for trouble bringing Elyse here, but he needed a place to stay and as soon as she listened to him for a minute, she would understand.

He checked his watch and rang the bell again. It was noon and at least one of them should be home. He was about to leave when someone yelled to hang on. He looked at Elyse to see if she recognized the voice but she still looked hung over from her nap.

But when Hannah opened the door, Elyse stiffened, eyes widened. She tried to tug her hand free. He had been so intent on Elyse he didn't notice at first Hannah's disheveled appearance, her hair sticking out all over. He detected a hint of color on her cheeks which only deepened when he narrowed his eyes. It finally dawned on him why it took so long for her to answer the door. He was afraid his cheeks reddened, too.

"Jack, what can I do for ya?" Hannah tried to straighten her shirt, but the buttons were off one hole so it continued to hang crooked no matter how much she tugged on it.

"Can we come in?" he asked, trying hard to hide his smile.

"Ah, yeah, sure." She turned her face to the inside of the house. "Honey, Jack's here," she yelled.

Jack laughed when Casey grumbled and grouched somewhere else in the small house.

Elyse stopped him from entering, pulling on his hand. "I thought Hannah was your girlfriend?"

Before he could answer, Monty came barreling through the front door. He leapt up on Elyse and licked her as if she'd been gone a month not just overnight.

He couldn't help but smile at the confused look on her face. "I tried to explain it to you but you wouldn't listen. Hannah's married to one of my best friends, Casey."

"The guy who moved my car and got Monty?"

Jack nodded.

"Then why does she have a key to your house?"

"She comes over to clean for me twice a week. She thinks I live like a pig and as much as she and Casey are over, she couldn't stand it." He smiled at the look of utter

astonishment on Elyse's face. "Come on. I'll introduce you." He patted his leg and Monty followed leaving Elyse to trail after them both.

Jack led her to the living room where Casey was pulling on a T-shirt, inside out. Jack winked at him, earning a scowl until Casey kicked the ottoman in front of the sofa. His friend was at least three inches taller than him and outweighed him by twenty or so pounds. Jack had to fight back laughter watching the big man hobble about the room favoring his right foot.

Hannah hurried around picking up loose clothing from the floor. If Jack had been unsure at first, the sign of what he interrupted was still scattered on the floor.

"Hi guys. Whatchya been up to?" Jack asked. When no one answered he made tsk-tsk sound, and then chuckled. "And in front of the poor, helpless pooch no less."

Hannah dropped the shirt in her hand and her cheeks burned brighter. Elyse squeezed his hand so hard he winced—he hadn't thought she was strong enough to hurt him. He made a mental note not to forget that.

"That poor, helpless dog ate my rollerblades last night. Not to mention my leather briefcase." Casey motioned for Jack and Elyse to sit on the couch. "You owe me. We are *not* even. And you owe me. Did I mention that already?"

Jack laughed. "I think I got that." He looked at Elyse, who was waving her finger in Monty's face, scolding him for his insatiable appetite. "Casey Blackwell I'd like you to meet Elyse Cabot, owner of Monty the wonder-gut."

Casey shook Elyse's hand, and when she wasn't looking he winked at Jack. Jack had the overwhelming impulse to puff out his chest.

Hannah returned laundry free. "Hannah Blackwell, Elyse Cabot." Jack made the rest of the introductions.

Hannah shook Elyse's hand and then slapped Jack's arm. "I guess *we're* about even, huh."

Elyse coughed and looked down at her feet. Jack shook his head and laughed.

Hannah invited them into the kitchen and made a quick lunch for everyone while Jack ran down the case.

“The woman in her ex’s condo has attacked her twice now. And you still don’t know who she is,” Casey said.

Jack finished his sandwich and wiped his mouth. He tossed another crust of bread to Monty then spoke. “That about covers it.”

Elyse watched Casey, Hannah and Jack talk to each other. They had an easy rapport. Instantly she was jealous. She couldn’t believe she’d even thought Jack and Hannah were dating. Just one look at the intensity between her and Casey when they looked at one another; any fool could see how in love they were. She wanted what they had. She wanted the happily ever after.

Despite her height, Hannah was dwarfed by her husband. He was a large man with the brightest shade of red hair she thought she’d ever seen. His eyes, they were so green.

Elyse learned Casey and Jack had been in Special Forces together and formed a friendship that lasted nearly ten years until they both needed a break from the excitement. While Jack took a lower keyed job as a private investigator, Casey ran and marketed software to help train new recruits. His adrenaline-pumping, role-playing game geared soldiers for battle without having to traipse through the jungle or desert to learn.

At the beginning of the lunch, she had learned that was how Casey and Hannah met. She was a fellow computer genius—who knew, beauty and brains—who he had hired to help him work out the bugs. The rest, as they say, was history.

Her ex’s name brought her out of her thoughts.

“Matthew probably got the money skimming off his clients. That kind of cash gone would make anyone mad. The gal may be one of the clients or maybe he had a partner and forgot to cut her into the deal. We won’t know ’til we talk to him.

“He put the money in Elyse’s name, probably trying to hide it. He pulled most if it out a few weeks before Jonathan was killed.”

“What money?” Elyse leaned toward Jack and grabbed his arm.

“Matthew has been putting money away for years in accounts with your name on it. I found three different accounts so far.”

“I didn’t know about any of those.” She hoped they didn’t think she’d been hiding information. Now that they were all willing to help her, she couldn’t bare to think they would stop.

Elyse was amazed Casey and Hannah believed her story, no questions asked. She’d thought for sure they’d be skeptical, and not believe even Jack when he told them Matthew was the one alive.

“We know.” Jack patted her hand. “It’s not that uncommon to hide accounts in the ex’s name.”

“I still don’t understand. Why didn’t the police know which brother they had dead?” Hannah asked.

“Matthew switched IDs and those two were identical. I’ve only seen them together twice. And both times the only way I knew which was which was because Elyse was with Matthew. If I had to tell them apart I couldn’t.”

“Fingerprints? Didn’t either one have them on file?” Hannah persisted.

“No.”

“What about their baby records? When my niece was born they foot and hand printed her.”

“They were lost in a fire when Matthew and Jonathan were ten.” Elyse spoke up. “Their house burned down and they lost everything.”

“Hospitals have them on file, too, don’t they?” Hannah wouldn’t let it go.

“Enough, hon,” Casey said, putting a hand on his wife’s shoulder. “The police probably didn’t have any reason to look any deeper than they did. They found him in Matthew’s office. When he assumed Jonathan’s identity and told the police he’d found Matthew Cabot shot to death, that was that.”

“I understand. I just don’t see why in this day and time, even with twins, they didn’t figure it out.”

Because I was fooled at the beginning, too, and I was married to the man for seven years.

Finally, after another hour of talking, Jack told Elyse it was time to go. They waved their goodbyes and walked to the truck. As Jack opened her door and Monty leapt in, she stopped him from walking to the driver's side. "Can we run by my house? I need some clean clothes. I've been wearing these for two days and I feel kind of grimy."

"Yeah, sure." He chuckled her under the chin. "But you'll have to make it quick. We don't know if anyone is watching your house."

Ten minutes later, they pulled into Elyse's drive next to her car in the other space—Casey was good. Jack and Elyse got out leaving Monty in the truck. "He won't eat the upholstery, will he?"

Elyse made a grim face. "I don't know. I've never left him in my car before. We'll make it quick."

Jack checked all the rooms before he let Elyse out of his sight. She had to admit, she liked being hovered over by Jack. Unlike her family, he managed to give her enough space and still keep a close eye on her. She packed a bag with a couple of changes of clothes. She didn't know how long she would be gone.

Walking back into the kitchen, Jack carried a bag of dog food and Monty's water dish. He hefted the twenty-five pound bag like it was a small sack of flour. She smiled and pushed the button on her answering machine.

The first six were from her mother and her sister. The seventh was from Matthew's office.

"Play that last one back, will you?" Jack asked.

"Mrs. Cabot, this is Heather from Crumpet and Associates. At your earliest convenience, if you could come by, we have a few of Matthew's personal effects to pick up. Thank you and have a nice day."

"Why would they call me?" Elyse asked.

"Probably because they can't get a hold of 'Jonathan'."

That was what he said, but the look on his face said he didn't trust the call. Funny, Elyse could already tell looks on Jack's face. It took her years to realize that with Matthew you never knew what he was really thinking or what he meant.

"Let's get moving." Jack turned and headed for the front door.

Elyse looked around her house. A longing for the way things used to be slammed into her. Before Matthew-Jonathan had died. Before someone was out to get her. But, if things had never happened, there would be no Jack in her life. That thought scared her more than the uncertain danger surrounding her.

Chapter Seventeen

Bright morning light spilled into the room. Elyse rolled over and for a minute imagined what it would be like to wake next to Jack, to have his warmth welcome her when she woke. But it was just a dream. Jack slept, alone, down the hall from her. Or at least she assumed he slept.

After they got back to his house from picking up her clothes and Monty's things, she was so exhausted she took a nap. The next time she woke, it was just before sunrise. She hadn't meant to sleep through the night, but her body had other ideas.

Elyse lay awake and watched as the room slowly lightened to full brightness. If she'd had work to go to, a couple of extra days of the after-holiday rush, maybe she could have kept her thoughts from falling back to Jack Walling. She couldn't believe she'd thought he was gay. She laughed to herself. He was so not gay. He'd awakened more in her in the brief couple of kisses than Matthew had the last few years of their marriage.

She only wished she could banish her wayward thoughts. It wasn't like they—as a couple, as a one night stand even—could go anywhere. Life would be so much easier if she could be done with Matthew—she and he had split long ago and she liked it that way. Then she'd be done with Jack. Before her heart got broken. She was afraid, though, it was too late. Jack had grabbed onto her heart and wasn't letting go—whether he knew it or not.

If only she had something to offer him. If only she was enough woman for him, which she could never be. If only love was enough to keep a couple together. There were so many “if onlys”. No matter how much she wanted it to be true, love wasn’t ever enough.

Maybe she wasn’t giving Jack a chance. Maybe if she didn’t underestimate him. But no. She made her resolve then and there not to let Jack deeper into her soul. It would hurt bad enough to never have him, if she let him in and then he left... And he would leave when he found out she...

“You awake in there?” Jack called from the other side of the door, breaking into her thoughts.

She climbed out of the bed and hurried to the door. When she opened it, Monty came barging in, nearly knocking her to the floor. Jack grabbed her arm to steady her. Elyse pulled herself free as soon as she was sure she wouldn’t fall. Jack seemed surprised, but didn’t comment.

“Someone has been waiting for you to get up.” Jack motioned with his hand to Monty. “How are you feeling this morning? You look a lot better.” He reached to touch her face but she stepped back, out of his reach. She wanted his touch but couldn’t afford to let her heart yearn for what she couldn’t have.

A flash of disappointment crossed his face before his expression went blank, unreadable.

“I feel better, thanks. The sleep did me wonders.” She was doing the right thing, keeping her distance from Jack, but why did it already hurt? “Thanks for taking care of Monty. That goes above and beyond the call of duty.”

“Duty? Uh-huh.” He shifted from foot to foot. “Well, breakfast is just some store-bought muffins. When you get hungry help yourself.” He turned and walked away.

Elyse slowly closed the door then crawled into the bed with Monty. He laid his head down in her lap, not moving, as the tears fell from her eyes.

“Duty, huh? What the hell is wrong with her? One minute she’s hot as can be, the next she acts like we just met.” Jack grumbled to himself as he knocked around the living room. “Can’t win for losing, man.”

The rest of the day, they avoided each other. Jack only ran into her when she came out of her room to eat and use the bathroom. Then, late that evening, she came out of the room with her cell phone pressed to her ear.

“Yeah, yeah I know. Hold on a second, Mom.” She looked at Jack and stopped at the scowl on his face. “What?”

“Have you been using that the whole time you’ve been here?”

“Yes. But just when my mom or someone calls.”

Jack jumped to his feet. “Did you tell them where you’re staying?”

“No. Do I look stupid to you?” She shoved her hands on her hips, still holding the phone. “And lower your voice. My mom can probably hear every word you’re saying.”

She raised the phone back to her ear. “Mom, let me call you back. This is going to take longer than I thought. Okay. I love you, too. Bye.

“What is your problem? Do you think I am an idiot or something?” She tossed her phone onto the sofa and stood in front of him.

“Of, course not. But if you tell anyone where you’re staying, you might as well be at home.” He shook his head. Maybe she wished she were. She sure didn’t seem to be comfortable in his house anymore. “I didn’t realize you had that thing. Hell, any wireless company can tell where you’re calling from if someone was, oh I don’t know, looking for you.” He ran his hands through his hair, tried to calm himself.

“Look Jack, it’s been hard enough to be cut off from the outside world, you can’t expect me not to talk to my family. Speaking of family, tomorrow is Thanksgiving.”

“Yeah, and?”

“I would like you to come over to my parents’ house with me.”

“No sorry.” *Spend the day with the Brady Bunch, hell no.*

“What? Why not? I’d hate to think of you here all alone.”

“I won’t be alone. You’ll be here with me.”

“No way am I missing Thanksgiving. The whole family will be there. And they’ll be expecting me.”

“Tough shit.” Jack didn’t mean to sound like a hard-ass but he needed to keep her out of her usual places. He’d had no luck finding Matthew. At this point, he didn’t know if the woman after Elyse was working for Matthew or trying to find the money herself.

“I have done everything you say up to this point. I haven’t complained once. All I’m asking for is to spend the holiday with my family. Why is that too much to ask?”

“Because, it will be putting you at risk. And my *duty* is to protect you.”

“No your duty, I mean, the job I hired you for, was to find Matthew. Bang-up job you’ve done so far. I’m glad your superior skills have been utilized to their fullest.”

Jack stared at her for a long moment. Didn’t she know? Couldn’t she see? It was killing him that he couldn’t do anything but hide her. He had busted his ass, tapped every source and had come up with zilch looking for Matthew.

“It’ll be fine.” She sweetened her voice. “Do you know how many people will be there? Over twenty. And all related to me. Not one wants to harm me. Well not since we outgrew our crush on Kirk Cameron in the eighties. Please, Jack? I haven’t seen any of them in almost a week and for me that’s a miracle.”

“No. Sorry can’t do it. It’s not worth...”

She growled low in her throat and ran off to her room.

“...risking losing you for good.”

Jack woke Thursday with a splitting headache. He’d stayed up late drinking the night before, hoping to find peace in the bottom of a bottle of José Cuervo. Instead, he found a pasty mouth and a head thick as a bowling ball.

He stumbled to his bathroom, thankful it was only a few steps away. Once the water in the shower was hot enough, he stepped under the spray and let it wake him up.

Almost human again, he pulled on his jeans and T-shirt just as his stomach growled. Surprised he’d be so hungry so early, he looked at his watch and was shocked to see it

was almost noon. He hurried out of his room expecting to see Elyse's door shut, but it wasn't. He peeked his head to find the room empty. The rest of the house was quiet. Too quiet.

"Elyse?" he called. "Monty, come here boy."

Nothing.

Jack looked from room to room but couldn't find either one of them. Finally, in the kitchen he noticed a note with his name on it in the middle of the table. His stomach knotted.

Jack,

It was tearing me up not to be with my family today. I called Cody to come pick Monty and me up—a couple of blocks from here—see no worries. Everything will be fine, you'll see. I hope you understand.

Join us. Please.

Elyse

Jack balled the paper in his hand and threw it at the refrigerator. Then he picked it back up and read it again. Damn her. And damn her family. "Just see if I come running after you." He threw the paper again.

"Arghh!"

Who was he kidding?

He waited five minutes, paced the kitchen then grabbed his shoes and a dressier shirt. He paced the floor again when he finished dressing. He was going to meet Elyse's family. What if they didn't like him? What if they didn't think he was good enough for her?

What was he thinking? It wasn't like they were dating. Or even friends for that matter. She was his client. He'd sworn to take care of her. He couldn't very well do that from across town.

He grabbed the note and headed out of the house.

Chapter Eighteen

“I’ll get it, Mom.” Elyse called when the front doorbell rang.

Her nerves hummed. She’d been expecting Jack all morning. By noon, when he hadn’t shown up, she knew she’d made a big mistake leaving before he woke. He was probably so mad at her he couldn’t stand to look at her.

Every time the doorbell rang, a spasm shot from her brain to her toes. And when you have such a big family, the doorbell rings often. She tried to count who all had come so far. The only group not there yet was her sister Megan and her crew.

Elyse smoothed the front of her cream-colored sweater set, thankful she had enough foresight to grab something suitable for today. “Coming,” she yelled when the bell sounded again. It had to be Megan, the only other person as impatient was...

“Jack,” she said when she opened the door. Her smile was wide and genuine. “I’m so glad you came.”

“Like I had a choice,” he said, but he returned her smile. He handed her a bottle of wine and a bouquet of flowers. “For your mother for having me over.” He narrowed his eyes at her.

If he was mad, she thought, he’s having a hard time staying mad. Just then, Monty pushed past her and barked at Jack. Jack boxed at Monty’s ears and the dog’s tail was a whirlwind of motion. The knot in her stomach loosened.

“What’s all the commotion?” Elyse’s mother came up from behind her and put her arm around her shoulders.

“Mom, this is my friend, Jack. I invited him over for dinner.”

Jack raised his eyebrow at the word “invite”, and gave her a look. “Nice to meet you, Mrs. Zweller.”

“Oh, please call me Diane. Come in, come in. Don’t just stand in the door.”

“Here, Mom, Jack brought you flowers and a bottle of wine.” Elyse handed her mother the gifts and took Jack’s hand.

“Aren’t you sweet?”

“Come on, I’ll introduce you to everyone.” Elyse’s squeezed Jack’s hand. “Don’t look so terrified. We don’t bite.”

“Can I talk to you a minute first?”

The knot returned and it brought a friend. Both threatened to send back up the vegetables she’d munched on earlier as she led Jack to her dad’s study and closed the door behind them. She leaned against the desk and looked up at him, prepared for whatever he dished out. She deserved it.

He moved in front of her and put his hands on his hips.

Oh, boy. Now I’m going to get it.

As she waited for him to speak, his face softened and he put his hands on her shoulders. “Please, don’t ever do that to me again. I was scared half out of my mind when I couldn’t find you.”

“I...” She was stunned. She expected pissed, but concern threw her for a loop. “Sorry. I waited and waited for you to get up but I thought you were mad at me and didn’t want to come out.”

He pulled her into his arms and hugged her tightly. “I could never be mad at you for long.”

Elyse ran her hands up his back. Her resolve to stay away from him melted completely. “I just thought... Matthew would have...”

Jack pulled back from her. "I'm not Matthew. Don't ever compare me to him. Do you understand?" He put his hand under her chin and raised her mouth to his. The kiss was sweet and gentle, but meant more than any other.

"Oh, sorry. Didn't know anyone was here."

Elyse pushed back. "Dad, hi." She cleared her throat. "Dad, I want you to meet someone. This is Jack Walling."

"Don Zweller, nice to meet you." Her dad held out his hand.

The two men shook hands, then Elyse took Jack into the family room to meet the others. "Everyone, this is my friend, Jack Walling." A chorus of greetings echoed through the room.

Jack smiled, but looked a bit nervous which made Elyse tingle inside.

"Okay, let me just go down the line. I'll start with the *oldest*." Gwen stuck her tongue out at Elyse, making the little kids laugh. "Miss Manners is my oldest sister, Gwen, and that's her husband, Joe. You've met Cody." Cody waved and went back to watching the football game while she introduced his brother and sister.

"Then you have my brother Lance and his wife, Amber." She named off her two nieces and two nephews. Lance stood and shook Jack's hand. The girls waved, the boys, however, glued to the TV, didn't even bother to turn around.

"This is brat, I mean my sister Cara." Elyse put her arm around her sister and introduced Craig and their three daughters.

"My sister Megan isn't here yet."

"Huh? Did somebody call my name?"

"Speak of the devil," Cara said and stood to hug her sister.

"This is brat times two. Megan and Cara are twins," Elyse told Jack.

"Fraternal twins," the two women said in unison.

Jack's face held little expression. He blinked at the two women before him and swallowed. Elyse fought so hard not to bust out laughing.

Behind Megan, Elyse's nephew Alexander walked in with a big grin on his face. "Aunt Elyse, I got to drive the car over here."

“God help us all,” Diane said, coming over to hug her newly arrived daughter. Then she ruffled Alexander’s hair. “Where’s the rest?”

“Out in the car. Reid is having trouble with the crutches,” he told his grandmother, then joined the other boys in front of the TV.

“Reid was playing pee wee football and forgot to move when the defensive end came barreling down,” Elyse told Jack. She continued in a stage whisper, “Reid’s dad didn’t know whether to be proud of the other team’s defensive end or sorry for his quarterback.”

“What’s that you say, Eliza Doolittle?” Elyse’s brother-in-law came into the family room carrying his younger daughter, Brooke.

“This is...” Elyse started as she took Brooke from Mike.

“Mike Dunlap,” Jack said holding out his hand, a smile spread on his otherwise perplexed face.

“Jack.” They shook hands like old friends. “How’re you doing? I haven’t seen you in years.”

“You two know each other?” Elyse asked, surprised.

“Yeah, we played ball together in college,” Jack said. “Mr. I-eat-quarterbacks-for-breakfast got himself one, huh?”

Mike ducked his head. “Yeah, but what can you say? She’s the best danged quarterback in the league.” The young girl hobbled past the men on her crutches and rolled her eyes at her father.

Elyse watched Jack’s eyebrows disappear under the hair falling over his brow.

“Yeah, my *niece* throws a mean bomb,” Elyse said.

Jack looked at Elyse with amazement.

Chauvinist thought Reid was a boy. Elyse shook her head. “Who do you think taught her? It sure as heck wasn’t him.” She motioned to her brother-in-law.

“Throws a mean bomb is an understatement. I wish she played back-up for Aikman when I was there.” Mike hugged Elyse and tickled Brooke, who squirmed. Elyse put down the six-year-old and the little girl ran off for parts unknown.

“Soup’s on,” Diane called from the dining room.

Jack spent the entire day with the Zweller clan. That evening, they ate turkey sandwiches, crowded around the table in the kitchen while the kids watched DVDs in the family room.

Elyse, who stayed close to his side most of the day, smiled at him, warming him. It was a new sensation. One he wasn't likely to forget anytime soon.

He liked Elyse's family. They welcomed him in, no questions asked. He had never been very comfortable with a large family, but even with thirteen kids running around, Jack was at home. That was the only way he could explain it to himself. He belonged, like they had just been waiting for him to come home.

It scared the hell out of him.

From the time he really knew what marriage was, thanks to the examples by dear old Mom, he knew he wasn't cut out for it. It wasn't that he couldn't be monogamous. Quite the opposite, when he was with a woman he wanted to be her world, and she his. But he never could imagine himself settled down with the *same* woman for any length of time.

He had never once considered having children. He had seen, too many times, what abuses fathers could heap on their children, and not all abuse was physical. He swore he would never bring a child into the world if he wasn't one hundred percent certain he could be there for him or her. As far as he could tell, he was too selfish with life, he didn't want to be tied down or responsible for anyone other than himself. Such had been the problem with his own father. He'd be damned if he would repeat the process. The only way he could see to it he didn't, was to never become a father. It was a sacrifice he needed to make. But watching Mike with his kids, watching the love and adoration, Jack wondered if he was missing out on a whole world he'd never understood before.

Whenever he caught Elyse's eye and she smiled at him, he couldn't imagine a life without her in it. Did she know what she did to him?

Elyse's sister Megan stood, clinking her glass. "Everyone, Mike and I have an announcement to make."

Elyse's hand tensed in Jack's. He looked at her. The smile didn't quite go all the way up to her eyes. It was odd he recognized the little nuances in her demeanor. Confused by her reaction, he continued to watch Elyse as her sister spoke.

"We're having another baby."

Elyse's smile faltered briefly. Something akin to pain shot through her eyes, but she somehow pushed aside whatever she'd been thinking and cheered for her sister along with the rest of the family.

Jack stood and shook Mike's hand, then returned to his chair and watched Elyse. She looked at him and he could definitely see pain in her eyes. Why was she so sad? Her sister was having another child and that should be a happy occasion. Right? She loved her nieces and nephews as much as any mother he'd ever seen fawning over her own children. Why would she take it so hard?

He tried to reason it out while the hoopla from the baby news died down. Then Elyse's mother snagged Jack's attention with a little wave.

"How'd you two meet?" Diane asked.

Jack was surprised the question hadn't come up earlier. He hadn't known what he would say. He didn't think Elyse wanted to tell them the truth. Knowing how much they loved her, they would want to help. Not that a family like that would interfere intentionally, but just by their sheer number they couldn't help but get in the way.

Jack looked at Elyse, waiting for her to say something, but her nephew Cody beat either to the punch. "He's building shelves for the store," the young man said.

"Really?" Mike had a strange look on his face. "The last I heard, you started a private eye business when you got out of the service."

Don coughed and Diane looked at her daughter. Jack watched Elyse squirm, wondering what he should say if anything. He noticed Elyse's sister, Cara squint her eyes and Elyse refused to look at her.

"Did I say something wrong?" Mike asked.

“No.” Elyse wiped her mouth with her napkin and looked to her parents at the end of the table. “He’s an old friend of Jonathan’s. We met thirteen years ago. We ran into each other again recently. And, yes, he’s still a PI. He’s working on something for me.”

All the eyes in the room turned to Elyse. Jack linked their fingers together under the table.

“What?” her mother finally asked.

“No big deal. Matthew left me some money and Jack is helping me handle the account.”

“A PI?” Lance asked. “No offense, Jack, but I don’t understand.”

“There’s nothing for you to understand,” Elyse said.

Jack held her tighter when her hand shook.

“It was something I needed taken care of and he’s helping me. End of story.”

She pushed back her chair and left the table. Jack got up quickly and followed her. “You see what I mean. They don’t think I can handle anything myself.” She ran her hands through her hair.

Diane came into the living room. “No one meant any harm, honey. Lance was just asking.”

“I know, Mom. It’s just been a long couple of days.” She kissed her mother on the cheek. “I’m going to go for a walk.”

Elyse left Jack standing alone with her mother. “Just give her a minute to cool off. She’ll be right back.”

Chapter Nineteen

Jack tapped his foot on the front porch, looking around the yard. Elyse had only been gone a little while, but his palms itched. When he was in the Marines his palms would itch just before they came under attack. Elyse was completely unprotected outside alone. He had to find her.

He looked at his watch for the tenth time in less than five minutes. “Come on, Monty.” He whistled at the dog.

The Zwellers’ six-bedroom colonial sat on two acres in an area not far from Jack and Elyse’s neighborhood. But, whereas Elyse and Jack could yell over the fence to a neighbor, the Zwellers could see neither hide nor hair of anyone. Trees and expertly crafted shrubbery created a foliage wall of intimacy.

What he thought was beautiful driving up, he now cursed as a devil’s playground with far too many places to conceal oneself. He debated going back in for a flashlight and one of the many men who would protect Elyse with their own life, but an urgent nagging kept him looking on his own. Thankfully, Monty stayed at his side and seemed to know they were looking for Elyse. Animals had a natural intuitiveness, but this was the first time he had experienced it firsthand.

Making little noise, he came to the corner of the house. He wanted to scream out Elyse’s name, but from years of training, he knew not to let the opposition know your

position. The problem was his heart had thoughts of its own. His heart demanded he run and shout her name, calling to her until he found her.

Rounding the house, he recognized the tool shed. Now he was glad Elyse had dragged him away from the Cowboy game earlier to show him around.

He was about to look inside the shed when a rustling noise from behind it caught his attention. He grabbed Monty's collar to keep him from bolting ahead.

With his back flattened to the shed, he slid to corner. With quick peeks, he checked to see if anyone was there. When he found it clear, he repeated the process to the far corner.

Two people stood next to each other. Despite the low light from the quarter-moon, he immediately recognized Elyse's light-colored sweater. At first glance, if someone didn't know better, one might think the two behind the shed were lovers sneaking away for a kiss. But Jack did know better. The other person had a hand over Elyse's mouth. The gleam of a handgun pressed to her throat glittered in the moonlight.

His gut tightened and his mind sharpened to battle-ready. He ordered Monty to sit and to the dog's good credit, he stayed.

Jack backtracked and went into the woods the shed skirted. Careful of the underbrush, he came to the trees closest to the two. He tried to make out what the person holding Elyse looked like, but dressed in head-to-toe black, the only thing he knew for certain was it was undeniably a woman. A strong-scented perfume tickled his nose as a memory surfaced, but he pushed it away to focus on the "now". His gut tightened again knowing the woman who had gotten to Elyse before had done it again. Under his nose.

Taking slow, deliberate steps, he edged up behind the two women. He was two feet away when the stalker must have sensed him, because she grabbed Elyse and turned to faced him.

Jack held up his hands in a disarming manner and stood perfectly still. "I don't want any trouble. Just let the woman go." He said in as neutral a voice as he could muster. All the while his insides screamed, *Let her go now.*

He thought he heard laughter coming from her but at that moment Monty took it upon himself to rescue his master. He lunged at the pair, knocking Elyse free. Jack grabbed her and ran for the cover of the darkened trees. She said not a word, but her wide eyes spoke volumes to Jack. He held a finger to his lips. The only sound was Monty growling.

A pop, no louder than a balloon bursting, echoed. After a brief whimper from Monty, no other sound resonated. With all the noise inside the house, he doubted anyone would have heard a thing. The neighbors were just far enough the sound probably hadn't traveled that far down. Jack waited a twenty count then slid from the trees after warning Elyse to stay put.

When he came out of the clearing, he found Monty limping toward him. He dropped to his knees in front of the dog. The poor pup had a wound—a graze—on his hind leg. Jack told the dog to sit, and again he listened. He ran the perimeter of the shed and found no one lurking in the shadows. Not wanting to leave Elyse alone in the trees, he decided to forego searching around the entire house.

Elyse held her hands clenched in front of her when he returned. “Is he...”

“He’s bleeding, but he’ll be okay. Just a nick.” Jack took Elyse in his arms. She trembled so hard her teeth chattered. “He’s going to be okay, but it needs to be dressed. Do you want to go back inside or would you rather just go back to my house?”

“Your house,” she said without hesitation. “But I need to tell everyone goodbye.”

“Can you pull yourself together?” Just as the words left his mouth he recognized the signs of her panic attacks. He walked her through it, quicker than he expected—damn, this woman had more strength than some of the men he’d served with. Once she calmed, he asked “Are you sure you want to go in? What just happened shows on your face.” He looked into her wide eyes. He tried to tell from her face, pale—devoid of *any* color—if she would be okay. But, as usual, she nodded and sucked in a few deep breaths, ready to do what was needed.

Back at the house, Jack got Monty in his truck, then walked with Elyse to thank the Zwellers for their hospitality. Within fifteen minutes of Elyse's third near-death experience, they were driving to Jack's house.

She didn't speak on the ride, not that he expected her to. The experience rattled him, a trained soldier. He could only imagine what she must have gone through, having the woman hold a gun on her. Anger boiled inside of him. That damn woman wouldn't get away with the terror she put Elyse through. He made a vow right then to stop at nothing to find her and destroy her.

She shot my dog. She shot my dog. The phrase repeated itself over and over in Elyse's mind. *The bitch shot my dog*, she amended when her fear segued into molten-lava anger.

She had been so frightened when the black-clad woman had jumped out from behind the shed and grabbed her. She knew instantly who it was. That damned perfumed had burned a hole her olfactory sensors. The woman must bathe in the stuff, and it permeated her skin so her pores breathed the smell.

If Jack hadn't come looking for her... She shivered. She hated to think what would have happened.

How had her life turned so abruptly? Just because her freaking ex-husband had to stash diamonds, probably stolen, in their old safe deposit box, not to mention the forged accounts in her name, she now had a perfume-drenched, obsessed stalker literally gunning for her. If she got her hands on Matthew, she would make sure the death certificate had the right body when he was pronounced dead.

What was she thinking?

As if she could kill Matthew. Deep down inside, a small part of her would always love him. Even though he lied about his promise to love her forever, she would always know she wronged him first. She let the marriage vows down all by herself. Matthew's selfish behavior was more a survival instinct than a direct affront to her as a person. Wasn't it? She was so mixed up she didn't know anymore.

She shook the depressing thoughts from her head when Jack rolled into his driveway. Neither said a word as he carried Monty into the house and into the guest bedroom. He asked Elyse to sit with Monty while he got the first-aid kit to clean and dress the wound.

Elyse stroked Monty's head and spoke softly to him. "You were such a brave boy. When you get to feeling better, I'll take you to the park everyday for a month. I promise." She kissed his furry head.

"You know he'll hold you to that." Jack sat next to them on the bed. He expertly tended to Monty. When he was done, he removed his blood-splattered denim shirt, leaving only his T-shirt. He and Elyse washed their hands, then both went into the living room and dropped to the sofa.

"Some night you had there, kiddo." Jack's voice broke, betraying the light banter.

Elyse snuggled up next to him. "I was so scared, Jack. When I realized it was that same bitch, I was mad. Why is she doing this to me? Then..." Her voice cracked as tears filled her throat. "Then she shoots my dog." Tears fell down her face.

Jack wrapped both arms around her. He held her while she purged herself of tears. He held her while she shook in the aftermath of emotion. His grip never faltered, nor was it too rough or constricting. *It was just right*, she thought.

A remarkable insight filled her. *Right—here in Jack's arms is where I belong*. She didn't know how she knew it to be true, but once the thought entered her head she knew, it was absolutely correct. Despite her problems, she would find a way to stay in Jack's life.

Still sitting wrapped up in Jack's embrace on the leather couch, Elyse tilted her head to find his mouth. He wasted no time, thrusting his tongue between her lips. The warmth from his touch ignited long-extinguished flames. A hunger greater than any she had ever known built inside her, refusing to be sated by a kiss.

Elyse turned her body to lie atop Jack. She fisted her hands in his hair, mouths infused, while he skimmed his hands under her sweater, his fingers playing with the edges of her bra.

Jack tugged at the bra until the clasp popped free. His hands massaged her back. He shifted until he somehow managed to get her on her back.

“Oh God,” he moaned as he pressed down on her, his erection digging into her hip.

Elyse tugged at the hem of his T-shirt until he removed it with one swift pull at the neck. Her hands looked pale next to his tanned skin as she ran them over the muscular planes, his sandy chest hair tickling her palms.

Jack mimicked Elyse’s action, pulling on her sweater.

Nerves made her pause, but only briefly. The desire on Jack’s face gave her all the encouragement she needed. She wiggled out of her sweater and bra, throwing them to the floor.

Jack stilled. What she had done wrong?

Chapter Twenty

“You are so beautiful,” he said finally. Lowering his head, he took her nipple into his mouth.

Elyse arched her back. Heat pooled low in her abdomen and burned lower still. When she thought she could take no more, he removed his mouth only to repeat the process on the other nipple.

He kissed lower, but stopped. “This damn couch is too small.” He stood and lifted her effortlessly in his arms, feasting on her neck as he carried her into his bedroom.

He gently laid her on the bed then turned on the lamp.

“Do...do you have to have the light on?” Elyse’s nerves hummed, almost superseding her desire. “I don’t have much...experience.”

His brow furrowed as he looked down at her. “You were married for over seven years.”

She swallowed hard. She didn’t want to have this conversation now. “Yes, but—” she swallowed again, “—he’s the only man I’ve ever been with. And he... I...I don’t think I was very good.”

She didn’t want to say Matthew laughed at her the first time they made love. She didn’t want to remember he eventually found someone else when she couldn’t give him...

“That will be for me to decide.” Jack broke into her thoughts. He lowered his mouth back to hers. He kissed her until she could barely remember her own name.

Elyse ran her hands the length of his back; her fingers delighted in his warm skin. Her nipples puckered under the friction of his chest hair teasing the hard nubs. She spiraled out of control.

He kissed her neck, then trailed his lips down until he reached her navel. Elyse sucked in her breath when his tongue teased the edge of her pants. His fingers released the buttons. With a gentle tug here and there, he removed her clothing while his tongue danced circles on her abdomen.

Jack lowered his mouth until his tongue plunged into her, sending her over the edge. Her hands fisted into the quilt as she soared higher and higher, until finally, the climax ripped through her with dizzying results.

Her breaths came out in spurts as the ringing in her ears lessened by scant degrees. She had just relaxed when the bed shifted and Jack’s hand drifted up her stomach and onto her breast. He kissed her gently and she could taste herself on his lips, exciting her more.

Moving slowly, he eased on top of her, his erection teasing her already swollen clit. Elyse wedged her hand between them and encircled his hard penis. A smile slipped free when he sucked in a breath. At that moment, she wielded the power.

She nipped at his shoulder as she ran her fingers over the soft tip of his penis, slid her hand up and down the length. He was larger than she could ever have imagined. A twinge of fear filled her. *What if he’s too big? What if it hurts?*

“I haven’t...” She turned her face away from him so he couldn’t see her dread. “It’s been over three years since I...did anything like this.”

Jack kissed her neck. “I’ll be gentle, I promise.” His fingers found her tender clit and moved in small circles. The intensity climbed again instantly. So close to the edge it was wonderfully painful. But before she could climax, he stopped. She opened her eyes to find him smiling down at her. “You’re so beautiful.”

Elyse tried to look away.

“Uh-uh. Keep your eyes on me.” Jack nudged her chin with his, and waited until she returned her gaze before he slid inside with one hard thrust. She dug her fingers into his shoulders and cried out his name. He held his position for the longest time. Finally, he moved in and out, pumping harder and faster with each thrust.

Elyse raised her hips and met him motion for motion, riding a wave of ecstasy. It was more than she could ever have hoped for. Warmth filled her from the inside out.

She let her hand slide down his slicked back and onto his firm ass.

Elyse started to close her eyes.

“Don’t. I told you, keep your eyes on me.”

Unable to speak she simply nodded, her eyes intensely focused on his. Her climax grew nearer. She gripped him with her knees, tried to control the sensations swallowing her as she watched Jack’s eyes darken. She couldn’t hold back. When she thought she would explode from the sheer torture, a moan wrenched from her throat and she could no longer keep her eyes open. Jack came with a force that skyrocketed them both over the edge.

Dazed, and ears still ringing, Elyse thought she heard him utter the three most wonderful—and terrifying—words: *I love you*.

Jack lay exhausted. Making love to Elyse was all he imagined it would be and worse. One time would *never* be enough. Caught up in the post-coital glow, he told her he loved her. And meant it. He just never thought he could actually say those words to any woman. He had come close a few times in the past, but something had always stopped him. Something lacking. But making love to Elyse, nothing lacked. If anything, there was more there than he was ready for.

Blindly, he reached out and found her hand. He intertwined their fingers, wanting to touch her, to keep a connection, however small, to her.

For the next few hours, they dozed and made love. Jack made sure he had intimate knowledge of every part of Elyse’s anatomy.

Waking just before dawn, Jack slid his hand across her naked bottom. His erection stiffened instantly. He marveled at his body's stamina. And the sheer desire that welled in him every time he touched her.

Awakened—or aroused, he wasn't sure—by his touch, Elyse turned to him. She opened to him and he wasted no time entering her. The warmth of her velvety walls around him took him airborne instantly. The climax engulfed him. With one final thrust, he emptied himself into her and fell to the bed beside Elyse.

“Good morning,” she said, her voice husky and sexy as hell.

Jack ran his fingers down her arm. “Good morning to you. How'd you sleep?”

“Not much.” A flush tinted her cheeks then spread to the rest of her body.

The memory of his words of love early in the night ran through his head. Fearing he might lose control and utter them again he let the grumble of his stomach distract him. “Hungry?”

“Starved.”

“Okay. Sit tight. I'll be right back.” He leaned over and kissed the tip of her nose.

“Mmm-hmm,” she mumbled and closed her eyes.

Jack pulled the quilt off the floor and covered her before he slipped on a pair of sweatpants, then went to check on Monty and get breakfast ready.

Monty picked his head up when Jack looked in. His tail flapped a couple of times on the bed, then he dropped his head back down. Jack smiled at the mutt and left the door cracked open in case he wanted to get out.

In the kitchen, he toasted a couple of English muffins and found fruit and juice in the fridge. “Thank you, Hannah,” he said aloud. The woman was a godsend, filling his kitchen with food. He had to remember to do something nice for her.

Melons and strawberries piled in a bowl, he put all the food on a tray and carried it back to his room to find Elyse had kicked off the covers. She lay sprawled sideways across the queen size bed. The sight of all her creamy skin made him pause. He had to take a moment just to appreciate the awesome beauty of her in all her naked glory.

“Are you going to stand there staring at me or are you going to feed me?” Elyse raised her head and smiled at him before she sat up and pulled the sheet around her like a sarong.

Jack considered throwing the food to the floor and taking her again, but they needed nourishment. He put the tray in the middle of the bed and sat beside her. He picked up a strawberry to feed her. When she nipped his finger, he moaned and kissed her long and hard. “We’re never going to get anywhere if you keep that up.” He handed her a fork.

“What?” She tried for an innocent look, he thought, but it had quite the opposite effect on him.

“Eat,” he ordered.

They ate in silence for a few minutes, then Elyse finally spoke. “What about your other clients? Since you’ve been with me non-stop, you couldn’t have got much done.”

“I don’t really have a lot going right now. I cleared most of my cases when I knew Kelly, she’s the receptionist...” he added when her brow furrowed. “...when I knew she would be gone for her honeymoon. She takes care of all the office work and she’d have my hide if I messed with her filing system. A couple of other cases have stalled, so you’re not keeping me from anything.”

He grimaced at his own words. He made it sound like she was just a way to pass the time. But, either she didn’t hear it that way or she was too polite to point it out because she didn’t say anything, didn’t freak out as one might have expected after all he’d learned of her past.

Watching her, he again tried to wrap his mind around her going into a clinic for a mental breakdown. He’d found no evidence anything stressful had plagued the marriage and now... Sure she’d had several panic attacks lately, but who wouldn’t? Especially now, with her embroiled in some major shit. He couldn’t imagine what in her marriage could provoke such drastic measures.

He thought, too, of her family’s overprotective nature. Was there more to the story? Surely just because she was the youngest of five didn’t make them all so overprotective that they would try to prevent her from attending her ex’s funeral. But he had been with

them at Thanksgiving. They didn't seem to treat her any different from any of her siblings.

His thoughts volleyed to Megan and Mike's announcement of their pregnancy. The strain in her eyes had betrayed the smile she wore when congratulating her sister. Worse, the pained expression had torn at his gut. She obviously wanted a baby. He wondered why she and Matthew never had children. It seemed like the natural thing to do. With a woman, a lover, like Elyse, he couldn't imagine not trying every day for a child.

He lifted the forkful of fruit to his mouth and paused.

A child with Elyse. The thought warmed him more than it should. Whoa, was it possible?

"Uh, Elyse."

She looked over at Jack. A smile curved her lips. "Hmm?"

"We, uh forgot to, uh use protection."

The smile fell from her lips and she cast her gaze down. The hysterics he expected didn't come.

"Did you hear me? We didn't..."

Chapter Twenty-One

“We didn’t use any protection. Yeah, I know.” She wiped her mouth with a napkin and let it fall to her lap.

“And...”

“And nothing.” She looked at him, not liking the glare in his eye. Did he think she was trying to trap him or something? Far from it. “It doesn’t matter.”

“How can you say that?” Jack’s face reddened. “What if...”

She held up her hand and stopped him from speaking. “It doesn’t matter because...because I can’t have children.”

An emotion crossed his face that she couldn’t discern. Disappointment? No, couldn’t be. Pity? Please, anything but that.

“Are you sure?”

Elyse cocked her brow in disbelief. Did he really think she wouldn’t be sure? Did he really think she wouldn’t have had doctors’ opinions?

“Yes, I am quite sure.” She glared at him and dared him to comment further. He didn’t. “Look, Jack, it’s something I dealt with a long time ago. I am as over it as I’m going to be, but I don’t want to talk about.”

“Okay. But just so you know, I’d have been honored to have children with you.” He didn’t say anything for a long moment. Then the corner of his mouth quirked up. “So we could...” he let his words trail off and he wiggled his eyebrows.

She did a mental headshake. Leave it to a man to look at the bright side of things—as long as that bright side ended with sex. She'd have to admit, she liked his train of thought.

She pushed the tray aside with her leg and pulled Jack down on top of her. His hands cupped her breasts as he ravaged her with his mouth. Elyse shifted her hips. Jack's erection nudged her inner thigh through the cotton sweatpants he wore. Sliding her hands down his back and to his waist, she gripped the elastic waistband and pushed the material over his firm ass—God how she loved his ass. As soon as the material was free, Elyse wrapped her legs around him and he slid into her with the ease of long-time lovers.

A mechanical chirping noise awoke Elyse. Pushing her hair back from her face, she opened her eyes. The room had filled with light as they slept away the morning. A smile spread across her face when Jack snuggled closer to her under the quilt.

The chirping noise sounded again. It was her cell phone ringing. Careful not to wake Jack, she slid out from under his arm. Grabbing his T-shirt, which lay bunched on the floor, she pulled it over her head and searched for the phone.

Her purse sat near the door. Inside she found it. The LED screen was unreadable due to the many times recently she had dropped it on the ground. She stepped into the hall and closed the bedroom door so she wouldn't disturb Jack.

"Hello?" She walked to the guest bedroom to check on Monty. His tail flapped twice as she sat on the bed next to him. He nudged her hand with his nose until she stroked his head.

"Elyse, I'm just calling to make sure you're still coming in today." Debbie's chipper voice made Elyse smile.

Coming in? What was she talking about?

"You forgot didn't you? I knew the boss-lady was crazy to let you have so many days off before the sale."

The Day-After-Thanksgiving Sale. She had completely forgotten. She was supposed to work the afternoon to evening shift because the other girls liked the earlier shift. She'd never considered it would take so long to track down Matthew.

She had been so wrapped up with Jack, it slipped her mind.

"No, I didn't forget. I'm looking through my closet right now trying to decide what to wear." She lied too easily. What had happened to her over past few days? "I'll be there, don't worry."

The call waiting beeped on Elyse's phone.

"I have another call coming in. See you in a little bit." She pushed the talk button on her phone. "Hello?"

"Mrs. Cabot, this is Heather from Crumpet and Associates. I called you the other day."

Elyse stroked Monty's neck. "Yes, what can I do for you?"

"We have some of your ex-husband's personal affects. We would like you to pick them up."

"Why don't you get Jonathan to pick it up?" She fought to keep the sarcasm out of her voice.

"We haven't been able to get in touch with Mr. Cabot's brother. I really hate to bother you with this, it's just... We know you two stayed friends and..."

Friends? Matthew told them we were friends? What was one more lie, after all the other lies?

"And? You were saying?" Elyse prompted the young woman when she didn't continue.

"Please just come get it."

The young woman hung up before Elyse could say anything else.

"That was odd," she said to Monty. She turned off her phone and tossed it beside her on the bed. "Why would they be so desperate for me to come into the office?"

The dog didn't answer. He just looked up at her. His big brown eyes shined.

“How are you feeling today, wonder-gut?” She rubbed her hands around his neck and let him lick her cheek.

“Lucky dog.”

Elyse turned to see Jack leaning on the doorframe. His crooked smile warmed her.

“Who was that on the phone?”

Elyse detected tightness to his smile. “Did it wake you? I tried to get it as soon as possible.”

Jack’s smile disappeared. “Who was it, Elyse?”

“Well, one call was from Matthew’s office trying to get me to pick up his things.”

His brow furrowed and he rubbed the stubble covering his chin. “I don’t get why they’re trying so hard to get rid of his stuff.”

Elyse shrugged.

“Wait, you said one, was there more than one?”

Damn. She slipped up. She wanted to avoid the rest of this conversation.

“Yeah. Debbie called to remind me what time I come in today.”

Jack moved from the doorframe and took a step into the room. He shoved his hands into the pockets of his gray sweatpants. The muscles on his bare chest rose and fell with every breath.

“You’re not going.”

“Jack, today is the day after Thanksgiving.”

“I know what damn day it is.” Color tinted his cheeks. “It’s far too dangerous for you to be exposed like that. Your life is not worth the risk.”

“It’s my job, Jack. I have responsibilities.” His face stayed neutral, but his eyes blazed with anger. “It’s the busiest shopping day of the year.” She turned her eyes away from him.

“And the day after you were attacked—again.”

“I remember.” She looked down at her dog and the pristine white bandage that covered the tan fur over his back leg. Despite the emotions warring in her, she had to go in. “It’s my *job*. I have to go. They’ll be swamped.”

“Out of the question.”

“Jack, be reasonable.”

“No.” He turned and left.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The shower in the master bathroom ran. She fought back the tears that burned the back of her eyes.

“Why is he being so unreasonable? Why can’t he understand this is my job?”

Monty looked at her, his tail flapping on the bed.

“Nothing will happen with a store full of people.” Saying that, Elyse made up her mind. She planted a kiss on the top of her dog’s head and then dug through her bag for clean clothes.

She could hear Jack humming in the shower like he didn’t have a care in the world—like they hadn’t just had an argument. *Damn him*, she thought.

It was *her* life. They were *her* responsibilities. She couldn’t just let them go.

Not having time to worry about a shower, afraid Jack would find her getting ready and keep her from going, she threw on clothes in record time and brushed out her hair. She was thankful she didn’t wear make-up—which, according to her sisters, made her an abomination. She laughed at the thought, but quickly pushed it from her head and focused on the task at hand.

Padding barefooted into the kitchen—not that he could hear her in the bathroom—she dug in the junk drawer where Jack kept the keys to his car. A flash of guilt raced through her. But she had to go.

Jack stepped out of the bathroom with just a towel around his waist and called to Elyse.

An eerie silence settled in the house. The bed no longer sported a rumpled comforter. Elyse had straightened it and left her nightshirt—or rather an old shirt of his—thrown over the pillows. With teeth gritted and stomach clenched, Jack walked down the hall to the spare bedroom. Hope flashed. Maybe she wanted to sit with Monty. When he opened the door, the dog lifted his head and thumped his tail once.

No sign of Elyse.

Several pieces of clothing littered the floor, clothes that were all in the bag just that morning, now strewn about the room. He shook his head and went to the kitchen. “I can’t believe it.” He ran his hands through his hair.

Elyse’d set a note in the middle of the table. The second damn time in two damn days she had done it to him.

What the hell was with her? Why couldn’t she listen to his fucking rules? All he asked was for her to stay put, so he could watch her—keep her safe. Did she care someone wanted her dead? Would she do what he said? No. Hell no. The woman was exasperating.

Jack stomped down the hallway back to his room and into his closet. He jerked his shirt and broke the hanger. With far too unkind words, he grumbled as he stuffed his legs into a clean pair of jeans and then shoved his feet into socks. It took him three tries to tie his athletic shoes and he almost shut his hand in the door of the truck when he noticed the empty side of the garage. His car was gone.

“Did I really think she’d walked?” He was so mad he could wring her neck.

He shook his head. How could one small, fucking woman get under his skin so completely to make him want to screw her brains out one minute then strangle her the next? Damn the hit man, or whoever was after her, he’d save them the trouble.

Then he realized where his thoughts had gone. The blood drained from his head and nausea rolled his stomach. He didn't mean it. He would never mean it. Elyse was everything to him. He would never intentionally hurt her—not if he could help it.

He sat in his truck with his hands clenched around the steering wheel. The woman was tearing him apart inside like no other had ever before. What was it about her?

Jack started the truck. It was not the time or place to worry about it. Every minute she was out of his sight was another minute whoever was after her had a chance.

On the short drive to Elyse's store, Jack tried to work out the angles of the case—if he thought of it as a case, not as Elyse, he could accomplish so much more. What were the facts? What information did he have that wasn't a guess?

He knew Matthew switched places with his brother when someone killed him—whether he could prove it remained to be seen. Elyse found four million dollars worth of diamonds in a safe deposit box. Last, he knew someone—probably a woman—had attacked Elyse three times now. Once at her home, her parents' home and at work, so they knew her routine pretty well.

The attack didn't necessarily have to be connected to Matthew, but he doubted Elyse had anyone else after her.

Stopped at a light, Jack tapped his thumb on the steering wheel and rolled scenarios over in his mind. The key was to figure out how Matthew and the mysterious woman were connected. Elyse said he'd found another woman when they split. From the sounds of it, even before. It was feasible she was a new girlfriend he'd pulled into this.

But attacking someone and shooting at them was far more than just someone Matthew pulled into his scheme. She must have a lot more at stake. Why else would she risk so much for Matthew?

Hmm? Was Matthew working for the woman instead of the other way around. Maybe he screwed up getting Elyse involved. Surely, he wouldn't do something to intentionally get Elyse stuck in the middle. He must have loved her at some point in the relationship. He couldn't possibly want her dead.

Even the thought sent a shiver up his spine. He slammed down on the gas pedal and sped down the road to get to Elyse when the light turned green. Sweat popped out on his forehead and his palms grew clammy. A tick started in his right eye and his breathing burned in his lungs. Bearing down on a late model Cadillac, he swerved into the next lane and nearly lost control of his truck.

Cursing a blue streak, he slowed his speed and tried to slow his head. If he wasn't careful, if he couldn't get his mind to stop dwelling on Elyse, he would kill someone or, at the very least, himself. Where would that leave her?

By the time he pulled into the parking lot of her store, he had his nerves under control. The front door of the store stood wide open. People filed in and out. Whatever calm he'd acquired evaporated. There was zero protection from someone just walking in there and taking Elyse out.

He slammed the truck door and marched across the lot. His temper picked up steam with every step. He walked through the doorway and scanned the area for Elyse. His stomach tightened when he couldn't find her.

A young woman with jet black hair approached him. "May I help you, sir?"

"I'm looking for Elyse."

The woman blanched at his brusque tone. She stared at him for a long moment, then headed toward the rear of the store. As soon as she disappeared from sight, he followed.

He turned the corner in time to hear her say, "...big guy, scar on his mouth, looks mad as hell."

"That would be Jack." Elyse's tone sounded apprehensive.

"Who's Jack?" the other woman asked.

Elyse groaned. "It's a long story. Suffice it to say I am big trouble."

"Damn straight you are." Jack burst into the conversation.

Both women jumped and the dark-haired woman squealed.

"I told you not to leave." He took several steps into the stock room. "Why in the hell can't you listen to me?"

"I told *you*, Jack, that I have responsibilities." Elyse walked over to him. She clutched a red sweater to her chest, but didn't look the least bit intimidated by him.

He grabbed her elbow. "Come on. We're leaving."

She jerked her arm free and glowered at him. "I'm not going anywhere. You can stay here and watch me work, see that I am safe, or you can get the hell out and come back when I'm done."

He stared at her. He couldn't believe she had the nerve to disobey him. No woman had ever stood up to him before. Not once. He didn't consider himself an ogre, but when he put his foot down, he expected to be minded.

He locked his eyes on her and a staring contest began. A contest of wills. He wasn't entirely sure he could win against Elyse.

"Sh...should I call the police?" a meek voice asked.

The eye contact broke as they both looked to the corner where the other woman stood with the telephone clenched in white knuckled hands. "No," they said in unison.

"What's it going to be, Jack?"

He lost. And he knew it. He would do just about anything Elyse asked him to. He didn't care what. As long as he was with her. She was far more than a client. He couldn't say when it changed. Yes, he had slept with her the night before, but he'd slept with many women and not one could make him back down. But with her, she was in control.

What had he gotten himself into?

"I'll stay," he grumbled and shoved his hands in pockets.

Elyse smiled. "He's not usually such a jerk, Debbie." She winked at her co-worker. "He had a busy night—didn't get much sleep."

He looked up, wide-eyed, at Elyse. He expected to see a blush crawl across her cheeks, but it never did. She even had the nerve to wink at him, too. He wondered at the heat that danced up his neck.

By the end of the evening, Elyse had Jack stuffing clothes on hangers in the stock room while she cashed out the register—it had been an even busier day than she had anticipated and she was glad she hadn't left her employees in the lurch. Jack had come in useful. When they were too busy to return the clothes back to their proper spots on the floor, she rolled out a portable rack and asked Jack to hang everything on it. He grumbled, and a few times she thought she heard him say some quite vulgar words, but he'd done it. She couldn't help but smile at the image of his hands, large and awkward, handling the cashmere sweaters.

She had let the employees go home almost an hour earlier, determined to clean up by herself to make up for her tardiness—even if only fifteen minutes. She stuffed the charge receipts and cash in the deposit bag and closed down the register. When she walked in the back, she found Jack sitting at her desk with his feet propped up. A short, fuchsia silk robe lay across his lap. With his eyes closed, he pinched the bridge of his nose. Stubble covered the lower half of his face. It made him look tougher, meaner, somehow despite the girly intimate wear draped over his left thigh.

“Rough day, detective?”

Jack groaned but didn't look up.

“I don't remember anyone trying that robe on.” Elyse nudged his feet off the desk and rested her hip against it.

Jack opened one eye then the other. “Payment for services rendered.”

Elyse arched her eyebrow. “It's not really your color. I do have it in black, though. I think it would be better with your skin tone...” she leaned forward and stroked his cheek, “...and hairy legs.” She giggled.

Jack grabbed her wrist and pulled her into his lap. “Keep yucking it up, girl, and I won't let you make it up to me by wearing this.”

“Oh, is that so?” A shiver ran through Elyse.

Jack slid his hand up her neck and cupped the back of her head. He glanced down at her lips.

“Definitely so.” He lifted his mouth to hers, not giving her a chance to speak.

Elyse squirmed for about a second trying to get away, but gave up and relaxed in his lap. His feather-light kisses chased away the weariness which had crept into her bones halfway through the workday, and replaced it with passion and desire.

She slid her hands up his chest and rested them on his shoulders while his hands made their way to her bottom. They pushed and nudged her until she was straddling him on the ergonomic office chair. The arms of the chair dug into her thighs and she flinched when Jack shifted under her.

He pulled his mouth back from hers for a brief moment. With an understated grace, he rose and set her on the desk and wedged himself between her legs. His mouth met her neck in a fevered frenzy. His hands slid under her sweater and cupped her swollen breasts.

She threw her head back and moaned with delight.

“I have been dying to do this all day.” He nipped her shoulder.

“I wouldn’t want...to be accused...of denying you anything,” Elyse panted out when he lifted her skirt and ran his hands over her hips.

She pulled Jack closer and brought his erection flush up against her. Taking her mouth again, he ground into her. With expert accuracy, he pushed aside the small swatch of underwear and slid his finger inside her.

“Oh Jesus, Jack.” Elyse was so hot. He made her soar instantly. But she wanted more.

Her hands fumbled with the button on his jeans. In no time, she freed him and held his hot erection in her hand. “I need you.”

Jack stilled. He looked at her through heavy lidded eyes. “Elyse we need to...” He cleared his throat. “Aren’t you uncomfortable? We can’t...”

“Uh-uh, no way. You started this. No backing out now.” She stroked him and watched his eyes cloud over. “Don’t stop, Jack. Make love to me.”

All the invitation he needed, he pulled her to the edge of the desk and thrust inside her. Jack held the position, filling her. “You’re so incredible. So hot.” His hot breath

fluttered against her neck. Then he pulled back and thrust again, and again, setting a maddeningly slow pace.

Each stroke pushed Elyse closer to bliss. Then Jack increased the rhythm. His fingers dug into her hips. His mouth found her ear.

“So beautiful,” he murmured. And as he peaked, as he reached climax, he said, “I love you.” She was certain.

Chapter Twenty-Three

He had gone and said it again. That was twice now that he'd said those three damnable words. *I love you*. He didn't think she had heard him. She made no comment as her slick, limp body lay up against his.

God, how could he be such a fool? He had never before lost control during sex. Granted, he had never before been in love with the woman he was having sex—no, making love to. The realization stopped him. When had he fallen in love with Elyse? He didn't know. He didn't care much either. Hell, he could admit it. He'd been a little in love with her when he'd met her thirteen years ago. Hadn't he compared every woman to her since?

Not one had come close.

It shouldn't come as any great shock after getting to know her, getting to hold her in his arms, that he'd fall head over heels for the woman. Now he just had to figure out what to do about it.

A cool breeze feathered his naked ass.

First, however, he had to get the hell out of the store. He pulled out of Elyse despite her groaning protest and righted his pants.

When she lifted her head with the goofy grin, it was all he could go not to take her again. "We never got to use the robe," she said, her voice all husky.

A deep growl rumbled in his throat. "As soon as I get you home, darlin'."

“Promises, promises.” She giggled when he helped her off the desk and let his hands stray to her ass. “Let’s go.”

He was nothing if not a man of his word. After caravanning back to his house, Jack showed Elyse just how well he kept his promises.

When the morning light woke him, he was surprised to find the bed empty. Wearing nothing but a big grin, Jack went in search of his lover. His grin however, faded. She sat at the kitchen table—fully dressed.

“Hey, sleepyhead,” Elyse said when she looked up.

The smile that curved her mouth made Jack instantly hard—and vulnerable, considering he was standing stark naked in the middle of his kitchen. Elyse took in his lack of clothing and her eyes widened. A blush colored her cheeks.

“You want some breakfast?” she asked with an added breathiness to her voice.

“Why so dressed?” He ignored her question and his raging hormones.

Deep creases lined her forehead. “I have to be at work in twenty minutes.”

Not again. “Oh no you don’t.”

“Jack.”

“Don’t *Jack* me. I thought we covered this. Yesterday was a one-time deal.”

“A deal? My life is not something to be negotiated, Jack. You can’t keep doing this to me.”

“And you can’t keep running off every time I turn my back. You need protection.”

“And you need to cover up. I can’t talk to you standing there naked.” She pulled a dishtowel from the counter and tossed it at him.

“Someone is after you, Elyse,” he said once he draped the rag in front of him. Despite the argument, the towel would hang there by itself if he moved his hand. He shook his head. Damn, the woman moved him to distraction.

“You have been attacked. Do you remember the bullet the dog took for you?”

Elyse gasped, her face blanched. “That’s not fair, Jack.” Her voice was barely above a whisper.

It was a low blow, but she had to listen to him.

“Look, Jack,” she found her voice. It took on an edge he didn’t like. “I’ve played by your damn rules up to now.” She stalked over to him and planted one pointed finger in the middle of his chest. “I have a J-O-B. I have to go.”

“I have a job, too. It’s protecting you and finding out where Matthew is. A job that you’re not making any easier by the constant disregard for what I say. So don’t tell me about having a job.”

Her eyes went cold and her hand fell away from his chest. “I am just a job to you?”

Ah, shit. “That’s not what I meant.”

“Is fucking me part of the job description? Is this a service you perform for all your female clients?”

“Elyse, that’s not...”

“You’re an asshole.” Her tone was deadly calm. She looked at her watch then back up at Jack. He longed for the look that had been in her eyes when he walked in, before he opened his damn mouth. Instead, she looked at him with no emotion. “I’m leaving in five minutes with or without you.”

She pushed past him and walked down the hallway. The door shut with the barest of sounds. It stung his ears more than if she had slammed it.

He fucked that up—big time.

Jack sat at his dining room table and looked back over the pages of info he had collected on Matthew Cabot. Elyse hadn’t spoken more than two words to him since they’d left the store several hours earlier. She hadn’t even attempted to sleep in the same room with him; she and Monty shared the guest bed. With his newfound solitude, he’d had plenty time to go back over everything he knew so far. He shook his head. He had to be missing something. Something just didn’t add up, but he couldn’t place it.

He flipped through the insurance papers he’d sweet-talked the receptionist into copying for him. If anyone ever found out he had them, they could both be in trouble. He thought it odd that he could find no mention of Elyse’s stay in the clinics. Then again, he

wouldn't necessarily want people to know that himself. Even if that had been the case, why had Matthew leaked the info himself?

Nothing made any sense.

Scanning the pages, one particular visit caught his attention. He blinked thinking the words would change and form into words that coincided with what he knew. Because what he saw couldn't possibly be right.

Then he focused on the words, and everything he knew flew out the window.

"Elyse, could you come in here?" he called to her in the other room.

She came in and sat.

"I was just wondering..." He had to know for sure. "What went wrong in your marriage?"

Her stance relaxed. He could tell she hadn't been expecting the question. "Why do you want to know?" She crossed her arms over her chest. The physical barrier was nothing compared to the emotional barrier she immediately put up.

He stroked his finger down her cheek, trying to connect with her, but she remained closed off. She wouldn't meet his eyes.

"Children," she said finally.

"You got divorced because you didn't have any children?"

She nodded. "That was the main reason, the reason that started all the other problems."

It still didn't make sense, but a picture formed in his mind. "Is that why you went to the clinics?"

She gasped and looked up at him. "How did you know about that?"

"I told you I had to dig into your background when I looked into Matthew's." His heart sank.

"That's personal stuff. That's not something I want advertised around." She wiped at a tear that ran down her cheek. "I don't want people to think I'm damaged goods."

"Nobody would think that. Not in this day and age." Of course, he had thought just that, even if it was for more of an excuse not to get close to her.

His thinking changed. He had never wanted a family, not until he met Elyse. “What about your family? I know they could never feel that way about you.”

“They don’t know,” she whispered.

“What do you mean they don’t know? How did you hide it from them?”

“Simple. I just didn’t tell them. They figured it was because of Matthew’s job.”

He took a drink of his cold coffee, his throat suddenly dry.

“They thought we were waiting to have kids.” She shrugged and continued before he could ask. “I don’t know what they thought we were waiting for. My mom knew how I felt about it. I mean, look at all my nieces and nephews.”

Jack’s stomach sank, the coffee turned into a lead weight. He was afraid he finally knew what she was talking about. “And you wanted them—children?”

“Are you not listening to me? Of course I did. I come from a big family. I always thought I would have lots of kids running around me. And when my sister announced she and Mike are expecting—again—it was all I could do to be happy for them. I am happy for them. I just wish... I just wish I could, too.”

“But you can’t because...?” The lead weight lurched and gained momentum. It rolled around the walls of his stomach. Everything made sense now.

“I thought you said you knew about the clinics?” She looked at him through narrowed eyes.

“Originally, I thought I did, too.” Jack was going to wring Matthew’s neck if he ever found him. “What kind of clinics did you go to?”

“Fertility clinics.”

Jack closed his eyes, raking his hand over his face. *Matthew, you are the biggest asshole.* How could he do something like that to Elyse? “What did the doctors tell you? When you went to these clinics.”

“They couldn’t find anything wrong with me. They had no medical reason why we couldn’t conceive. Jack, what’s wrong? Why are you looking at me that way?”

“You and Matthew got divorced because *you* couldn’t have children?”

“Pretty much.”

He waved at her to keep going.

“Matthew made it perfectly clear that I was useless to him as a wife. I couldn’t give him an heir, as he put it, so we separated. Why do you want to know this? What does this have to do with the case?”

“Just keep going.”

“On our seventh anniversary, I went to the apartment he’d rented when we separated and found him with another woman. It turned out to be her condo—that *he* had bought her. He even bought her a brand new Jaguar.”

The missing money Matthew had said went to Elyse. Jack closed his eyes and shook his head. When he opened them again she was staring at him with an odd look.

But she continued. “And he told me it was all my fault. I pushed him into her arms because he needed a whole woman. I filed for divorce the next day.” She picked at her short un-manicured nails.

Bile rose in the back of Jack’s throat.

“That’s why when we divorced I didn’t take any money from him. I couldn’t hold up my end of the marriage so I didn’t feel it was right to take any of his money. Besides he had already given quite a bit to...to her.”

Jack stood, walked to her chair and drew her into his arms.

“Jack what is wrong with you?”

He stroked his hand down her hair.

Matthew had lied. She probably could have children.

Oh God, all the times...

Jack loosened his hold on her and pushed her back to arms length. “Elyse, honey,” he drew out slowly.

Her eyes widened. “Jack you’re really scaring me.”

“I need to tell you something.”

Jack was acting so strange. Elyse's limited experience with men—Matthew being her only other experience—gave her little knowledge if this was normal. She thought women were the irrational, emotional ones in the relationship—if that was what you could call what they had.

Why now, did he have such an odd look on his face? And what was with the twenty questions about her divorce? He said he'd checked into her background. She didn't want to harp on her infertility, but a man deserved to know if a woman could carry his child or not, even this early in a relationship.

"Elyse, I don't know how to tell you this." She watched as Jack got up and paced the floor around the table. The muscles in his back flexed as he ran a hand over his face and through his hair. "Didn't Matthew go in with you when you were tested at these fertility clinics?"

She was having a hard time concentrating on their conversation watching the man stalk around the room, switching threads of conversation every time he opened his mouth. "No. He said since it was my problem I needed to take care of it. He was too busy with his clients."

Jack balled his fists at his side. "Matthew never saw the doctor?"

"Not with me. Jack, what is the point of these questions?" He didn't answer, just looked at her. His eyes, too intense, burned into hers. Her nerves tingled—on edge. "The doctor had asked once that he be tested. Matthew went to his own doctor and said he checked out fine."

Jack's face reddened.

"Jack, what's going on?"

"Elyse, Matthew had a vasectomy."

Elyse laughed. "Yeah, right."

Jack didn't laugh. Jack didn't even smile.

"This is not funny."

Heat drained from her face when Jack took her hand in his. His were so warm, she clung to him to heat her chilled body.

“He had it done several years ago, right after he started working for Crumpet and Associates, in fact. I have all the paperwork right here.” He motioned to a pile of papers on the table. “If you want to see it. He had the procedure done that April.”

April? She closed her eyes. “In March of that year my niece Brooke, you remember Megan’s daughter, she was born two months premature. I stayed with Megan and Mike for the entire month of April when they finally brought her home from the hospital—helping them take care of her and the other two kids.”

She looked up at Jack; his face was full of sympathy. “I didn’t see Matthew for two straight weeks at one point. He said he had to get the tax stuff taken care of for his clients.”

Tears spilled down her cheeks. She had been such a fool. Why hadn’t she seen it? The doctors told her they couldn’t find anything wrong with her. Why had she let Matthew manipulate her into thinking *she* had failed *him*?

She was having a hard time letting it sink in.

Then she wondered at Jack’s odd questions. “What did you think I was talking about at first? You seemed surprised when I said I went to fertility clinics.”

He looked away from her. She stood and grabbed his chin and turned his head back to hers.

“Jack, what did you think?”

“Matthew told people you were admitted to mental clinics because you were having breakdowns.”

“WHAT!” She slapped her hands down on the table, upending his coffee cup. When she looked back up at Jack, the sympathy in his eyes fueled her rage. “Why, Jack? Why would he do something like that to me?” With the back of her hand, she wiped at the angry tears that fell. “What did I do to deserve that?”

Matthew had lied to her. He had deceived her and made a fool out of her. How could he hate her so much as to treat her like that? *Why...*

She lowered her voice to a whisper. “I was devastated. I felt like such a failure and he knew it. He knew how badly I wanted children.

“And, do you know, I haven’t dated one single man in the three and a half years since we split up? I didn’t think I had anything to offer a man since I couldn’t have children.”

“But that’s not true.” Jack cupped her face in his hands, forcing her to look at him. “You are beautiful, smart, funny. You have the biggest heart I have ever seen in anyone before. Matthew just couldn’t see it.”

“Why?”

Jack pulled her into his arms. “He’s an asshole, that’s why. He didn’t deserve you.” He kissed the top of her head.

All this time I could have had children. All this time I mourned the inability to bear children.

She had watched her sisters and sister-in-law go through the joys and pains of pregnancy, fiercely jealous when she thought she couldn’t have a child of her own. Her sister was about to embark on the journey again. And the whole time, the whole damn time, Matthew had lied to her.

If she had been with another man, she could have gotten pregnant. Any other man and she could have... “Oh, Jack.” She raised her head and looked at him through blurry vision. “We didn’t...we never...” She covered her mouth with her hand. She couldn’t finish the sentence.

“Yeah, I thought of that, too.” He ran his hand through his hair. “But don’t worry. If anything...if you’re...I’ll do what’s right.”

What’s right? Like a burden handled? Elyse’s emotional roller coaster peaked the highest hill and plunged down the side. Jack wounded her. She didn’t think it would have been any worse if he had slapped her across the face.

No, this hurt more. He cut her deep with just a few words reminding her she was an obligation, not a lover, not even a potential wife.

“Oh. You’ll do what’s right? How kind of you. I am glad to know you are such the considerate soul.”

Jack narrowed his eyes. “What do you want me to say? I said I would take responsibility. I’m not like Matthew.”

“No you’re just a different kind of son of a bitch.” She turned and walked out of the room.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Elyse waited as long as she could for Jack to get home from his client meeting. It had been two weeks since his grandiose offer to “do the right thing” when they realized Matthew’s duplicity. They’d managed to live in some kind of symbiotic existence. He went to work with her, she went with him on a client call or two. Otherwise they spent very little time within one another’s personal space. And now that she needed him, he wasn’t around. Typical.

Guilt flashed over her annoyance. It wasn’t as if Jack was away because of her. No. He did have a job to do. She was annoyed more by her own disappointment than Jack specifically. She had hoped—even in the short period of time with Jack—they could build a life together. Settle down. But it could never happen. He didn’t love her despite his post-lovemaking professing. He’d never once uttered the words when he had full use of his faculties, never once told her anything remotely close past his adamant mention from time to time as to his professional regard for her.

He was obligated to her. Just like he would be to any other client.

She tried his office number one more time to no avail. With another look at her watch, she had to leave or she’d be late for work. She still had to stop at her house to pick up a clean outfit.

Damn, time to go. He’d be mad, but nothing had happened over the two weeks he’d been coming to work with her. No reason to think ten minutes without him would be any

different. Just because he appointed himself her bodyguard didn't give him the right to order her around. She had been good up to this point. She had a life of her own. If she walled up in a room for the unforeseen future, she might as well let Matthew and "the woman" get her, because she would die being closed in.

She had run through her work clothes and needed to grab a few more things. After she snatched the keys to Jack's Camry, she drove the few blocks to her house. The owners' car sat out front. She wondered what they were doing there but then she saw another car. They were showing the house. Usually the realtor showed potential buyers around the house, but twice before, the owners took over the role.

She pulled Jack's car up the driveway and parked beside the house. She debated going into work with an outfit she'd worn earlier in the week. With a quick look in the rearview mirror, she examined her wrinkled clothes. Elyse hoped the tour was almost over. She needed to shower and change, and head in to work.

When she entered through the front door, she heard Sheryl in the kitchen, her nasal voice unmistakable.

"Elyse, I thought I heard you come in," Sheryl said from the doorway. "We were just about to leave. Mrs. Smith was hoping to get in touch with her realtor and make an offer."

"That's wonderful," Elyse said, walking into the kitchen.

She found Sheryl by the stove, standing next to a tall woman in her mid-forties. Her dyed blonde hair was a stark contrast to Sheryl's shocking red mane. The woman eyed Elyse with almost a predatory look that caught her off guard. A smug smile kicked up the corners of Mrs. Smith's bright red lips.

The air of familiarity skittered across Elyse's brain. She tried to remember where she'd seen this woman before. She pictured a black-tie gala in downtown Dallas, four and half years before. It came to her in a flash—Sissy Crumpet. Her eyes widened as she looked at the wife of Matthew's boss.

Then the smell hit Elyse. The expensive, musky perfume that had haunted her dreams, night after night. Her stomach churned and she was afraid the breakfast she'd shared with Jack would come back up.

"So nice to meet you," Sissy Crumpet said. "You've done a marvelous job decorating this house." She stepped forward and held out her hand, as if the two had never met before.

Elyse's lips turned down in disgust as her hand slid into the woman's grip. Sissy squeezed Elyse's hand so hard she wanted to drop down to her knees. Elyse was thankful Sheryl seemed oblivious to the power struggle going on in front of her.

"We'll just get out of your hair now." Sheryl turned, heading out of the kitchen.

"I was wondering if I could look around a tad bit longer," Sissy said. Her lips turned down into a pout. "But, oh pooh, I know you have that appointment with your hairdresser."

Sheryl reached up and patted the mop of curls on top of her head. "Yes, well..."

"I bet Elyse wouldn't mind showing me around some more. Would you?" Sissy gave Elyse a pointed look.

Nerves hummed throughout her body, making it hard for her to know what to do. One thing for sure, she had to get Sheryl out of the house.

"I would love to." Elyse tried to lighten her voice to hide her stress. "You go on and have a good day, Sheryl."

As soon as the woman was out the door, Sissy pulled a gun from her leather shoulder bag. "Let's dispense with the chit chat. I want what's mine."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Elyse's heart pounded against her ribs.

"Come now. We don't have time for this shit. I want my diamonds, and I want them now."

"Your diamonds?" *Keep her talking*, Elyse thought. "I thought they were Matthew's."

"Matthew stole them from me."

“If that’s the case, why didn’t you just tell the police? You could have gotten them back without trying to kill me.”

“Because, *she* stole the money to pay for them from her husband’s clients.”

Elyse swirled around at the masculine voice.

“Matthew.”

Matthew stood in the doorway leading to the living room, pinning her between the two of them. No escape.

But...only Sissy had a gun, so she thought getting past Matthew was her best chance, until he pulled a gun out from under his shirt, aiming at Sissy.

“She’s been skimming money from old man Crumpet’s clients for years.” Matthew took several steps into the room and stopped. “She conveniently put herself in a position to have access to all the accounts.”

Elyse remembered now that Sissy had been her husband’s secretary for years. She had wondered why the woman had done it so for so long. Sissy didn’t strike Elyse as the conscientious employee type.

“Explains a lot,” she said under her breath.

“She was quite clever, too. No one found out. But rumor has it the old man was ready for wife number three. Sissy decided to liquidate her assets,” Matthew said with a smirk.

“Matthew, you bastard.” Sissy waved her gun at him, then back to Elyse.

“I’m the bastard?” he asked incredulously. “You murdered my brother in cold blood and you have the nerve to call me names.”

“My mistake. I thought it was you.”

“Oh, that’s comforting to know.”

“How the hell was I to know you have a goddamn twin? I didn’t realize it until I looked through his wallet.”

Matthew’s brow scrunched. “You were trying to get four million dollars in diamonds, and you needed to pick his pockets, too?”

“Shut up.”

Elyse couldn't believe the gun-wielding duo was bickering over this while she was stuck in the middle of them. She edged further from the pair, trying to get closer to the garage door.

"Where the hell do you think you're going?" Sissy swiveled the gun back in Elyse's direction. "Get your ass back over there."

Elyse held her hands up in front of her in the most non-threatening way she could.

She needed to keep them talking. Jack would come looking for her as soon as he got back from his client meeting. As Matthew and Sissy argued again, the familiarity of Sissy's voice struck her. "You're the one who has been calling me, trying to get me to come up the office and clear out Matthew's desk?"

"Figured that out did you? She's not such a dolt, Matthew." Sissy volleyed her gaze between the divorced couple. "He used to call you that, you know. Most often while we were hot and heavy between the sheets."

Elyse's mouth fell open. What?

She dropped all pretense of surrender and thrust her hands on her hips as she whirled on Matthew. "Why am I not surprised?"

He shrugged as if to say, "Such is life."

"Speaking of surprises, Matthew, imagine mine when I found out you had a vasectomy." She took a step toward him and jabbed her index finger into his chest. "Years you made me feel worthless, telling me I wasn't a whole woman. That I couldn't provide for you. If it weren't for Jack, I would have never known."

"That was my idea." Sissy said from behind her. "He wouldn't want to get tied down with such a homely girl. You are just too plain for words."

"What!" This was not happening. Elyse closed her eyes and counted to ten. When she opened her eyes again, she'd wake up in Jack's bed and this would all be a bad dream. But no, when she opened her eyes, Matthew stared her down with his typical condescending glare.

"Who the hell is Jack?" he demanded and lowered his gun.

She shook her head in disbelief. She had been transported to some alternate universe. That was the only explanation for the inane banter flying around her. Elyse would have laughed if tears weren't clogging her throat.

"Who is he? Are you seeing someone?"

"Oh she's seeing someone. He's been going to work with her every day."

Elyse numbed. The bitch had been following her all along.

"They were together on Thanksgiving."

"How the hell do you know all this?"

"He was there when I tried to get her."

"You went after Elyse?"

"Several times." Sissy nodded. "Shot her dog, too."

"You shot Monclay?"

"Would you two stop?" Elyse screamed. Matthew and Sissy both stiffened and stared at her. "His name is Monty, you dumbass." Elyse glared at Matthew. "And you—" she turned back to Sissy, "—I could kill you for hurting my dog."

Sissy blanched and seemed stunned by Elyse's sudden, fierce tone, but she quickly recovered and raised her gun. "Yes, but I have the gun. Now cut out all the shit. Where are my diamonds?"

"I put the diamonds in a safe."

"Where?"

"I won't tell you."

"Now. Or else."

"No." Elyse held her shoulders back and looked at Sissy. The woman's eye twitched, and the gun shook in her hand.

A sound deafened Elyse. A gunshot. She waited for the pain but none came, which scared her more. When she expected to fall into a heap on the floor, she still stood, all in one piece. But something bumped into the backs of her legs, shoving her forward. She looked behind her to find Matthew crumpled at her feet. A dark stain colored the front of his white oxford shirt. Elyse looked from him then back to Sissy.

Sissy lowered the gun as Elyse dropped to her knees beside Matthew. She grabbed the phone on the table next to them but Sissy yanked it from the wall and dropped it to the floor.

“You have to call an ambulance. He’s going to bleed to death.”

“Well, then I guess you better give me my diamonds, so you can get back to him.”

Elyse pulled off her cardigan, balled it up and pressed it to the wound. “Matthew. Matthew, you need to hold this here. Can you hear me?”

He nodded, but barely. Elyse had no choice but to take Sissy to the stash. “I have it in a safe at my store.”

“Let’s go.” Sissy shoved Elyse outside and toward the Cadillac.

Her mind reeled as she watched the woman walk around the front of the car. She had shoved the gun in her pocket and Elyse had considered making a run for it, but there was nothing stopping Sissy from going back into the house and finishing off Matthew. Despite everything—all the dirty, rotten things Matthew had done—she didn’t want him dead. A small part of her would always love him.

Her thoughts turned to the store and her employees.

She had to focus on a way to get the people out of her store. She remembered the fire alarm just inside the back door. The alarm company hadn’t connected it when they installed their own system but it made a hell of a racket when pulled. She would be able to get the gun and call the police and hopefully make it back to Matthew in time.

All she had to do was get Sissy to park in the back of the store.

Despite the circumstances, a calm came over her now that she had a game plan ready to go.

Jack turned the corner onto his street. He cussed a full ten seconds before he let his current tirade fall silent. His damn client, Dustin Markwood, would not stop talking. He told the man he would get right on his case as soon as he finished with the one he was

working on. Markwood, though, insisted going over every single piece of evidence he had on the man robbing him blind.

If Markwood hadn't been the father of one of Jack's Marine buddies, he'd have just walked out on the man and said to hell with it, but he couldn't. And now he was a half hour late picking Elyse up.

A strange niggling rippled through his gut when he pulled into his driveway, but he excused it as annoyance with Markwood. It wasn't until he hit the button for the garage door and it started to lift that he knew what it was. His car was gone.

Elyse did it again.

She left without him when he gave her explicit instruction not to. Damn the woman.

Just to make sure, he ran inside the house to look for her. The house was eerily quiet. Checking in on Monty, he hoped, but didn't actually expect, to find Elyse. The dog lifted his head and flapped his tail, but sat alone in the room. Jack gave him a quick pat then headed back out to his truck.

A note sitting in the middle of the kitchen table—she liked that fucking table when she was sticking it to him—caught his attention. Steeling himself to the anger, he picked up the note and read. Elyse was stopping at her house on her way to work. He looked at the time she wrote on the note and glanced at his watch. He just barely missed her.

"Damn, I can't believe she did it again. Why won't she listen to me?" Jack practically growled the words out between clenched teeth.

He grabbed the cordless phone and dialed her cell number. As he paced the kitchen, the phone rang and rang with no answer. Pulling the phone from his ear, a chirping noise came from somewhere in the house. It synced with the ringing of the number he dialed. He pushed the off button and the noise stopped. Then he dialed again, and again the chirping noise sounded.

Jack walked down the hall. It came from the guest bedroom. He found Elyse's cell phone lying next to Monty on the bed. Cursing, he turned off his phone and slumped down next to the dog. Monty looked up at Jack with almost a conspiratorial grin on his doggie face.

“Monty, how could she do this to me again and again? If I didn’t love her so much...” Jack rubbed the dog’s head then got up to find his file with the store’s number.

“No sir, she’s not due in for another half hour. Can I leave her a message?”

The woman on the other end of the phone at Simply Threads was polite enough, but Jack wanted to scream at her. Instead, he said simply, “No thanks,” and hung up the phone.

Running his hand through his hair, he cursed again. Not at Elyse necessarily, but at her inability to listen to him. She was a grown woman and not a child to be led around and told what to do. That was exactly what Matthew had done to her and that was exactly why she wouldn’t put up with it from him. Knowing that, however, didn’t put his mind at ease with her out there alone.

He tried to call her home number. All he got was a busy signal. An instant sense of relief filled him. He dialed the operator and asked her to break into the call. When she came back, she said she couldn’t get anyone and thought the phone might be off the hook. The hairs on the back of his neck stood. A sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach turned to lead.

Elyse wouldn’t leave the phone off the hook. Not when she knew he’d be looking for her.

Think, man, think.

But he couldn’t. Elyse’s face filled his mind. The smell of her hair—strawberries—engulfed him. He had to find her.

He hurried out to the truck and drove like a crazed man the few blocks to her house. When Jack pulled into the driveway behind his Camry, a wave of relief washed over him. The feeling left, though, when he rounded onto the porch. The front door hung slightly open.

Stepping quietly through the door, Jack slid the gun from his waistband. A heap of clothing covered the floor by the kitchen. The scent of a strong perfume lingered in the air. A memory he’d been avoiding surfaced. The woman from the funeral, the one with

the brassy hair, popped into his mind. He shook the thoughts away and looked at the heap in the corner.

The heap moved. His chest tightened. Could someone have gotten to Elyse so quickly? Could he have been totally useless in the end and lost the love of his life just after finding her?

Jack crept closer until he realized it was Matthew. Leaving the man, Jack searched the entire house, finding no one else around. He returned and dropped on the floor next to the injured man.

Matthew had a gunshot wound to his chest and Jack immediately recognized the sweater Elyse had worn the day before pressed to the injury. Jack pulled his cell phone out from his pocket and called 911. Dropping the phone, he took Matthew by the shoulders.

“Where is she?”

Matthew didn’t open his eyes.

“Where is Elyse?”

Jack was afraid Matthew had already lost too much blood and wouldn’t be able to answer.

Then Matthew moaned and his eyes fluttered open.

“Matthew, where is Elyse?”

“Sissy...Sissy took her.”

“Took her where? Come on, Matthew, you’ve got to help me out here.”

“To...the store.”

“Elyse’s?”

Matthew nodded and seemed to lose consciousness again. Jack knew he should stay and wait for the paramedics, but he needed to get to Elyse.

Chapter Twenty-Five

After Elyse instructed Sissy to park around the rear of the store, she said a quick prayer. "Please give me the strength."

"What was that?" Sissy asked.

"Nothing."

Sissy parked the Cadillac and hurried Elyse to the back entrance with the gun pressed to her ribcage.

Elyse's hands shook as she tried to shove the key into the lock.

Please don't let anyone be in the stock room. The store would probably be packed with the holidays nearing. She had one chance to get the people out so Sissy wouldn't have a handful of hostages at her mercy.

When she pushed through the door, she grabbed the old fire alarm and pulled down the lever. It wailed louder than she expected but she could hear the people in the front of the store hurrying to get out.

A pain exploded on the side of Elyse's head. Brilliant colors passed before her eyes and she fell to one knee. She looked over her shoulder to see Sissy with her hand raised, the butt of the gun showing.

"Why in the hell did you do that?" Sissy spit as she spoke through clenched teeth.

Elyse cupped her hand over her throbbing temple. “I wanted to get the others out of the store. You wouldn’t want them to walk in on us would you?” Elyse didn’t even try to hide the belligerence in her voice.

Sissy shoved her with the end of the gun. “Just get up and get me the diamonds.”

Elyse clambered to her feet, unsteady after the blow to the head. She opened the cabinet under the desk and turned the knob on the safe. Her fingers shook so bad she had to dial the combination twice before she could open the door.

She pulled out her jewelry box and handed it to Sissy.

“What is this?” Sissy held the box away from her body.

Elyse stood and the room swayed around her. Pictures on the wall danced as she tried to focus her vision. A low buzzing noise vibrated in her head. She looked at Sissy and gasped. Two Sissys stood before her. “Crap.”

Two guns trained on her chest. Two sets of hollow, emotionless eyes stared at her. Two snarled mouths opened and yelled at her. “Where are they?”

Elyse put her hand to her head where Sissy had hit her. She pulled it away to find it covered with warm, sticky syrup. She frowned. Where did the syrup come from? She didn’t remember bringing any red syrup.

“My head hurts,” she told the Sissys. Her knees weakened and she fell on all fours to the floor.

Sissy grabbed Elyse’s shoulders. “WHERE ARE MY DIAMONDS?”

“I gave it to you. Or did I give it to the other you? I’m not sure. But one of you has it.”

The pain in Elyse’s head subsided and a numbness moved through her. Her limbs weighted and she struggled to move back from Sissy’s grasp.

“All you gave me is a child jewelry box.”

“That’s the diamonds. Yep. You got it.”

Sissy’s grip tightened. “You put over four million dollars worth of diamonds in a child’s toy and in your work safe? Are you insane?”

“I must be. I see two of you. With two guns. Doubly damned I guess.” Elyse looked into the two faces. “You and your sister might want to move. I’m going to be sick.”

Sissy jumped back and shoved Elyse away from her. The room took another rolling pitch before someone turned out the lights.

When Jack arrived at the store, a fire truck and ambulance sat out front. His heart seized in his chest when the gurney rolled through the front door. He pushed through the crowd of people.

“You can’t go through there, sir.” A young police officer put his hand in the middle of Jack’s chest, halting his progress.

“I need to get in there. My…” What was she? His client? His lover? What did he call her? “Elyse. I’m looking for Elyse Cabot.”

“I don’t know who that is, sir, but you’ll have to stay back here.” The officer rested his hand on the butt of his holstered gun and pushed Jack back again.

Frustrated, Jack turned around to find another way in. A small woman with jet black hair and pale ivory skin approached him. He recognized Elyse’s assistant manager. “Debbie, where is she?”

“They’re taking her to the hospital.”

His heart stopped. “What happened?”

“I’m not exactly sure, but someone tripped the old smoke alarm. We called the fire department and cleared the building. When they went in there they found her in the stockroom unconscious.”

He grabbed the woman’s arms and her eyes widened. “Was she shot?”

“Shot? I don’t think so. Jack, please let go.”

Jack did and the woman took a step back.

“She has a gash on her head, but that was all they would tell me.”

Jack watched the ambulance pull away and raced to his truck. He followed it to Methodist Hospital, ten miles away.

Every fiber of his being shouted at them to hurry. He parked in the emergency zone and rushed in behind the gurney. Elyse lay still, her eyes closed. Her skin so pale. Blood covered her right temple. His heart seized and he was afraid he might collapse right there in the emergency room.

But he steeled his nerves and followed the EMTs into the cubical.

“You can’t be in here, sir,” someone said.

“I have to. I...love her. I have to make sure she’s okay.”

“I’m sorry, sir, but you’ll just be in the way.”

Jack took Elyse’s cold hand in his and kissed the back gently.

The nurse nodded and he released her hand. He reluctantly left the cubicle to call her family.

The Zwellers filled the waiting room. Jack didn’t know if he should leave or stay. At some point, the sun had gone down and twilight covered the area, but time had stopped moving the minute he saw Elyse lying bloodied on the emergency table.

His body had numbed instantly. He dreaded making the call to her family to inform them she had been injured, but he hadn’t wanted them to hear it from someone else. Diane Zweller had taken Jack into her arms the minute she found him and gave him the strength to wait out the doctors. She had comforted him when he thought he wouldn’t hold a moment longer.

Finally, after a couple of hours, Elyse was moved to a private room, but the doctors would only let in two people at a time. Her parents had yet to come out from seeing her.

Jack had checked on Matthew. The paramedics had brought him to the same hospital. After Jack had given his statement to the police, he had asked to see Matthew, but he was barely conscious and under guard until they determined his true identity.

Apparently, Jonathan had a strange disease; he couldn’t remember what it was called... Gilbert’s disease, yeah. A rare liver disease that, while may lay dormant, will always be present. Something he didn’t share with his twin.

Matthew was undergoing the tests to verify his—Elyse’s—story. Not that the man was stupid enough to deny it at this point. He’d told the police everything.

Jack learned from his friend in the department that Matthew had discovered Sissy had been skimming money from her husband’s clients for some time and purchasing diamonds. He’d found her stash one night and moved it to his and Elyse’s old safe deposit box until he could make sure Sissy cut him in on the deal. It seemed that the two were having an affair and Sissy was losing interest. Matthew ensured she didn’t tell her husband—he didn’t want to lose his job—and earned a little money while he was at it.

Sissy apparently had other ideas and mistakenly killed Jonathan, thinking he was Matthew. But then she couldn’t get her hands on the diamonds because she didn’t know where Matthew had stashed them. On a fluke, she ran into him, discovering his deceit, and said she would cut him in. Half of something was better than all of nothing.

Matthew had slipped when he told her Elyse had the diamonds. Sissy took matters into her own hands to get them back. She stalked Elyse. She attacked her, trying to get her alone to divulge the diamonds’ whereabouts. It wasn’t until earlier that day when she was posing as a potential buyer for Elyse’s house that she managed to do just that.

Then all hell broke loose.

Jack just wished they knew where Sissy was now. She had fled the scene with Elyse’s jewelry box after Elyse passed out from the blow to the head. Unfortunately for Sissy, Elyse had left her glass collection in the box and put the diamonds in another. Sissy stole what amounted to absolutely nothing. The diamonds were turned over to the appropriate authorities.

Now if they could just find Sissy Crumpet.

A light tap on Jack’s arm pulled him from his thoughts. Diane Zweller smiled at him through red swollen eyes. “She’s asking for you. You can go on in.”

Jack nodded.

His steps echoed in his ears as he walked down the long white corridor to Elyse’s room. His stomach knotted and his mind raced for what he would say to her. He loved her so much. The thought he almost lost her scared him shitless.

Holding his breath, he stepped into the small room. Elyse looked so young and fragile. A bandage covered the right side of her forehead and a bruise snaked out underneath and circled her eye. He knew from Diane that Sissy had hit Elyse with the butt of a gun, eventually causing Elyse to black out.

She lay with her eyes closed and all he could do was stare at her. Anger and love warred inside him, tightening his heart and his gut at the same time. He almost lost her before they had a chance at a life together. She'd been foolish to leave without him. She hadn't listened when he'd warned her it was dangerous for her to be out alone.

Not only had Sissy Crumpet found her, but her louse of an ex-husband had too. There was no telling what he might have done had Sissy not shown up and shot him first. Anger won as he clenched his fist at his side and gritted his teeth.

He heaved out a breath, trying to control his ire. The sound must have alerted Elyse to his presence; her eyes fluttered open. A tiny smile turned the corners of her lips.

"Jack." Her voice was just above a whisper.

"I...I didn't mean to wake you." He approached the bed.

"I wasn't sleeping. Just waiting for you." She held out her hand to him as he moved closer.

Her hand was so cold in his own. He reached out with his other hand to touch the bandage, but he stopped himself before he could.

"Dammit, Elyse. You could have been killed."

He watched color crawl across her face, her smile faltered. "But I wasn't. She just hit me."

"It could have just as easily been a bullet through your brain."

The smile that had teetered finally faded altogether and she pulled her hand from his.

"I can't believe you were so careless." He needed to rein in his temper, but he couldn't seem to stop himself. "All I asked was that you stayed with me until we had a handle on everything."

"Jack, I did what I thought I had to do. My job is important to me. They were counting on me. And for the record, I would do it again."

“And you nearly got yourself killed for it. Dammit,” he yelled, before he could help himself. He’d never been so scared. “Was selling a few fucking dresses worth it?”

“I thought you understood.”

“You thought wrong, darlin’. Nothing is as important as your life.”

“Jack, you’re being unfair.”

“The hell I am.” He paced beside her bed, running his hands through his hair. “You were incredibly selfish.”

She stared at him with a blank expression.

“Not to mention you could have gotten your precious co-workers killed if it hadn’t turned out the way it did. Sissy had already killed one person and almost killed another. You took far too great a risk with everyone’s lives.”

She stared at him for a long moment. “You’ve had your say, now you can leave.” She closed her eyes and turned her head away from him.

His gut burned from the lashing he gave her, but dammit, he loved her and she had risked her life for no good reason. “Elyse, look at me.”

“No. Get out before I call security.” She picked up the call button and held her finger over the button.

Jack couldn’t believe she was kicking him out.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Elyse left the hospital two days later. Her parents insisted she come stay with them since her house remained cordoned off by the police. Not that she intended ever to stay there again. Her mother situated her in her old bedroom and left her alone to rest.

The same pink-and-white-striped Laura Ashley curtains hung at the window. The same matching comforter covered the bed. She looked around the room and was transported back to her youth, growing up in such a loving home. Secure and safe. She picked up one of her twenty-some-odd stuffed animals and squeezed it to her chest as she snuggled into the rest.

Why can't I feel security now? Why did things have to get so messed up?

Her eyelids fluttered closed.

Sometime while she slept, someone had let Monty into her room. She guessed Jack had brought him over. She hadn't spoken to him since the evening at the hospital. Though her pains from Sissy's assault still stung, nothing compared to the pain in her heart.

When she needed him most, Jack had reminded her of her stupidity instead of taking her in his arms and comforting her. He humiliated her for doing what she thought was right.

Dammit, she would do it all over again if she had to. The fact that he couldn't—or wouldn't—see hurt most of all.

Elyse closed her eyes again and rubbed the top of Monty's head. The soft fur soothed her strung-out nerves. The familiarity lulled her into a comfortable calm.

A light tapping on her door pulled her eyes open. Her mother poked her head inside the room. "I brought you some tea and a sandwich. I thought you might be hungry."

Elyse pushed herself up in the bed and nodded.

Diane Zweller came into the room carrying a tray filled with food. Not just *a* sandwich, but three, along with cookies and a bag of Goldfish crackers. And a pot of tea.

"How many people are you planning to join us?" Elyse teased.

"Just wanted to give you a variety." She set the tray next to Elyse on the bed. She stroked her hand through Elyse's hair like she did when Elyse was a child and had the flu. "It's not every day one of my babies is at home for me to mother. And to think I almost lost..." Her mom's eyes shined with unshed tears when her voice caught.

"I'm okay, Mom. Really. Just a bump on my thick skull." She took her mother's hand and squeezed it tightly before letting it go. For the first time, guilt settled into her stomach. The pain in her mother's eyes tore at her.

In that instant, she could understand the anguish Jack had heaped on her. He'd known the dangers Elyse was facing. She deliberately walked head-first into it. As far as her mother knew, it was a fluke. She hadn't told her about Matthew and his connection to the incident at the store.

Jack had warned her not to leave. But did she listen? No, of course not. Now, she and Jack weren't even speaking to one another.

"What happened between you and Jack?" Her mother asked, as if picking up on Elyse's thoughts.

"What do you mean?" Elyse looked at the tray of food to avoid her mother's intense stare.

"I thought you and Jack were an item. Why hasn't he stopped in to see you?" she asked. "He even had a friend of his drop Monty off. Boy was that man's hair red!"

The thin string that bound Elyse's heart together, kept it from shattering, snapped. Her heart crashed in her chest, splintered into a million sharp pieces. Jack hadn't even wanted to take a chance of running into her, so he sent Casey with the dog.

Elyse fought back tears and plastered on a fake smile. "We were never an item, Mother. That saying went out when *you* were younger. Jack was...is just a friend." Geez she was already speaking of him in the past tense.

"If you say so. Casey, I think that was what he said his name was, left this for you." Diane handed her daughter an envelope. "I'll let you have some privacy. Come on, Monty." She slapped the side of her leg and the dog followed her out the door.

Elyse turned the envelope over in her hand. She ran the tip of her finger over her name printed in small block lettering. She recognized the handwriting. Jack.

Taking a deep breath, she slid her finger under the flap and ripped at it. Just before she got it all the way open, the flap bit into her skin.

"Damn. Why do paper cuts hurt so bad?" She stuck the injured digit into her mouth for a second, willing the pain away, hoping the inside of the envelope didn't have something that would hurt ten times more.

She slid the single piece of paper free and stared at it. Jack returned her check. She opened the envelope to see if there was a note inside, too. No note. Just the check.

Tears stung her eyes and rolled down her cheeks. That was it. That was the end of her relationship with Jack Walling. If possible, her heart ached more, as if covered with a thousand paper cuts.

Jack sat across his desk from Casey Blackwell.

"I took Monty to her parents' house, just like you asked. I gave her mother the envelope." Casey cleared his throat. "You want to tell me now what's going on?"

"Nothing's going on. I was settling an account with a client."

"Aw come on, Jack. I know she was much more than a client."

“There’s nothing more.” Jack couldn’t look Casey in the eye. His pain was too raw and would surely show. “But I did talk to Tommy at the police station and they don’t have the manpower to keep an eye on her.

“You’ve done some part-time work for me before. I want to hire you to watch her for me. With Sissy Crumpet still running around, Elyse isn’t safe, even though she doesn’t have the diamonds anymore. Sissy may still want to get at her.”

“And you’re doing this why? I thought you just said you settled her account. She’s not a client anymore.”

Jack looked up from the folder on his desk. He narrowed his eyes and fought to control the urge to pop his friend in the mouth. “Do you want the job or not? I can find someone else if you don’t.”

“I’ll do it,” Casey said with a sigh. “When do I start?”

After Casey left, Jack called his friend Tommy down at the station. “Tell me what’s going on with Matthew.”

“This is becoming a habit for you.” The man laughed. “The medical reports confirmed the ID. Once in the hospital, though, he didn’t try to deny it. The DA has so many charges pending against him, I doubt he’ll ever see the light of day again without bars around him.”

“Will they let me in to see him?”

There was a pause on the other end of the phone. “Jack, you know they won’t. You got mixed up pretty bad with his ex, huh?”

“I, ah...” He didn’t know what to say.

“That’s what I thought.

Jack sat in his car across the street from the Zwellers’ house. The cold gray day cut through him despite the layers of clothing to keep him warm. He’d been watching Elyse, alternating shifts with Casey, the last few days. Every time he saw her, got a glimpse of her mink-colored hair, his gut tightened.

With Christmas just weeks away, Casey and Hannah had been hounding him to call her. He couldn't. He'd ruined things with her. She couldn't possibly forgive him for the way he treated her. Hell, he was still angry she'd risked her life for a stupid dress shop.

Still, he'd give anything to touch her again.

He sat up straighter in his car when she and Monty emerged from the house. His fingers fumbled with the keys as he watched her bounce down the steps to her car.

Finally, he got his car started. He waited a couple of beats before pulling onto the road behind her. His brow crinkled when he recognized the direction they were headed.

"Is she going back to her house?" he wondered aloud. "I didn't think the police had released it yet."

At the street she should have turned to get to her old house, she went straight. Straight to his house. She pulled up in the driveway and parked. He sat four houses back hoping she wouldn't notice him.

She got out of the car, wagging her finger. She said something to Monty before shutting the car. She took several weary steps then straightened her shoulders and walked the length of the sidewalk up to Jack's door.

He could see her ringing the bell. "No one's home."

She rang it two more times, then her shoulders slumped and she returned to the car. Jack followed her for an hour, just driving around the city.

What was he doing? His stomach clenched. If he were going to rectify things with her, then would have been a brilliant time to try. But he'd held back, couldn't bring himself to get out of the car and talk to her. Tell her he'd been wrong.

Instead, he sat in his car, lusted after her like a freaking horny teenager, content to trail her hidden in shadows—not the best way to make things work with Elyse Cabot. As if she'd have him.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The day started off sluggish and didn't improve much. Elyse couldn't shake the bug she'd picked up at work from Debbie earlier that week. She'd dragged around the store all morning, tired, grumpy. If it weren't for her mother's party, she probably wouldn't have left her room for the rest of Friday afternoon. But she'd worked an early shift at the store so she could help her sisters get ready for their mother's sixty-fifth birthday bash. Halfway through hanging the banners her brother-in-law had printed, she got dizzy, followed by a rough bout of nausea from the scent of the crab dip for the party. She excused herself to lie down in her room for a bit before the guests started to arrive.

Elyse groaned when someone knocked on her door. "Come in," she said with her face squished into her pillow. She quickly lifted her head to see who it was.

"Hey, brat, you still under the weather?" Cara came through the door.

"Not too bad," she lied. "I just had a busy week at work. What do you need, sis?"

"What makes you think I need something? Can't a big sister come in and talk without having an ulterior motive?"

Elyse raised an eyebrow and looked at her sister.

"I need a feminine product. Do you have any?"

"No, sorry." Elyse scrunched her forehead. She couldn't remember the last time she'd bought any. She rubbed her temple.

"Oh. I just thought since you were living here now you'd have some."

“No, I...” The last time she bought any was after Halloween. She hadn’t needed any since... *Oh God!* “No, I, ah, just ran out and haven’t made it to the store yet.”

“Okay. I’ll just run home real quick. Tell the others I stepped out.” Cara rose from the bed and walked to the door. “You know, if you’re still feeling lousy from the cold you caught, you should go to the doctor.”

“Doctor, yeah, I’ll do that.” *It’ll just have to be an OB/GYN.* She waved lazily to her sister. The minute the door shut, she bounded from the bed and went to the closet to dig through the boxes of things from her rental house.

Looking for her day planner, she cursed the mess of her boxes. She’d packed in such haste she’d neglected to write on the boxes what they contained. After ten minutes, she finally located it in a box of shoes.

She flipped through the pages looking for the date of her last period. Since she was twelve, she’d always kept a log of her menstrual cycle. The only time in twenty years that she’d forgotten to keep track was the summer she went to camp when she was sixteen. She’d left her calendar at home. The entire summer she walked around with a pad in her pocket afraid of being caught unaware.

Crouched on the floor of her closet, she held her breath and flipped to October. She scanned the page and found the date of her period. Releasing a breath she turned the page and looked for the little star she used to indicate the start of her cycle.

Two notes about birthdays sat above the little star two and a half weeks before Thanksgiving. Two and a half weeks before she and Jack made love. She turned the page again and read over December. Dread and excitement filled her simultaneously. There was not one single notation.

It could, of course, just be the flu, stress, anything of a hundred things. But she didn’t think so.

With a shaky hand, she pressed her palm to her stomach. Why hadn’t she paid better attention? Because she’d been so intent on pouting about losing Jack. Jack. She’d have to tell him. First, she needed to see a doctor.

Standing, she searched for her shoes. Thank goodness her cousin, Melody, was a doctor. She could get in today, no questions asked.

Elyse didn't want to go to the doctor alone. She tried to decide which one of her sisters could keep a secret best. Not a one of them. She thought about her sister-in-law. The only person Amber would tell would be Lance. She couldn't keep a secret from him. Unfortunately, like the Zweller women, he was a blabbermouth. That left her with only one alternative.

"Mom," she screamed when she slid her feet into the tan loafers by her desk.

"Congratulations, Aunt Diane," Melody said from the other side of her desk. "Looks like you're going to have busy year with two daughters expecting."

They all stood and did a round of hugs.

"Can we just keep this between us for a bit?" Elyse hoped her voice didn't sound as desperate to her cousin's ears as it did her own.

Melody promised to keep the secret and said she'd see them both at the party later.

Diane's smile grew wider. She squeezed Elyse's hand and didn't let go until they reached the parking lot.

Back in the car, the pair stared at the black and white sonogram print. You couldn't see much of anything, not unless you knew what you were looking at. It was, however, the absolute most wonderful, if not almost as frightening, picture she'd ever held.

Her mom hadn't asked one single question the entire time they were with Melody, which scared Elyse as much as her impending motherhood. Her mother *must* be going crazy with her silence. When they buckled up, her mother released a heavy sigh.

Elyse held the keys at the ignition but didn't put them in. "Mom, I know you're wondering..."

"It's wonderful. To think, all those years married to Matthew and you two never conceived. If you ask me, it was because deep down inside you knew he was not the kind of man to help raise children." Diane reached across the car and cupped Elyse's face.

“It was because of Matthew, Mom, but not how you think.” Elyse steeled herself for the words she was about to say.

Her parents had been angry when they found out about Matthew faking his death. She saw no reason to tell them all the horrible things he had done to her. She took a hold of her mother’s hand and told her about the vasectomy and all the lies he built up around the two of them. Tears rolled down her mother’s cheeks, but she didn’t say a word. She simply drew Elyse into her arms and hugged her fiercely.

The two women pulled apart and Diane took Elyse’s face in her hands again. “You know I love you more than life itself.” Elyse nodded as best as she could in her mother’s grip. “If you ever get yourself mixed up with a man like him again I will take you over my knee.”

Elyse snorted. Her mother found the lighter side of things and she knew how to threaten you with saccharine sweet words. *God, I hope I can be half the mother she is.*

“When are you going to tell Jack?” her mother asked, releasing her face and sitting back in her seat.

Elyse stared at her wide-eyed. “I uh...?”

“Just because I’m an old, old grandma doesn’t mean I’ve lost my seeing, dear. I saw how you two watched each other over Thanksgiving. I saw the path he wore in the hospital corridor when you were hurt.”

Elyse couldn’t speak.

“The last time I checked there has only ever been one Immaculate Conception.” She winked. “It doesn’t take a genius to figure out what happened. Remember, I’ve had five children myself, and two-handfuls of grandbabies.” Her mother straightened her seatbelt. “So when are you going to tell him?”

“I don’t know, Mom. I just don’t know.” She started the car. “But for right now let’s not tell anyone. I want to keep this just between you and me.”

“She went to the medical clinic?” Jack asked again.

“Yeah, with her mom. Then they just sat there in the car for the longest time.”

Jack waved it all away. “It’s her cousin’s office. There’s no telling, but it’s probably nothing.”

The two men stood side by side in the cold, wet evening, watching the house. Luckily the rain had stopped an hour before, so no umbrellas to contend with. Still, so many people had entered for a party that Casey had had to call Jack to help him watch the perimeter. With that much activity, Sissy could easily slip past.

Jack had called Mike to see what the family was celebrating. When he mentioned Diane’s birthday Jack slapped his forehead. He’d forgotten.

Diane had sent him an invitation to the party. She’d even added a note asking how he was doing. It tightened his gut, the thoughtfulness of Elyse’s mother. What a family.

He’d also subtly asked about the trip to the medical clinic, but Mike didn’t know. It did appear as nothing. He should dismiss it, but there was a little niggles in the back of his head.

If it turned out to be anything, Mike would tell him, he’d given him updates the past few days. He was the only one in the family who knew he and Casey were watching Elyse. Jack let his friend in on his plans, but only when Mike’d found him lurking outside one afternoon. He appealed to Mike’s sense of security for the family, and then he begged him not to tell her. Mike agreed she needed protection and had promised not to say a word.

At half past eleven, the front door opened and Elyse stepped out on the porch. Jack had set himself up with a direct view of the door. Hidden by the azalea bush, he was only a dozen or so feet away. It was the closest he had been to her in almost a week. He wished he could smell her scent of strawberries instead of the damn bush. He never thought it would hurt to miss her.

He couldn’t tear his gaze away from her face. She was more beautiful from one time to the next. In the moonlight, she absolutely glowed. And it worsened his mood. She was doing great without him—hadn’t really needed him after all. But he was determined to see this through. Once Sissy Crumpet was found he would stay away from Elyse

completely—he had to, it was too hard to watch her and not be with her. For a brief moment, he wished the woman would never resurface. He would forever be in Elyse’s life, even if from a distance.

He heard a growl and noticed for the first time that Monty was standing beside her. The dog trained his eyes on the bushes. Monty slowly approached and Jack watched Elyse’s face grow alarmed. She stepped back onto the house and called Monty.

The dog was not to be deterred. He drew closer and then his snarl disappeared. His tail flapped as fast as Jack’s racing heart. Even though Monty wouldn’t attack him, he wanted him to get back before Elyse discovered him.

“Go, Monty,” Jack whispered. He looked to see if Elyse heard. She hadn’t moved from the door.

“Come on, Monty.” She made a kissy noise.

“Shoo, go boy, get,” he whispered a tad louder.

“Monty.” Elyse stamped her foot and the dog turned to look at her. He gave Jack a parting look and if Jack read doggie faces, he would swear the dog looked disappointed.

Jack let out heavy sigh when Elyse finally closed the door behind her and Monty.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Elyse licked the hundredth little Christmas card for her nieces' and nephews' classes. Her mother had roped her into putting them together as punishment for not talking to Jack yet.

But she couldn't. It wasn't like she could call the man up and say, "Hey, what's been going on? Oh by the way, you're going to be a daddy."

If he came back to her then, she'd always wonder if it was from some misplaced sense of honor. He knocked her up, therefore he would now take care of her. She didn't want that. Or worse, what if she told him and just like Matthew—just like Alexander's loser father—he didn't want to have kiddos? She couldn't take the rejection, not now with her pregnancy emotions running the gamut daily.

Her poor father didn't know what was going on, although she suspected he might have an inkling, but thankfully he hadn't asked her outright. And her sisters, every time she ran into one of them, they gave her strange looks. Megan had flat out cornered her one day and looked her up and down then finally said, "Did you change your hair? There's something..." Megan had shaken her head and walked away before Elyse could come up with a lie.

So much for woman's intuition. Not one of them had guessed, thank God.

"Hey, Bratzilla, penny for your thoughts."

Elyse looked up to find her brother standing at the other end of the table. He looked at the stack of cards in front of her.

“I came to pick up the class Christmas cards before I take the rugrats to school. Are you okay? You looked deep in thought.” He walked over to her and put a hand on her shoulder. “Are you still worried about Sissy or is it something else? Your pregnancy is going okay isn’t it?”

Her gaze flew up to his. “Who told you?”

“Elyse, I have four kids. I know the signs when someone is expecting.”

“Cara, Megan and Gwen haven’t noticed.”

“Well, Megan’s wrapped up in her own pregnancy. As for the other two, I have no clue why they haven’t noticed. Don’t worry, Amber and I haven’t said a word.”

“Amber knows, too?”

“Well, yeah, you don’t think I would keep something like that from her?”

Elyse rubbed her hands over her face. *Why me?* If Lance and Amber knew, it was only a matter of time before the rest of the family found out.

“We won’t tell, I swear,” Lance said again as if reading her mind. “What plans do you have tonight?”

“I told Kenny I’d help him up at the church. They’re having a party for the high school kids.”

“Good old Kenny. Not exactly the way I’d want to spend an evening, but hey, it’s your life.”

“No, *you* have a life.” She sighed. Whatever her lack of “life”, it was by her own doing. “What’re y’all up to?”

Lance flashed Elyse his most engaging smile. “We’re going to the mall to see Santa, then get a tree and maybe go out for a pizza afterwards.” His eyes lit with excitement. “Wanna join us? Kenny’d understand. Come with us, it’ll be fun.”

Elyse moaned at the thought of having fun. Not that spending the evening helping out her cousin wasn’t going to be a hoot. Yeah boy. “No thanks.”

“Why’d Mom put you on card duty? It must have been big to make you do all this.” He scooped up the load of cards for his kids and dropped them in the bag hanging from his arm.

While their father liked to nag as a punishment, their mother relished her brand of punishing her kids. As children, Elyse and her siblings would beg for spankings or groundings. But no... Diane Zweller had made punishment an art form. She would pick the most tedious, mind-numbing job and make the offender sit at the head of the table while accomplishing the task. Not only did you nearly die from the monotony, but everyone else in the house knew you were being punished as well.

“I...I haven’t told Jack.”

“Well you should. He’s nice, and Mike says he’s a stand-up guy.”

Lance hadn’t seemed the least put off by her circumstances. Everyone thought what was between her and Jack was great. Everyone except Jack.

Jack fondled the box of candy next to him on the front seat of his car. Casey was off to an evening alone with his wife while Jack sat in the car and watched the woman he loved. He was totally and completely in love with Elyse. He thought he might have been from the time he met her when she was just nineteen. Again, he thought back over his numerous girlfriends, each he’d compared to Elyse.

He was such a loser. He loved her and lost her. Why couldn’t he have told her when it mattered? Why had he yelled at her? If only he could take it back. If only, if only... Life always left you with “if onlys.” Your hope was to make them as few as possible. And tonight he wanted to lessen his by one. He wanted to find Elyse and first apologize then tell her how much he truly loved her.

He thought of approaching her when she left her house, but for some reason he followed her first. Parking out in front of a church, she left her car under the light.

Good girl, he thought.

The hair on the back of Elyse's neck pricked. She had the strangest feeling someone was watching her. She turned and scanned the church parking lot but didn't see anyone around. She'd taken all the precautions Jack had told her about early on. And the huge can of mace in her pocket would stop an elephant.

A gaggle of teens hung around by the front door of the church. She started for them when Kenny's truck pulled in and parked up by the front of the church in the youth minister's spot. He smiled and waved her over.

After getting out of the truck, he threw his arm over her shoulder and kissed her cheek. "Hey, kiddo, how are you?"

A smile broke across her face. Kenny was her favorite relative next to her brother and sisters. "Eh, I've been worse."

A loud noise echoed through the lot. It sounded like a car door slamming, followed by the peel of tires racing from the far end of the parking lot. Elyse shielded her eyes from the setting sun to try to make out the vehicle, but it sped away too fast.

"One of your teenagers?"

"No, they would never do that." Kenny looked at her with a staid expression. "They usually do donuts first *then* speed out of the lot."

Elyse nudged him with her elbow and they both laughed, walking into the church. She tried to lighten her mood, but she still had the feeling someone had been watching her.

Jack threw the twelve days of Christmas chocolates in the wastebasket.

"Let her new boyfriend watch over her," he said aloud as he Googled the church. "Let him worry when Sissy might come after her next. Damn, damn, damn."

When the pastor's name flashed on the screen it rang familiar. Heat flooded his cheeks. He flipped through the case file on his desk.

“Her cousin.” Jack kicked the corner of his kitchen counter. “Who has such a freaking big family? Jesus.” Limping, he hobbled around the room cursing. Almost immediately, he looked up to the heavens and asked forgiveness. “Jealous fool.”

Or just a plain fool? So help him, he was so in love with her he let it rattle him, let him lose focus.

He picked up his car keys and headed back up to the church.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Elyse tried to smile as her family sang Christmas carols around the tree. A little over a week until Christmas and she didn't give a jingle bell for all joy to the world and peace on earth. She was nauseous most times of the day—morning sickness, please, all-day sickness—and parts of her were getting more tender by the day.

Lance had been true to his word. He hadn't told a soul. Amazingly, her sisters were so wrapped with the upcoming holidays they pretty much left her alone.

The family finished singing and settled on every available space in the living room as her mother passed around an assortment of cookies and candies she wanted to try out before readying her annual Christmas offerings for any and everyone.

Elyse nibbled on a gingerbread man as Cara leaned on the arm of the chair. "How ya doing?"

"Fine." The cookie sat heavy in her stomach. "Why wouldn't I be doing fine?"

"No reason." Cara stared at her for a long moment. "Ooo, eyelash." She pinched at Elyse's cheek then held her fingers in front of her face. "Make a wish."

Elyse started to laugh but changed her mind. Couldn't hurt. She closed her eyes, thought real hard, as she had when she was a child and Cara found an errant eyelash. *I want Jack Walling back in my life.* She blew at her sister's fingers with one swift blow.

"What did you wish for?" Lance asked with a knowing smile.

"I can't tell you or it won't come true." Oh, how she wanted it to come true.

Later that evening, when they started on their Santa songs, one of the neighbors called.

“Elyse honey, I don’t want to alarm you but there is a strange looking man watching your house.” Elyse’s heart stalled in her chest. She had almost been able to put her ordeal behind her. Almost. “He was sitting in his car when we left for dinner a couple of hours ago. We just drove by and he’s still there.”

“Th-thank you, Mrs. Turner. I’ll have one of the guys go take a look.”

“Sure, sure. I might not have noticed him if it wasn’t for all that flame red hair. Bye now.” The elderly woman hung up.

Elyse just stared at the phone in her hand. Flame red hair? She hung up the receiver and slipped into her jacket. She said she was going out to play with Monty so as not to worry her family. Once outside, she tiptoed to the gate that led to the front yard, not that anyone would have been able to hear her with all the noise inside.

She checked all the cars until she found the one down the street indeed occupied by one red-headed man. She tapped on the glass and startled the man sitting in the driver’s seat.

“Casey, what are you doing out here?”

He rolled down the window and straightened in his seat. “I, ah, well.”

“You liked to have scared one of my neighbors to death.”

“Sorry. I was trying to be inconspicuous.”

“She saw all this.” She ruffled his hair. “You stick out like Shaq in Munchkin Land.”

“Yeah, I forgot my hat tonight.”

“Tonight? How long have you been watching me?”

“Since...”

“There you are. Your mother is going to tan your hide if she finds you gone.” Her brother-in-law Mike, with Lance trailing behind him, walked over to her. “Hey, Casey,” he said with a quick wave. Then he flinched.

“Mike? How do you know Casey?” She turned toward Mike.

At the same time Lance asked, “You two know him?”

"I can't believe this." Elyse shoved her hands on her hips. "I'm not good enough to stay with, but follow like a job, no problem. God forbid you pick up a phone. Call. Ask how I'm doing. Oh but wait. Why would you need to do that, you just have your lackey follow me around."

"Hey now."

She wagged her finger. "Casey, now is not a good time to jump in."

"Elyse listen..." Mike moved toward her, but stopped when she growled.

Lance grabbed her arm. "Cool it. Not good for the baby."

"The what?" Mike's eyes widened.

Elyse whipped her gaze between the two bossy, nosey, over-protective men in her family. Then she glanced to see if Casey had heard her brother. When he sat calmly watching the trio, she didn't think so. "Not here," she whispered to Mike when she turned back to them. "Please."

He nodded and she pivoted back toward the car.

"Now answer me. How do you two know each other? The only person you have in common is..." she paused, nausea rolling her dinner. "Did he...? Are you two...? Mike how could you?"

"Lance? Did you know?"

"Not me." He held his hands up as if in surrender. "I just followed Mike to see what was going on."

"Come back inside and we'll talk about this." Mike gently took a hold of her elbow. "We have a lot to talk about." He narrowed his eyes at her.

Defeated, she slumped her shoulders and she walked between Lance and Mike back to her parents' house.

"Bye, guys," Casey called.

Mike grunted and Elyse raised her hand over her shoulder, not sure, if he could even see her. But of course, he could. He was standing watch over her house.

On the back porch, the trio paused. Mike toggled his gaze between her and her brother for a moment then drew her into his arms. "I love you. I will stand by you always. You know that?"

"Yes." Tears spilled from her eyes.

"Does Jack know?"

She shook her head and stepped back away from him. "I can't tell him, Mike. If I do, I'll never know if he stays with me for me or because of this." She pointed to her belly. "Or what if he doesn't want to have anything to do with us at all? I couldn't handle that. Not now."

"Jack's not like that."

"It's not a chance I can take."

"Like I said, I will stand by you, whatever your decision." He slapped Lance on the shoulder and squeezed her hand. "When are you going to tell the others?"

"Mom already knows. And Amber." She glared at her brother and he shrugged. "I guess no time like the present." She wiped the tears from her face knowing they would be replaced as soon as she told the others. "Let's do it."

Mike held the door open for her.

"Where have y'all been? I was about to send out a search party." Diane Zweller walked over to her daughter.

"Everyone, can I have your attention? I have something I would like to say."

Lance joined his wife across the room and gave her a big thumbs-up. Megan pestered Mike for details of their brief outing, but he just smiled and patted her belly. Her mother took her hand and stood shoulder to shoulder beside her.

"I don't really know how to say this so maybe a visual would be better." Taking a breath, she pulled the sono print from her hip pocket.

The room was dead silent for a moment as everyone passed the black and white picture around. Then, one by one, smiles tipped on each and every face. The room exploded with more noise and laughter than she had ever heard in her life.

They bombarded her with questions.

“How is this possible?” one of her nieces asked.

”How far along are you?”

“When’s the due date?”

“Does Jack know?” every last one of the adults asked.

“Hold on, one question at a time.” She walked across the room, her head spinning. “But first, I need to sit down. Okay let’s start with the easy ones. If you want to know how it’s possible, ask your mom. I’m not telling.” She smiled and several rounds of laughter followed.

“The due date is August twenty-first.” She looked at her mother and they shared a knowing look.

Her mother shooed the kids out to watch a movie in the other room.

“First hard question, Matthew and I never had children because he got a vasectomy without telling me.” She went on to explain how she’d undergone tests thinking she was the one at fault for her lack of motherhood.

“If that man wasn’t in prison, I’d kick his ass from here to Tulsa. And back.”

Everyone in the room stared gape-mouthed at Don Zweller with his clenched fists and reddened cheeks. He had never said a cross word about anyone in his life.

“Thanks, Daddy. I think.” A few snickers sounded and the attention turned back to Elyse.

“Lastly, Jack doesn’t know. And I want to keep it that way.”

“You have to tell him. It’s his child.”

“Jack has his own life. He never planned on being a father.” Suddenly his words echoed in her head. *I would be honored to have children with you.* Easy for him to say when he thought it *wasn’t* a possibility. Had he meant it? Later he’d said he’d do *what was right*. He wouldn’t tell her if he’d be happy about it. She would never know if he wanted to be with her or just for the sake of the...

“Hello?” Diane snapped her fingers in front of Elyse’s face.

“Sorry, lost in thought there for a moment. I would appreciate it if y’all could keep it a secret just for now. Sooner or later everyone’s going to know. But for now, just family please.”

“We’ve been busted man.”

“Damn.” Jack slammed his hands down on his kitchen table. “What happened?”

Casey told him about the neighbor’s call and Mike’s slip up. Jack got up and paced, unable to control the unease tightening his chest. For two days now, an unnerving gnawing radiated in his gut. The pain usually foreshadowed trouble. He just didn’t know what. Was it as simple as Elyse finding out about his surveillance? Or was there something else more foreboding headed his way? He just didn’t know.

“Well even if she knows we’re watching, I want you to stick to your regular routine.” Jack paused and rubbed his chin, running his thumb the length of his scar. Being found out or no, he would protect Elyse. He had to.

He almost wanted to laugh. He’d finally, after years of protesting otherwise, found love. The make-you-smile-at-sappy-commercials kind of love. And the woman hated him. She’d kicked him out of her hospital room and had not contacted him one time since. She hadn’t acknowledged he’d ever existed in her life. Still, he would guard her. If it was all he could ever give her, it would be enough. Enough to know she was alive and well. Until Sissy was behind bars, he would be Elyse’s protector, his biggest job—ever. He would make damn sure he didn’t fail.

“On second thought,” he finally continued. “I’ll take over your next few shifts. You need a break and I think she’ll be watching for you. You’re damn easy to spot with the blaze on your head.”

Casey rubbed his hand over his hair; his eyes sagged with lack of sleep. “It’s your call.”

“Yeah. That’s the plan for now. Enjoy your days off, Christmas is closing in.”

He walked Casey to the front door then headed to his office to write up his report. Even though Elyse was no longer his client, and even though Sissy had probably fled the country, he thrived on keeping his records straight. If nothing else, his report was the only part of his life, since meeting Elyse Cabot, he could control.

Chapter Thirty

Two weeks of watching Elyse since she'd left the hospital, and Jack wanted to beat his head up against the wall. His hormones raged every time she came into view. There was something about her. Something different. A peacefulness relaxed her face, despite the stress she must be under with Sissy on the loose. She still smiled, walked with her held high and shoulders back. She glowed. Corny as it sounded, she did.

It ate away at him. She didn't need him, had moved forward without him. She managed to get on with her life while he hung on to the brief glimpses of her under the darkness of concealment and she had never looked more beautiful. Elyse had just...changed. He couldn't help but wonder why, knowing he didn't have the right to speculate.

Even still, she was never far from his thoughts.

The night before, he had dreamt about her. A nightmare. Sissy had come for her holding a knife to Elyse's slender throat. The tip bit in, spilling precious drops of crimson down the front of her ivory skin. He had lunged for the pair but couldn't reach them in time. He failed. He couldn't protect her.

He'd woken in a cold sweat.

The dream shook him to the core. She was gone. Gone from this world and gone from his life. He had lain awake for hours, and finally dozed just before dawn. When his

alarm woke him at half past seven, the realization of how empty his life was already without her hit him. He had to get her back.

At least she hadn't found another man.

He snorted. As if she would in a couple of weeks. She would someday, though. He didn't think he could handle watching her with anyone else, though any man would be lucky have her in his life.

He shook his thoughts, couldn't think of their relationship—if you could ever call it that—as final. There could still be a chance. Maybe she did love *him*. Maybe she was waiting for *him* to come to his senses. He had been the one to yell at her. He had provoked her coolness. And his stubborn pride had kept him away.

But no more.

With renewed determination, he headed out on several errands before catching up with Elyse.

“Mom, I’m leaving a bit early today. I’ll see you tonight.” Elyse called from the front hall, getting her raincoat from the coat closet.

The light rain that had fallen since midnight the night before had increased to a torrential rainstorm. Sliding her arms through the sleeves, she ran a mental checklist of her day. As she buttoned the coat, she wondered if she would be able to spot Jack. Knowing he was watching out for her initially angered her, but she'd also reveled in the fact they were together, had been since she'd left the hospital. Finally, the loneliness didn't quite suffocate her as much.

“Mom?” Elyse realized she hadn't answered. She headed back to the kitchen looking for her mother. Walking in, the room looked deserted but her mother had been in there just moments before. Maybe she was in the laundry room in the back corner. Elyse called out, “Mom, I’m headed out.”

“I don't think so.”

Elyse's head snapped around. Rain blew in a broken window. In the opposite corner of the kitchen, Sissy stood over her mother's inert form, a gun pointed at her head. A wet umbrella and a gray satchel lay next to her on the tile.

Air backed up in Elyse's lungs with a loud gasp. Her knees weakened at the sight of her mom. It wasn't until the shallow rise and fall of her mother's chest became noticeable that her own breathing resumed.

Her initial jolt of shock turned quickly to anger. Sissy had bested her once before. She'd be damned if it happened again. Though she'd expected Sissy's telltale sign, the expensive musky perfume that had accompanied her everywhere, she wasn't surprised to see the woman. She just hadn't expected to be caught off-guard. She raised both palms up, surrendering. "Sissy, please, get out of here."

"Now why would I want to do that?" She turned the gun toward Elyse and closed the distance between them.

Elyse backed out of the kitchen slowly, hoping to get Sissy as far away from her mother as possible.

"Stop moving!" Sissy shouted. The gun shook in her hand.

Elyse stilled all but her pounding heart beating an increasing tattoo.

"You stupid bitch. Did you think I wouldn't come for you?" Sissy's eyes glared.

Elyse watched the madness dance on her face. With her platinum hair gone too long without expensive styling, and the tattered jeans and T-shirt, Elyse almost wanted to laugh at the contrast Sissy was from the woman who stole millions from her husband's clients. The woman, a cold-blooded killer, looked as on the edge as Elyse imagine a person could get.

Think, Elyse, think. She had to protect more than her mother and herself. Her hands went to her belly.

"Do you want money? I don't have much, but my parents do. I'll give it all to you."

Sissy laughed, or rather cackled. "You think that will help now? I don't know why Matthew ever married such a stupid bitch."

Elyse's spine stiffened. She started to open her mouth to object to Sissy's rude comments, despite the dire situation, but the doorbell stopped her.

The doorbell? Who would be at her door at eight in the morning?

"Ignore it."

The bell rang again. Elyse's mind raced. "I should get that. It could be one of my sisters." The lie rolled off her tongue easily. "If I don't answer they will just come barging in. You wouldn't want another hostage would you?"

Sissy appeared to consider then waved the gun, motioning Elyse to move to the front of the house. "Answer it. But don't do anything stupid."

Sissy stood beside Elyse, hid by the door. Elyse hoped she didn't see her eyes widened at the man on her porch.

"Jack?"

A slow smile spread across his face. "Hi."

"Uh, hi. What are you doing here?" Her cool tone dimmed his smile.

"I thought maybe we could talk." His eyes looked so hopeful.

"I, ah..." Despite the terror raging in her mind, her heart soared looking at him.

He wore a faded pair of jeans and a chambray shirt. The dark green jacket, freckled with raindrops, hung on his broad shoulders. Several times, she noticed, he patted his left pocket.

She wanted to fall into his arms and tell him how much she loved him and about her pregnancy. She couldn't, reminded by the gun poking in her side.

"It's not a good time Jack. I, ah, I'm running late for work."

His smile faded and brows knitted.

Elyse wasn't due in for another hour and a half. She'd made a point of giving her brother-in-law her schedule knowing he would pass it on to Jack.

"But you're..."

"You know how Megan is if I'm late." She interrupted him feeding him more false information, hoping he would catch on.

Awareness crossed his face and he motioned to the door with his head. "Is your mom or dad here? Maybe I could talk to them." He switched his tone more business-like.

"Dad's at work." Which he had to know was true from all his surveillance. "And Mom's at her yoga class." Another blatant lie rolled off her tongue. She hoped he remembered her mother's arthritis. Her lack of dexterity had been a topic at dinner on Thanksgiving.

His fists clenched at his side. "Where's Monty?"

"Vet." Sissy jabbed her again. "Look Jack, I really have to run. Maybe some other time okay."

"Yeah, okay." Lifting his eyebrows, he made a motion with his hand in the shape of a gun.

"Yeah," she said simply. "Bye, Jack."

She shut the door, wanting to burst out in tears from terror and relief. She knew Jack would protect her. But if he wasn't quick enough... She shuddered at the thought.

Sissy pushed her back through the house to the kitchen. Her mother moaned. Her heart raced anew. She prayed her mother wouldn't get caught up any more than she already was.

The doorbell rang again before Sissy said anything.

What was Jack doing?

"If you go near that door I will just shoot though it, I don't care who's on the other side." Sissy's hand shook, the gun waved in a deadly arc.

Elyse gulped and tried to keep from screaming. Sweat rolled between her breasts. The vinyl raincoat made for uncomfortable wearing inside an over-warm house.

Sissy started to pace the floor like a leopard stalking its prey.

A motion several feet behind the woman caught Elyse's attention. At first, she thought she may have hallucinated the movement, but then she realized her mother had recovered. The woman staggered like a drunk at two in the morning but managed to cross the room without a sound. Then she just disappeared. Elyse blinked several times trying to figure out what happened. Maybe she had imagined it.

But the very next second Jack stood in her place. He held his fingers to his lips and shook his head all while Sissy moved back and forth. With his hands, Jack mimed for Elyse to get Sissy talking.

“I don’t understand why you’re doing this.”

Sissy stopped and looked at Elyse. “Matthew said you weren’t the brightest bulb. Why would I do this? Why would I want to kill the woman who ruined my life, who made it impossible for me ever to show my face in this country again? Gee, I can’t imagine.”

“I didn’t do that. You took care of that all on your own when you killed Jonathan.”

Sissy narrowed her eyes at Elyse and leveled the gun with amazing calm.

From the corner of her eye, Elyse watched Jack approach. As he neared, Sissy turned in his direction. Just as she raised her gun at Jack, he lunged for the woman. In the scuffle of bodies, several rounds of gunfire erupted.

Elyse flinched; a scream fled her lungs, filling the air. Jack continued to wrestle with Sissy as if in slow motion, and then the two bodies thrust once more before falling still. Neither moved.

Elyse dove to the floor, knocked the gun from them and pulled Sissy off Jack. Sissy had a stunned look on her face and blood ran from a wound in her upper arm. Elyse shoved the woman out of the way when she spotted a patch of blood spreading across Jack’s side and shoulder.

“Oh God, you’re shot.” She leaned over him and pressed down on the wounds. “Mom where are you? Jack’s been shot.”

His hand came up and covered hers. “Don’t let her get away.” His voice weakened.

“Jack. Stay with me here.”

“I’m fine just get Sissy,” he said between gritted teeth. He looked at her for a moment before his eyes rolled up in his head.

A scuffle sounded behind her before she could move. Her mother had one hand on the scruff of Sissy’s neck, her other hand had Sissy’s uninjured arm twisted behind her back. “Hurt my daughter, will you?”

Elyse leaned down and kissed Jack's cheek. "Mom's got her handled."

Chapter Thirty-One

Elyse paced the same lobby Jack had weeks ago. Her entire family crowded the area. Jack had gone into surgery several hours earlier and Elyse was frantic to hear from the doctor.

Finally, still clad in scrubs, Dr. Whilmont approached her. An eerie silence befell her family. She held her breath, waiting for the man to speak.

“Mrs. Cabot, Jack is doing fine. We removed the bullet and closed up the wound in his shoulder. The one in his side was superficial. He’ll be good as new in no time.”

Elyse’s knees buckled. Her father stood at her side and held onto her, the only thing preventing her from collapsing onto the floor.

Elyse released a heavy sigh. She’d feared the worse and regretted not telling Jack about her pregnancy. She’d feared he would die without ever knowing he would be a father.

“C...can I see him?”

“Only a minute. He is still pretty groggy.”

She nodded and followed him back to Jack’s recovery room.

Jack lay so pale and still. When she walked over to the bed and touched his face, his eyes fluttered open.

Around the tears that welled in her eyes, she smiled. “Hi.”

Jack moaned, not speaking, but did raise the corner of his mouth in a lopsided grin.

Elyse was at a loss for what to say to him. Thanks seemed inadequate. But he had saved her life, yet again. She owed him so much. And she loved him.

“Jack. I love you.” She leaned over him and gave him a gentle kiss. “I’ll be back later when you’re awake.”

He nodded and closed his eyes.

When Jack opened his eyes, the white glaring ceiling stung. He tried to raise his left hand to scrub across his face but something held it in place.

What the hell is going on? Where am I? Jack’s mind fought to clear the haze and remember what’d happened. He had gone to Elyse’s house and Sissy was there. His chest tightened and he tried to sit up. He had to get to Elyse. But flashes ran through his mind.

Him charging Sissy. The gun going off. Elyse’s face hovering over his.

Where am I? And why couldn’t he move his left arm?

Focusing his eyes, he looked around the room. The sanitary white walls were littered with various monitoring devices. A television sat up in the far right corner inches below the ceiling. A utilitarian armoire sat across the room from the bed. He was in a hospital.

Craning his neck, he looked at his chest. A white bandage covered his left shoulder and down his arm, which lay secured across his chest.

With his right hand, he was searching for the nurse call button when the door to his room opened. The shock of red hair framed his friend’s face. “You’re awake.”

“Casey...” his throat was so dry it grated.

Casey moved beside the bed, picked up a glass with a straw, and held it to his friend’s lips.

“Thanks. Elyse?” He tried to hide the near panic that welled in his chest, tightening it, making it hard to breathe.

“She’s fine.”

Jack closed his eyes and said a quick prayer.

“She’s out in the waiting room. You want me to go get her?”

“Not yet. Tell me...” His voice cracked again and Casey lifted the cup back to his mouth. “Thanks. What happened?”

“Can you remember going to Elyse’s this morning?” Casey asked.

He did—some. Most of the events of the day, though, were a blur. He knew he’d gone to his mother’s, asked for his grandmother’s ring, then to Elyse’s house. Yes, he remembered enough. He nodded.

“Okay good.” Casey sat on the foot of the bed. “Sissy was already there. She had knocked Mrs. Zweller out and was holding Elyse at gun point behind the door while you two spoke.”

Jack finally managed to pull his free hand up to his face. He ran it through his hair fighting off a new wave of anger.

“Elyse had her talking and you crept in through the back door. But when you were about two feet away she must have heard you or something ’cause she turned and aimed at you. You lunged for her and the gun started going off. She took a bullet in the arm and you got one in the shoulder and one in the side.”

Jack nodded remembering everything now. It seemed more like a vague dream than reality.

“Elyse said you bled all over the place. I’ve never seen a woman so white before. I was worried how she was handling it all. Especially when Mike told me...” Casey broke off and turned his face away.

“Casey? What?” Jack’s heart pounded in his chest. What was wrong with Elyse? What wasn’t Casey saying?

“Nothing. She’s fine. It’s nothing like that. It’s just...I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“Dammit, Casey.” Jack tried to sit up, but his shoulder burned. With clenched teeth, he had to lie still until the pain subsided.

“Knock, knock.” His new visitor announced herself before he could question his friend again. Elyse walked in. A huge smile curled her lips and tears glistened in her eyes. “You’re awake.”

"I, ah, I'll just leave you two alone." Casey practically jumped from the bed. He paused only long enough to kiss Elyse on the cheek then beat a hasty retreat out the door.

The two stared at one another for a long moment.

"You look better, Jack..."

"...You okay?" They spoke at the same time.

Elyse smiled again, but stayed several feet away from the bed.

Jack held up his hand wanting her to let him speak first. "What's wrong?"

Her smile fell and her brows knitted, looking confused. "Nothing."

"Casey said something was wrong."

Her confusion shifted and something akin to anger shadowed her face. His stomach pitched, worried about what she was keeping from him.

"You didn't get hurt did you?"

She shook her head. "I'm fine, Jack. Don't worry about me. You're the one lying in a hospital bed." She stepped closer and put her hand on his. "And it's all my fault for not listening to you in the first place." Tears fell from her eyes, rolling down her cheeks.

Jack cursed his shoulder and not being able to take her in his arms. He turned his hand over and linked their fingers. "It's not your fault. You didn't pull the trigger."

"No. But if I had listened to you, she would have been in jail and we wouldn't have been apart all this time and I wouldn't have gone through everything alone." The tears fell in earnest and she pulled her hand from his. She turned away, her shoulders shaking.

"That doesn't matter now. She is behind bars now. Right?" he asked. He wasn't actually sure.

Elyse nodded.

"And as far as being apart, I thought that was what you wanted."

"No." She whirled around as she wiped at her eyes. "I didn't want that. But I thought you didn't want me because I acted so stupidly. I thought you hated me."

"I could never hate you. I love you, Elyse."

She gulped and looked at him. "What did you say?"

"I said, I love you, Elyse."

He looked at her. Waiting, hoping she would say something. Her red, swollen eyes just stared at him. Maybe she was in shock. Or maybe she just really didn't care. Jack couldn't wait one minute longer to tell her.

"Where are my things?"

"Huh? Your clothes?" She seemed startled at the shift in conversation. She looked around the room and opened the armoire. "In here."

"Is my jacket in there?"

Elyse nodded.

"Can you look in the front left pocket?"

She gasped.

"You found the velvet box?"

"Wha...what is this?"

"Open it and see for yourself."

"Jack?" She hesitated and looked at him.

"Open it."

Her eyes widened when she looked at the one-and-a-half-carat pear-shaped solitaire. "I know it doesn't compare to the stones you had, but it was my grandmother's."

"It's beautiful, Jack," she said, still mesmerized by the ring.

"I came over to your house this morning to ask you to marry me. I wish I could get down on one knee and do it right, but well... I love you, Elyse. I want you to be my wife."

She said nothing. Tears again welled and a few spilled. Finally, she turned to look at him.

She had a suspicious look on her face. "How do you feel about building a family?"

"I'm all in favor." And for the first time in his life, he wanted a family and knew he was ready.

"Are you now? If—if—I said yes, how soon would you want to start?"

“As soon as I could get out of this bed. I would right this minute, but the nurses probably frown on that,” he said, eliciting a smile from her. Her face lost the suspicion as if he had put her mind at ease.

“And if I still couldn’t have any?”

“There’s always adoption. But I doubt that would be a problem.”

“I know so,” he heard her say.

He held his hand out for her. “I’m sorry you thought I hated you. I was hurt you didn’t listen to me. Then I figured you just didn’t want to be with me and that’s why you never called. I’ve loved you for a very long time. I think from the first time I met you thirteen years ago.”

Her eyes widened again.

“That’s why Casey and I followed you. I couldn’t bear to think of something happening to you. Couldn’t take that chance.

“You never did answer me. Will you marry me?”

“Hang on.” She pulled the ring from the box and set the box on the bed. “Here hold this.” She handed him the ring. “Jack Walling.” She leaned over the edge of the bed and gave him a long kiss. “I love you more than anything.”

His ears rang and heart pounded in his chest. *She loves me!*

She held out her left hand. “I would love to marry you.”

He slid the ring on her finger and clasped her hand. “Come here.” He pulled her toward him. He needed to kiss her.

“Hold on. One more thing. You sure you want children?”

Her hand trembled in his. Why did she keep asking him the same question? “If we had one or ten I would love to have children with you.”

“I’m glad you said that...” she pulled a small slip of paper from her pocket and handed it to him, “...Daddy.”

As Jack stared at it his brain slowed to a crawl. “What is this? It looks like...”

“A sonogram. I’m pregnant.”

Elyse...pregnant. He was going to be...a dad. A smile spread on his face and tears welled.

He was stunned.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I was scared.”

She shouldn’t have been. He told her he’d be honored if she had his child. Why hadn’t she told him? Why hadn’t she come to him? Because he’d acted like an asshole and scared her away. He didn’t blame her one bit. He covered his face with his hand. “I can’t believe I was so stupid. I should have come to you sooner.”

“I guess we’re even then, huh? Time to check our pride at the door.” Elyse’s cool touched floated over his forearm.

“Yeah.” Jack lowered his hand. “We’re going to be parents.”

Elyse smiled. “Yes we are.”

“When...? How...?”

She arched her eyebrow as she looked down at him.

“Okay, so I know how.” Jack lifted his hand and rested it on her still-flat abdomen. His heart pounded in his chest as he imagined how she’d look in a few months carrying his child. Their *child*!

He lifted his gaze from her belly back at her, his smile so wide it hurt his cheeks. “What are we having? A boy or a girl?”

“It’s too early to tell. In a couple of months we should know.”

“That’s okay, I can wait.”

“Like you have a choice.” She laughed and kissed him again.

“I’ve never been a dad-to-be before. Tell me everything you know. What’s it like?” He glanced at the grain picture. He’d never seen a sonogram close up. He could make out what was what. He waved the paper at her. “What is all this?”

“Despite being so early, the picture actually tells quite a bit.” She smiled brighter than he’d ever seen before. “If you look right here...”

Epilogue

“Okay, on the next contraction—push,” the doctor told Elyse.

Jack held onto her hand even though he was afraid she might break it. He looked down at his beautiful wife. When her water broke just after dinner, Jack had raced her out of the house. She was a month early, but the doctor had expected it.

Despite all their preparation and planning, her labor progressed quicker than anticipated. They almost hadn’t made it to the hospital in time. If Hannah and Casey hadn’t been there, steadying him and driving, he didn’t know what he would have done. Thankfully, Megan had already set up the phone tree, so he only had to make one phone call. By the time they reached the hospital, all his in-laws knew Elyse was in labor.

“Breathe in—and hold it—push,” the doctor said.

Elyse growled, but did as the doctor said. Then a low scream filled the room.

Jack tried not to scream, himself, when Elyse’s grip tightened.

“I hate you. You will never touch me again as long as I live. Double damnation on your head.”

Jack had to fight back his laughter, knowing it would only infuriate his wife. “I love you, too, dear.” He ducked her lethal glare.

“Okay, Elyse let’s push again. On the count of three.”

Elyse paused in her ranting and obeyed her cousin. Jack wondered how Melody faced her family at reunions if the other women had reacted this way during childbirth.

His thoughts ceased though when Melody told Elyse to hold it. “I see the head, look at all the hair.” Jack stared in amazement.

Elyse pushed a few more times, then Hope Elizabeth Walling met her daddy. Tears rolled down his cheeks and he leaned down to kiss his wife’s forehead.

With the baby in Elyse’s arms, her face softened. All the pain and anger forgotten, she looked up at Jack. “I love you so much.” Elyse raised her hand to cup his cheek.

“I love you.”

Jack walked into the crowded waiting room. The Zweller clan filled every inch of space, all wearing expectant looks.

Jack couldn’t hide his smile. He walked over to his mother-in-law and wrapped his arm around her shoulder. “It’s a girl, Hope Elizabeth,” he announced.

Cheers filled the air. Hope’s younger cousins jumped up and down. The aunts cried while the uncles patted each other on the back.

Mike stepped forward with his two-month-old son cradled in his arm, and slapped Jack on the back with his free hand. “Congratulations, man.”

Jack smiled at him then looked at his mother-in-law. With a wink, she took his hand in hers.

“Hang on.” Jack held up his other hand and silenced the room. The smile on his face almost hurt he was so happy. “And...” Diane squeezed his hand. “It’s a boy, Jackson Ryan.”

The noise grew tenfold.

“Twins,” Cara laughed.

Jack hugged Diane then Don. They had both known, but Elyse wanted to keep it a secret from the rest of the family. A surprise.

“I’m going to go back in there now. Mom is pretty worn out.”

As he was about to step from the room a hand halted him. He turned to find his mother, her eyes wet with tears. He hugged her with more emotion than he ever had. And

he thanked God that Elyse had urged him to get over the past with his mother. In doing so, he discovered that she and her husband were truly happy and she seemed to be at peace with her life. Something he didn't think he would ever see in his mother—or himself.

He also grew to love his two stepsisters and their families. He had more people in his life than he knew what to do with. And he enjoyed every damn minute of it. Releasing his mother, he waved to her husband Timothy and headed back to his wife and his life.

Jack's family cheered as he left the room. His family. That was not something he had ever imagined before he met Elyse. And now he had a slew of relatives, a beautiful, wonderful wife and a son and daughter that, even though for only an hour, he adored with every ounce of his being.

How did he ever get so lucky, doubly—no triply—blessed?

About the Author

Denise Belinda McDonald started her writing career at the tender age of eight. Her stories have changed over the years, but not her love for telling tales. An overactive imagination and a propensity to embellish have kept her books rich with lovable characters and interesting twists. She belongs to several writers groups, several boards of which she serves on.

Denise lives in Texas with her husband, four young boys and two dogs, where she juggles her time between writing, carpool, Cub Scouts, sports galore and a multitude of crafts.

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And for a Chica good time, visit her blog with Authors Amie Stuart and Tanya Holmes as well as fellow Samhain Authors Vanessa Jaye and Raine Weaver at: www.southernfriedchicas.com.

Denise Belinda McDonald

Look for these titles by Denise Belinda McDonald

Now Available:

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Doing whatever it takes could get them both killed.

Living Lies

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Twelve years after her sister's disappearance, Haley Carling spends her days trying to hold what's left of her family together, running her late father's shop and caring for her alcoholic mother. Then her sister's remains are uncovered in the basement of their old home, and fingers start pointing. At the Carlings.

Dean Lawson, long the prime suspect in the Carling girl's disappearance, is sure he's got evidence proving who the killer is. He's determined to clear his name, and he won't let anything stand in his way. Not even his lingering attraction to Haley.

Haley is just as determined to protect her family from the former town bad boy's accusations. But now someone is stalking her, and Haley realizes Dean's the only one she can trust.

With a killer closing in, Dean wonders if he's made the biggest mistake of his life...a mistake that could cost Haley her life.

Warning: This title contains a mystery to keep you turning the pages late into the night.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Living Lies:

The Mountainview Motel was neither on a mountain nor did it offer a view of one, as the name implied. Little more than a row of shabby rooms slightly north of town, Haley was surprised the place managed to remain open.

As she drove into the lot, she spotted Dean's car parked in front of one of the rooms and pulled up next to it. What was she doing here, really? Hadn't she had enough drama for one day? Maybe, but she needed to know why he was back. Why now?

With a sigh she opened the door and stepped out into the cold. The walk running the length of the motel had been shoveled, exposing weathered wood planks. She crossed to his door and knocked loudly before she changed her mind.

After a moment, the door swung back and Dean filled the opening. He didn't look at all surprised to see her. Al had probably called to warn him after she'd left.

She could understand how she hadn't recognized him. The boyishness had left his face, making his features sharper, almost predatory and, if at all possible, more attractive. Even his body seemed harder and leaner than she remembered.

Her heart rate quickened, and something fluttered in her stomach. Could he really have killed Michelle?

Killer or not, she would have to say something soon. She couldn't just stand there staring like a twit all day.

"I didn't recognize you earlier," she said. Better than silence, but only marginally.

Dean leaned casually against the frame. "I figured."

"Erin recognized you." She should have stuck with silence.

"What do you want, Haley?" His voice was deep and quiet.

"Why are you here?"

He sighed and moved aside. "Do you want to come in?"

She hesitated. If she went inside that room, would anyone ever see her again? Allister was the only person who knew where she was and she didn't have a whole lot of faith he'd come to her rescue if she needed him to.

"People know where I am," she said at last.

Dean smirked, but said nothing as she stepped inside, closing the door behind her.

"Nice place you have here, Matthew Clarke," she said, taking in the faded beige wallpaper and gold shag carpet. An ugly oil painting of a gnarly sea captain hung over the sagging double bed.

"I wanted to keep a low profile."

"I thought you would have stayed with Al."

"Have you seen Al's apartment?" A faint smile touched his lips. "This place is a palace."

He had a point. She had seen Al's apartment once and had gone straight home and showered.

“Sit down,” he offered, gesturing to the only chair in the room. As she pulled it away from the desk, she noticed a thick envelope and file folder with bits of paper curling around the edge stacked neatly in the top corner. She would have loved to go through those pages. To see just what Dean studied on alone in a grubby motel room.

“So,” she said. “Why are you here?”

“Maybe I just wanted to pay my respects.” He sat on the corner of the bed, his eyes bright and his mouth still twisted in that slightly mocking smirk.

“By lurking in the parking lot?”

The grin vanished. “I wasn’t in the parking lot the whole time. I watched the service from the door. When I saw you get up and start to leave I decided to go.”

“You came back for the memorial?”

“Maybe.” He shrugged.

“Or maybe you’re worried there’s something to link you to Michelle after all.”

A tiny muscle twitched in his jaw. “Is that what you think?”

I don’t know what to think, and you’re not giving anything away. “I don’t think you came back here just to watch Michelle’s memorial from an open door. So why not tell me what you’re really doing here?”

“What do you want me to say, Haley? That I did it? That I killed her?”

“Did you?”

“If I did, it wasn’t too smart to come looking for me now, was it?” His voice was quiet, but there was an edge, jagged, like a serrated blade.

A tiny ember ignited within her. A slow fury growing hotter and brighter each time he spoke. “Are you threatening me?”

“No,” he said on a sigh, suddenly sounding very tired. “No, I’m not.”

“Why are you here?” she asked again.

“I’m not ready to tell anyone yet, but when I am, I’ll tell you first.”

“That’s it? That’s the best you can do?”

He nodded.

“Well, sorry, not good enough. Tell me why you’re back. I’m not going anywhere until you talk.”

“Suit yourself.” He shrugged. “I was thinking about ordering dinner. Pizza or Chinese?”

“This isn’t a joke, Dean. My sister is dead.”

“I know. And I will tell you why I’ve come back, but not yet. I need to be sure of some things first.”

“Fine. You have until tomorrow. If I don’t get some answers before the end of the day, there isn’t a person in this town who won’t know you’re here.”

Haley stood and strode out the door, suppressing a smile at the sight of his stony stare.

As she marched to the wreck parked next to his car, Dean stood in the open doorway, half shocked, half irritated, shaking his head.

She’d threatened him.

It took her three tries to get her heap started, taking a little something away from her dramatic exit. But not much. As he closed the door, he could hardly believe it. Quiet little Haley, who used to watch him with those amazing eyes so long ago, had threatened him. And he didn’t doubt for a second that she meant what she said. To think, he actually felt sorry for her for a second there.

He would have to get things done tonight. That was probably better anyway. The sooner he finished, the sooner he could get the hell out of this town.

Can two agents who clash work together to stay alive?

Caddy-Did

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An Aztec Security book.

Kent Jameson is content with his free-and-easy life-until Aztec's newest recruit lands in his lap and his superiors drop them in the middle of the Everglades with instructions to work out their differences.

Cadence Fleming is excited about becoming an Aztec agent, but she didn't get what she considers the best of the best as a trainer. Instead, she's stuck with a man who reeks of booze and sex. While she never thought herself a sharp-tongued prude, Kent seems to bring out the worst in her. Not the best partner to have on a survival training mission.

Then, on day two of their isolation, they come across a body, and their training mission becomes a very real trial by fire. Somewhere in the marshes there's a killer-and he's hell bent on making Kent and Cadence his next victims.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Caddy-Did:

Kent wasn't sure what he'd read in Cadence's eyes, but it wasn't the same indifference from yesterday.

As he handed her his weapon, he dismissed whatever it could be. It didn't matter. "I want you to get used to the weight of the Glock. This is what you'll be issued. It's heavy, but once you get a handle on it, it's a breeze to control."

"I have a question." She looked down and shifted from one foot to the other, an action that seemed out of character for her.

"Okay."

"Have you ever had to use this on anyone?"

"Yes." Kent instinctively knew her next question and answered before she could ask.

"No, I haven't killed anyone. That is what you wanted to know, right?"

She nodded.

"Look, Cadence, before this month's up, I'm going to teach you how to aim and fire

that weapon with efficiency. Show you how to bring an enemy down without having to kill him.”

She released a breath.

Kent understood her relief. Killing wasn't something that came easily to anyone—unless you were a man like Evan Grayson, a terrorist and murderer. He'd actually taken pleasure in it. Most of the men Aztec dealt with did. Yancy'd had no choice but to kill Grayson, and Kent knew it hadn't been easy for his friend to do so. Sometimes it became necessary. Most of the time, though, they could bring their targets in alive. That way they could be prosecuted for their crimes. The government preferred it that way.

“How does it feel in your hand?”

“All right.”

Kent pointed toward the far end of the range where a silhouette of a man hung as a target. “Aim for his chest. I want to check out your form.”

Her eyes widened. “I don't think so.”

Kent rolled his eyes. The woman was unbelievable. Hadn't he told her he wasn't interested in her? Why couldn't she get that through her thick skull? “The form in which you hold the weapon, Cadence.”

When his words sank in, her cheeks reddened. “Oh, sorry.”

“Fine. Aim for the target.” Kent watched as she did what he'd instructed, then reached around her and leveled his hands over hers, her perfume drifting to his nose. He liked the scent. It was light and subtle, unlike some women's colognes which arrived long before they did.

“Can you feel the difference?” he asked against her ear.

“Yes,” she croaked.

“Now, spread your legs.” When she didn't move to do so, he lodged his knee between hers and worked them apart. “This helps to give you balance. Now, squeeze the trigger.”

When the Glock went off, the kick sent her back against his chest. The feel of her next to him instantly stirred his libido, a totally unexpected reaction. Yes, she smelled nice, but she wasn't. Not even remotely so. His body's betrayal caught him off-guard.

She glanced over her shoulder at him, then moved away.

Kent cleared his throat. "You missed the target. Try again."

She raised the Glock, took the stance he'd shown her and fired at the outline, hitting the edge of the board.

"You're getting there. This time, while you aim, picture me as the target. See if that doesn't improve your shot."

She aimed and fired, hitting the silhouette in the nether region.

Kent gulped. "Okay, then. Try it again. This time aim higher."

Cadence rolled over in bed, glanced at the clock radio on her nightstand and groaned.

Why couldn't she sleep? Ever since she'd crawled into bed that evening, exhausted, her mind had wandered. Her erratic thoughts had kept her awake for the past two hours, and she was getting frustrated with the whole ordeal. She'd never had trouble sleeping. So, why was it suddenly impossible to do so now?

Kent's Jameson's face materialized, giving way to the answer. That and the experience of firing a weapon and the feeling of power the power behind it.

Her fingers trembled from where Kent had touched them, and she could still feel his warm breath on her ear. The sensation drove her to distraction—kept her from falling asleep. She hated the guy, yet he made her feel things she didn't want to feel. Her knees quivered at the memory of this afternoon, when he'd pried her legs apart with his.

Stop it, Cadence. The man's an asshole and a player.

He'd been screwing around with some bimbo the night before their first training day. He probably slept in a different bed every night.

His medicine cabinet is probably inlaid with Trojan wallpaper. Not the type of man you'd want to have sex with, the type who'd have no qualms about a threesome.

Cadence shivered at the thought.

Enough.

She threw back the covers and rose. It was futile to try to sleep. Maybe a glass of hot milk would help or a stiff drink. If she had to, she'd try them both. She pulled her robe on

and padded down the hall to the kitchen, trying to be quiet. She didn't want to wake Charlotte.

In the kitchen, she opened the refrigerator and glanced inside, making a mental note to stop by the grocery on her way home tomorrow. They were about out of the basics, the must-have staples.

Luckily, there was just enough milk to nuke a cup.

Waiting for the milk to heat, she went through a stack of mail on the table. A name in a return address caught her attention.

She swallowed hard, her hands shaking. Why would he write to her?

She peeled the envelope open and pulled out a wedding invitation. *Mauve and Yancy cordially invite you to join...*

Cadence couldn't read anymore as tears clouded her eyes.

How was she going to go to the ceremony? She'd break down, and in no way did she want Yancy to see that.

She sniffed and wiped at her eyes.

Strange that she could daydream about Kent in one breath, then cry when Yancy was brought to the forefront. Was she that fickle? She must be.

One thing was for sure, Yancy was not available to think about in that way, and she needed to get that message to her heart—the sooner the better.

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