

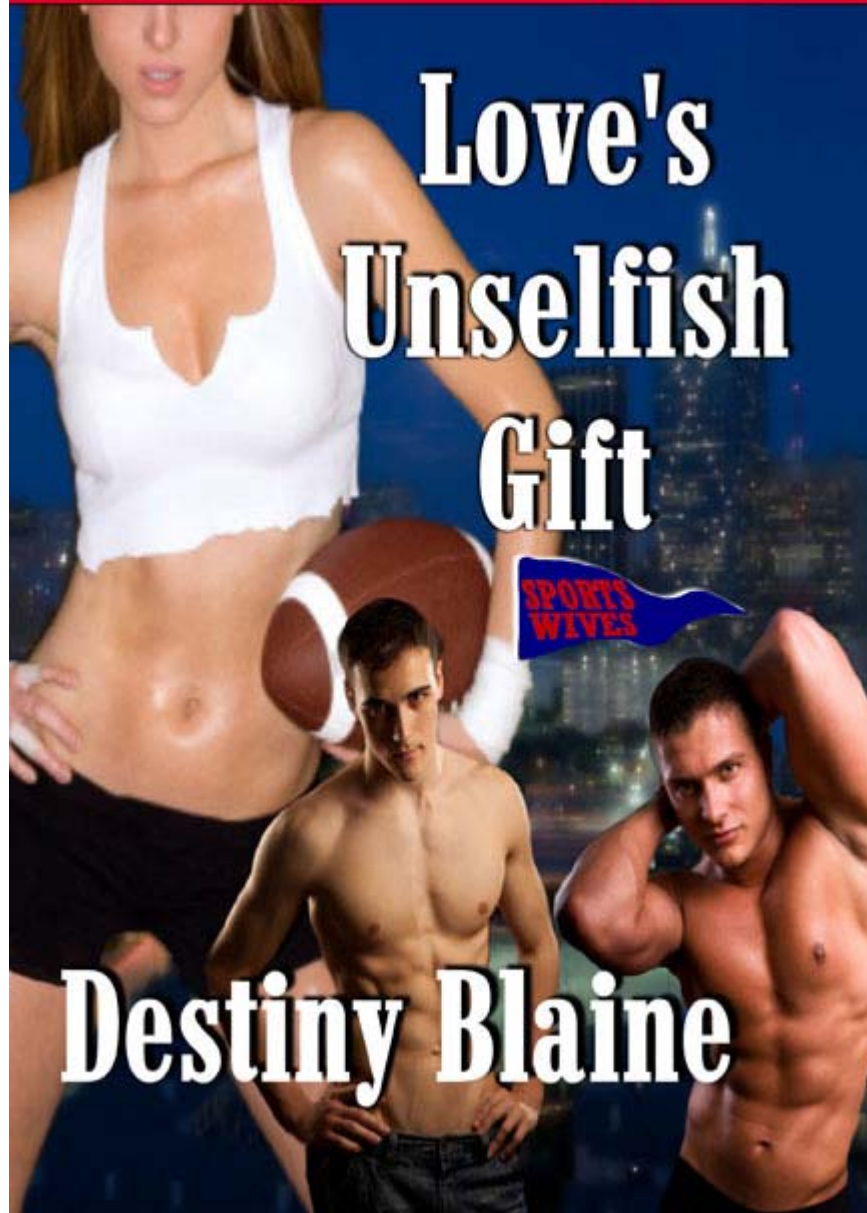
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Love's Unselfish Gift

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LOVE'S UNSELFISH GIFT

Sports Wives 5

Destiny Blaine

MENAGE AMOUR



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LOVE'S UNSELFISH GIFT

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DEDICATION

For My Husband.

You're loved and appreciated, but I'm very glad I don't have "two" of
you!

LOVE'S UNSELFISH GIFT

Sports Wives 5

DESTINY BLAINE

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Prologue

I took weighted steps, keeping a slow pace, the kind of stride certain to break at any given point. My knees buckled once or twice, but I managed to keep moving forward.

Grabbing on to the end of one of the pews, I prayed, lifting my gaze away from the velvet burgundy bench-style seating to study the huge cross behind the pulpit. I needed to find inner strength to make it through the day, but I didn't have any left.

When I stood before our family—his family, the kind people who accepted me as one of their own—and our friends, professionals Marco had known throughout his entire football career, the short time he enjoyed as a player, I remembered how I made it this far.

Surely widows found some solace in a flashback of memories. I lowered the microphone, and rather than read from the piece of paper now crumpled in my closed hand, I decided to speak from my heart.

Glancing at the casket three steps lower than where I stood, I focused on Marco's hands. Those hands once held me. His body once warmed me.

I couldn't help but notice how much Marco's skin resembled the silicone dolls I'd grown fond of collecting over the years. Marco had dry skin, but the corpse in the coffin looked soft and recently waxed,

like a mannequin from a museum. The man occupying the casket appeared as if he were made to order with perfect flesh to cover him.

Fighting back tears, I tore my gaze away from the husband I loved and looked around the audience. Then, without further delay, the final goodbye began.

“The first time I met Marco, I knew I was in trouble.” My breath hitched as the old, familiar love-struck feeling enveloped me. Speaking at this point proved inane. Muffled cries, those hardly vocal enough to make out, provoked reflection on the life I shared with the greatest man I’d ever known.

That’s when it dawned on me. I still had to rely on Marco and his strength. Otherwise, I would break right in front of an audience.

“Marco,” I whispered, clasping my hands in front of me and staring at his ashen knuckles. “It was difficult to breathe around you.” The tears fell and through them, I continued. “I couldn’t think a rational thought. I couldn’t live through a sensible moment without the profound need to reach for you every time I saw your sweet smile.”

Crying and laughing at the same time, I pressed forward. “I needed to run like hell but soon realized if I did, I’d want you to follow right behind me.”

I started my speech in pretty good shape, but then things took a hard turn toward reality. Marco wasn’t coming back. His funeral held significance and saying goodbye was more difficult than I could put into words.

I wasn’t walking out of that church with my husband’s hand to hold so I spoke random words, expressed bizarre thoughts. I looked at the living, breathing replica of the man I’d soon bury...my husband’s twin brother, Alanzo. Then, I returned my focus to the stainless steel box where Marco would soon turn to ashes, back to dust.

“I’m standing here today talking to a corpse, my dead husband. I’d rather do that for the next several hours than speak to the hundreds

of mourners here to view a dead person, touch a cold body, and remind me of what a good man Marco Giovanni was.”

I looked up realizing I’d spoken my innermost feelings. Did I care how those there to grieve would interpret my statement? No, I didn’t. The press and everyone in attendance could accept the fact I didn’t want a crowd around to watch me fall to pieces.

“He *is* a good man,” I stated firmly. “He’s always been a good person, a decent and loving husband, a professional football player who set records and lived humbly in a...” A gasp left my throat when I thought of our small cottage and I quickly added, “We lived in a two-bedroom home and never wanted for much or believed in the impossible. Together we dared to love and the love we shared was always enough.”

Looking at Mrs. Giovanni and then Alanzo, I spoke the last words I could muster through the tears and the piercing pain attacking my chest. “Five years ago, I fell in love with a dream. Two days ago, in a football stadium no less, my world came crashing down. The illusion is long gone, the fantasy now destroyed. My love is gone, my heart is broken, and my life as I’ve loved it, is over.

“My name is Suzy Illiani Giovanni. Today, the world mourns a football great, a hero to thousands, a great man to many, and my husband, Marco Lucas Giovanni.”

Today also marks the first day of the rest of my life. A life I’m not sure I can face without Marco.

Chapter One

One Year and Seven Months Later

Everyone loved my husband. Marco had more friends than enemies and in his profession, most believed adversaries were easier found than allies. I believed in the theory. Prior to meeting Marco, I had few friends. In fact, I doubt anyone called me out as a mere acquaintance.

Marco had a purpose in life and lived as a simple man struggling to make the world a better place. A religious character of sorts, he had a devout faith, but he never discussed his beliefs with anyone, not even me.

Impressively, he put back ninety percent of his income and lived off the rest. He'd once heard a preacher teach about tithing. Somehow, he translated everything backwards, and, of course, I didn't know the difference until after he passed away.

The media often reported about his unmatched generosity. I had to agree, once I realized the kind of money he earned. Marco was Mr. Generous-overkill, handing over almost everything he earned to charities, churches, homeless folks, and anyone who made him hear their desperate cry for help and monetary donations.

After Marco's death, I attended one memorial ceremony after another. I also walked into crowded rooms to speak on his behalf. Since his publicist booked him two years in advance, he had prior engagements to honor. The money, as everyone already knew, had been allocated for one charity or another, one good cause or the next. Those public commitments were secured and committee chairmen

and school leaders wanted someone, anyone, to show up for a few hours.

I nominated me. No one understood Marco any better.

Waking up to the smell of bacon filling the room, I hauled my exhausted ass, right along with my aching bag of bones, out of bed and hobbled down the hall in search of a hot cup of coffee. My mother-in-law practically moved in over the weekend and planned to stay until I “looked like somebody” again.

No thanks to the newspapers and countless reports of my failing health after Marco died, Marco’s mother took it upon herself to visit often. This was one of those occasions. With the Dallas Rascals season opener behind us, I wished a million times she’d head south and go back from where she’d traveled.

“Suzy!” she exclaimed. “Breakfast!”

I rounded the corner with my palm to my head. Why this woman insisted on treating me like the teenage daughter she never had, I couldn’t understand. I never thought of us as particularly close. In fact, we survived a very tumultuous time right after Marco and I decided to marry. Marco’s father, grandmother, and brother became my support system and with Anna for a mother-in-law, I needed a few people rallying around me.

I was older than Marco by about twenty years, give another year or two. His mother was my age, give another four or five. We never discussed birthdates since matters with digits typically brought out the cougar claws in Anna.

“Are you feeling okay, this morning?” she asked, setting a plate of scrambled eggs, dry toast, and bacon on the lavender placemat in front of me.

“I’m good,” I lied. “How about you?” *And by the way, when are you going home?*

“Today has been a rough day, Suzy.”

I glanced at the clock. It was six-thirty in the fucking morning. Of course, it was a rough day. Pre-Folgers, mornings were a pain in the ass.

“You’re not going to like this but—”

She pegged that one. Already, I didn’t like what was about to fall from her lips.

Anna needed to work on her presentation if she wanted me to agree to something she most likely arranged without my permission. I slapped the napkin in my lap and started shoveling eggs into my mouth as though it had been a year to the day since I last ate.

“I spoke to Alanzo this morning. He’s driving up tomorrow. He plans to stay with you for a bit.”

“What?” I gasped while I tried to process the new information. Dropping my fork, I chewed slower, trying to decipher why she felt compelled to shove my dead husband’s identical twin in my direction.

“Honey, I know Marco’s death has been hard on you. It’s been hard on him too.”

Yeah, dying was difficult for the deceased.

“Alanzo loves you. He considers you family.”

Oh, I mused. She was speaking of Alanzo and yes, I imagined losing his twin brought more sorrow than anyone realized.

“We are family,” I reminded. “Alanzo was Marco’s twin brother for crying out loud. He’s like my brother too.”

“But not really,” she corrected.

I quickly noted where this conversation was going.

“Down deep, you understand he’s not your brother,” she let her voice trail off, but her words remained thick with underlying motive. “He’s not blood related to you.”

Right, because I didn’t have a brother or a sister or a mother to drive me completely batty, something Anna did with ease. “I’m alone,” I whispered when reality struck.

“No sweetie, you aren’t alone. In our family, you’ll never be alone.”

I glanced at the end of the short kitchen table. Where my husband once sat, my MIL perched there, providing an instant reminder of who once occupied the seat. Sure, she'd only been a guest in my home for a few days, but it seemed like eternity. She'd managed to rearrange my life since her arrival and seemed to gloat while she complicated my days.

"Suzy, Alanzo and I have decided to sell the house." Translation: Anna decided. Alanzo rarely knew anything about the damn decisions she reached.

"What?" I asked, suddenly aware of the truer reason she was there and refused to leave. "You can't sell this house. This is my home."

Marco's home. The cottage we shared together!

"You still have your house in Preston Hollow. You can go back there and live just as comfortably as you always have. Maybe even return to the lifestyle you once loved."

Startled, I wasn't sure how to interpret her suggestion. Did she mean I should go back to living off of my previous PFC husband's money, spending thousands per week? Did she suggest returning to the country club scene? Or how about the old addictions, the habits I formed that died hard but eventually passed when Marco came into my life and saved me from myself? Why would Anna push me toward Preston Hollow?

"Suzy?"

"No," I said, looking up all at once. "I can't." Then, it struck me. I had money. Marco left behind a pile of cash. The life insurance checks alone mounted to over five million dollars even after I was taxed to death.

I broke a piece of bacon in half and stared at Anna. "How much do you want for the house?"

"It's not for sale."

"Bullshit, Anna. You said you're selling. I'm buying. How much do you want? One million? Two? Name your price, Anna, and I'll pay it." The house wasn't worth one penny over two hundred thousand.

“Cripes, Suzy, what do you want me to say?”

“Why don’t you start with the fucking truth!” I never cursed Anna, never raised my voice in front of her, because everyone in the family worried about her fragile feelings.

Well to hell with her sentimental side and shaky nerves. For once, she couldn’t pull that card and no one lurked around the corner waiting to dart in and save her. For the first time in a long time, I saw Anna for the manipulating woman I always knew she desperately tried to conceal.

Anna straightened her back and tucked a straggling gray hair behind her ear. The smell of coffee filled the room, and I could’ve been enjoying the first cup in complete silence but no, I had Marco’s mother ready to ruin a perfectly good morning.

Sometimes I hated him for dying. Right now, for an example.

“Fine,” she said, standing. “You want the truth? Here it is. You’re going to start living again, Suzy Giovanni. You’re going to get dressed in the morning and go places, shopping for instance. The speaking engagements are almost over, and once you finish with those, you won’t have anything to do. You aren’t going to sit here all day and remember when. I won’t allow it and refuse to watch it.”

She wouldn’t allow it? I could help solve her little problem pronto. “How about I drive you to the airport?”

“That won’t be necessary,” she snipped. “Alanzo will be here tomorrow. I’ll drive his car back home, and he can use one of Marco’s if you don’t mind.”

“Of course I don’t mind.” No, I really didn’t care at all. The problem I had was seeing a man with my husband’s face stroll into my home as if to make a mockery out of the mourning process, the grieving I seldom had time to do.

Thanks to Marco’s family and the relentless media, I never had the chance to mourn my dead husband properly. I never sat on the floor of our closet and scattered his things about and took a few hours to reminisce.

Instead, for nearly two years, I entertained a whirlwind of ongoing guests, made social calls, endured a parade of memorials and luncheons, and accepted dinner dates with the Professional Football Confederacy officials and, of course, their doting wives. Every day, the only thing I longed to do was curl up in a ball while burying my nose in Marco's favorite sweatshirts in hopes of inhaling the scent of him one last time.

Anna continued to babble about the events leading her to the house-selling conclusion. Marco left the house to her in the will, something I once encouraged. Since I owned a posh home over in Preston Hollow, I never thought about wanting to stay in a small cottage located near the downtown area. Besides, what were the odds Anna would survive Marco?

I always assumed Marco would eventually get tired of cramped spaces and we'd move over to my place. The transition to the lap of luxury never interested Marco. He was a simple man who enjoyed complicated pleasures. He once teased how I topped that list.

"I'll give you two million dollars cash," I said, my stomach lurching forward. *Take the damn money and run.*

"Do you honestly think I need Marco's money?"

Marco's money wasn't a drop in the bucket to the money I accumulated prior to meeting him. I hoarded my alimony and invested wisely. Sure I spent a lot on the house and daily shopping, but I had a chunk of change to work with from the beginning. Even the tabloids dubbed me one of the wealthiest ex-wives in PFC history right after I started dating Marco.

"Maybe you don't need Marco's money, and if not, stop acting like you do," I snapped. If Marco were alive today, he'd shake his head in disapproval. Marco left his family plenty of assets, including a few million in life insurance listing his parents and brother as the beneficiaries.

Anna's expression changed while we talked. "I've spoken to a real estate agent, Suzy. We're selling the house. I asked Alanzo to stay

with you for a while because you need someone around to take care of some things for you, like Marco used to do.”

“Like?” I hoped she didn’t suggest Alanzo pick up exactly where Marco left off.

“For starters, the women back home seem to think he’s pretty good at sex.”

“God help me.”

“I’m kidding.”

“That’s not funny,” I said. Anna had a peculiar sense of humor and sometimes it really hit a nerve. “Call Alanzo and tell him not to come. Please, Anna. It’s not fair to either of us.”

Anna stood up and patted my shoulder in passing. “Trust me, you’ll thank me later.”

* * * *

The afternoon flew by with one event after another. I spoke at two high schools, taking Marco’s position on drunk driving and teaching responsible drinking to teens. When Marco talked to kids, he never talked down to them, and rather than uphold the law as if he believed teenagers wouldn’t dare drink, he approached them from a different angle.

His message remained more along the lines of “If you drink and you might, then have a designated driver, pal up with your buddies, and make sure one of you remains sober and takes on the responsible role of designated driver.”

I tried to convey his message each and every time I stood behind the podium, but lately I felt like such a hypocrite. I wanted a drink. I longed to lose my sorrow in the bottom of a bottle. I hadn’t stooped to my previous level, the drunken stupor the tabloid reporters once loved to write about. But the inner demons chased me. The desire for booze haunted my every waking hour.

Marco and I had promised one another various things throughout our relationship. He swore off cheating and as far as I knew he never had an affair. In return, I agreed to remain sober.

I clutched the steering wheel harder upon entering Preston Hollow. The last time I visited my palatial mansion, I met Marco there for a little hanky-panky.

Pulling into the driveway, I stared up at the house Marco didn't want, the place he refused to live, and I wondered. Could I return there? Did I want to go back when Marco once allowed for the opportunity to move forward?

There were several signs and dead flowers at the iron gates. For some reason, many of Marco's fans believed we still lived there. When memorials were placed, the little cottage we'd made into our home went unnoticed. Instead, fans gathered in front of a home suitable for a PFC player, placing signs of their never-ending grief and leaving floral arrangements for the dead hero who never wanted any of this.

I left my brand new Honda Accord, slamming the door behind me. I drove an economical car and yet my three-car garage still had over two hundred thousand dollars in vehicles parked there. I stared at the massive front door with the brass doorknocker and resisted the first temptation to slam my fist against the walnut encasing the tiny beveled glass windows.

Like a silly school girl, a child without one make-believe friend, I knocked and waited. "Hmm," I whispered. "I guess no one is here."

The tears came. No, no one was home. No one lived there anymore. No one wanted to reside there when they had a cozy, comfortable cottage less than ten miles away.

Love once lived in the cottage. A drunkard once resided at the Preston Hollow address.

I sat on the stoop leading to the ostentatious house and knew where to find temptation, the worst of all evils. I needed to heal and I fully intended to do it on my own terms.

Standing immediately, I opened the car door, and grabbed my keys and my purse. Then, I unlocked the front door, disarmed the security code, and returned to a very lonely place.

Chapter Two

Two Days Later

“Suzy? Are you here?” My mother-in-law’s voice rang throughout the house. With the ceramic tile floor, high ceilings, and large open spaces, the echo bounced off the walls.

“Suzy? Honey? Where are you?”

I heard more footsteps right above me, and then I heard Mark, my ex-husband scream out in what I translated as sheer panic, “Suzy? Where are you? Damn it baby, answer me!”

Baby? Get fucking real! I rolled over and heard the clang of bottles, so I squirmed once and managed to tumble in the other direction.

“Suzy? Answer us!”

My heart stilled. “Marco?” I whispered. “Marco, is it really you?”

“Suzy!” Mark screamed again, an outburst far too dramatic for my liking.

The smooth, familiar texture of a cold bottle alerted me to the fact that I wasn’t in bed. I immediately remembered what had happened.

A long time ago, Marco asked me to toss out all liquor bottles. Instead of trashing quite a stash, I boxed everything up and moved the alcohol to the basement. I never forgot where my liquor was stored and between aged scotch and fine wines, I’d tied on one hell of a drunk and didn’t just fall off the wagon, but let the booze drag me completely under the wheels.

The concrete floor beneath me wasn’t comfortable, but at least, there in the basement, I finally had time to mourn. Sip after sip, gulp

after gulp, I relived every day of my life with Marco, relishing in kisses remembered and so many cherished times together.

“Suzy? Are you—” I heard Anna at the top of the stairs. “Oh my God, Mark! Alanzo! She’s here!”

Alanzo. I’d only seen him once after Marco died. Looking into his face and eyes would prove too painful. Being around him would ignite a mixture of emotions, some of which I once faced even when Marco was still alive.

Alanzo and I once enjoyed friendly flirtations, but we never crossed the line. Now, I didn’t want to see him. I didn’t need to hear his voice. He made me feel vulnerable. And I feared the worst. He could inevitably breathe life back into a body that had been dead since we’d buried Marco.

“Mark! Alanzo!”

Dear God, someone shut that woman up! I longed to scream, but instead I remained perfectly still, surrounded by Lord only knew how many bottles.

“Shit! Suzy!” Alanzo called out and I heard a rush of footsteps pound against the wooden planks. Two or three people hurried down the stairs. A light flickered overhead once Mark entered the basement. Only three people knew where to find the ridiculous location of the light switch—on the far wall right behind the water heater—and one of the three no longer walked among the living.

Alanzo brushed my hair out of my face. I didn’t have to look up to know who touched me. His hands were similar to Marco’s. For a second, I lost myself under his fingertips. He gathered me up and held me against his chest, stroking my hair and whispering. “I gotcha, Suzy. I gotcha.”

Rocking back and forth, he cradled me for what seemed like hours and for the first time in a very long time, I felt safe and secure, wanted and loved. Then, the illusion stopped and I freaked.

“Don’t touch me!” I yelled, pushing him away and glaring at Mark, then Anna. “What are you doing here?”

Mark squatted next to me. "Suzy, the question is, what are you doing here?"

"Do you know what day it is?" Anna asked, apparently disgusted.

"Tuesday," I replied. Hell, maybe Wednesday rolled around. After all, Alanzo was here, so yes, Wednesday seemed logical.

"It's Thursday," Alanzo said, caressing my arm.

I looked around at the empty bottles. "So much for crashing a party, mine apparently ended hours ago."

At least seven liquor bottles were strategically placed around me. Evidently, I drank until I passed out, woke up, and drank some more. I remembered something along the lines of taking a few sips here or there before the room started spinning.

I'd crawled upstairs a few times to go to the bathroom and then sat on the top stair and scooted back down again. Sliding over one wooden plank after the other, I kept my eye on the prize, finding my just reward in more booze.

Anna glared. "So, you go to the local high schools and preach about drinking. Then, you come here and to honor my dead son you drink yourself into a splendid stupor?"

"Something like that, yeah, Anna." I was sick to death of her condescending voice. I wanted her gone. Maybe she meant well but I meant business. She needed to go. I looked at Alanzo and with pleading eyes, I gave him a meaningful glare. Maybe he read minds. Marco always understood what I needed.

Alanzo didn't, but my ex did.

Mark said, "Anna, tell you what, Cassie and Corby just brought in a big barbeque picnic from a new downtown restaurant. What do you say we run over and grab a plate for Alanzo and Suzy?"

"Well, I...I..."

"Mother, barbeque sounds good. I'll help Suzy get cleaned up, and we'll expect you back in say...a couple of hours?"

“Sure, two hours should give us time to visit with the clan over at the house. Coach Tomlinson, the new offensive line coach, is over there. I know he’d love to meet you, Anna.”

I owed the ex something, not sex of course, but something. Anna loved talking to the Rascals coaches. She remained committed to one mission, to keep her son’s memory alive and make sure everyone remembered Marco Giovanni, one of America’s favorite quarterbacks.

Anna didn’t object. I never thought she would. Mark escorted her upstairs and I was left alone with the one man I feared most.

When they were gone, Alanzo plucked the bottles from the concrete and lined them up on a nearby empty shelf. After he carefully picked up a few pieces of a shattered bottle and then swept the remains, he gently lifted me from the floor and started up the steps.

“I can walk.”

“I’m sure you can, but I’ll carry you.”

Chewing on my bottom lip, I wondered if he realized how his presence affected me. I wanted to ask, needed to know if he even cared that I had a hard time being in the same room with him, let alone his arms.

When we walked across the foyer, he casually reached over and locked the front door.

“No!” I exclaimed.

“What?” he asked, startled,

Dizzy, I wiggled out of his heavy arms and almost fell in the process. He caught me around the waist.

“Get your hands off me,” I stated flatly.

“Suzy, I’m not here to take advantage of any situation. Mom asked me to come and help my brother’s widow get back on her feet.”

Pun intended? Probably. I glared at my husband’s twin, the duplicated man who would forever remind me of what I’d lost, what I’d never experience again.

"I want you to go," I whispered. "Go back to South Padre and never come back here again."

"I can't do that," he said, reaching for his jacket thrown over my banister. "And after you read this, you probably won't expect me to leave." He searched through an inside coat pocket and then extended an envelope.

"I'll uncover some of the living room furniture and see what I can do about the cobwebs around here. When you're ready to go upstairs, yell for me. I don't want you teetering around when you're obviously inebriated."

I stared at the hand holding what I presumed was a letter. Since I saw five or six hands, I went for playing it off and swiped my hand across the area directly in front of me until I snatched the envelope.

Taking a seat on the bottom step, my vision cleared up, and I immediately understood sitting trumped standing. I pulled the letter away from the envelope and stared at the bottom of the page. It was from Marco. Glancing toward the top, I saw whom he had addressed.

"Read it, Suzy." Alanzo walked away with a sorrowful expression, and I focused on every heart-wrenching word written by my husband:

Dear Alanzo,

If you're reading this letter, then I'm dead. It's kind of peculiar to write but a necessity because this request concerns my wife.

You know my history. You were there when I lost Francine. You always knew what she meant to me, how much I loved her even after she died.

I never thought I'd find another woman to love, one who would hold a candle to my Francine, but I did. I found a wonderful woman in Suzy and discovered the greatest love of my life.

Now don't get me wrong. She wasn't always easy, but she was worth the effort and became a treasure, one I adored and cherished.

Suzy was my second chance at love, the only lover I've ever had or ever will have.

Now, I must ask you a favor. It's not a hidden secret the two of you have a mutual attraction, something I could explain if you'd give me a day, but I don't want to encourage you to bed my wife, unless of course, I'm dead. Then again, I'll try to remember I already am if you're reading this.

You once told her that you didn't believe one thing you read about her in the papers. Well, you should've believed one written piece—that article about her being bad in bed, yeah as in naughty, that part...oh God, brother...that part is all true. Maybe I need to convince you she's safe for you to pursue now, and if you want me to persuade you, then that one fact alone is something to consider.

Alanzo, I love her and because I love her, I never want her to be alone. I don't want her to have to worry about who will be there for her.

You be there.

I don't want to die and go on to the next life unable to leave this world completely behind because of my love for Suzy, but somehow I know I'll never be able to rest in peace until she's truly happy. She will never find peace if she goes back to her old ways, to the Suzy who barely functioned on her own before I met her, before my love changed her.

I'm sure this is an odd letter to read as my brother but there is only one other man on the face of this earth who will love her like I do. That man is you. I know because from the moment you first saw her, new life came into your eyes and a bright light flickered. It pained me to know that I had the one woman who would've been just as perfect for you.

The alarming truth is, I should've shared her.

I should have offered an arrangement between the three of us because you would've done the same for me. Only, I was greedy with

love and lust. And so damn crazy about her it would've driven me mad if another man touched her.

I lost myself in her eyes and thanks to her, I'm a changed man. She's a special lady who made me become a better person. Let her into your life and you'll see. Suzy Illiani Giovanni is a woman with heart and spunk, a woman who loves with passion.

Go and find out for yourself, Alanzo, and if I'm not there with you now, then you love her for me. Love her for you.

I believe a piece of her heart was always yours anyway.

*You are loved and relied upon,
Marco*

I read the letter twice. "No," I whispered. "No, no, no!" How dare Marco do this?

Alanzo appeared in the archway separating the formal living room from the foyer. He stared straight ahead, apparently waiting for me to speak again.

I swallowed the lump in my throat. Then, I snapped the paper a few times again. "This isn't right."

"It may not be right but..." He paused and then said, "It's true."

My eyes darted in his direction, and I narrowed my gaze. "What do you mean, it's true?"

He didn't move but his eyes softened, and I could see he wanted to come closer, hold me while he told me whatever he had on his mind. "Suzy, I'm in love with you, and I have been since my brother introduced us. Don't insult me by pretending you didn't know. Marco realized I had real feelings for you, and if he knew, you did too."

"How dare you say that to me?" I screamed, storming over to stand in front of him while shaking the rippled paper. "Do you think this letter changes something? Do you?"

“Suzy, you may think my love comes with conditions but it doesn’t. I’ve loved you almost as long as Marco. Maybe he met you first. Maybe he loved you first, but I plan to love you last.”

“He’s your brother!” I screamed, my fists balled up at my sides.

“And if I’m damned for loving my brother’s wife, then I’m damned. But after Mother gave me this letter and told me to read it, I accepted the truth. You need to accept what’s right in front of you, too, because you’ve always felt something for me.”

“Don’t you see what this is?” I shook the letter in his face. “Don’t you?”

“Yes, I know what it is. Marco always had a great fear of dying young. He wanted to make sure he expressed his feelings and relayed those in a letter.”

“I wasn’t married to your brother for over five years without knowing him, without understanding the way I handed over my life to him. I am who I am because I changed for your brother and what did I get in return?” I paced a few steps. “A man who still wants to control me from the grave!”

Alanzo pursed his lips and his face turned red. I noticed then that even in his anger, Alanzo looked exactly like Marco. “You don’t mean that, Suzy. Marco loved you.”

Sarcastic laughter filled the air. I barely recognized my own voice. “He left me with nothing!”

“How can you say that? He gave you everything!”

Through the tears and the pain, I said, “He stripped me down to bare bones and then left me with absolutely nothing.”

The bitterness new, the odd way I looked at my relationship with Marco right then didn’t reveal my truest feelings. Marco was my life and without him, I wouldn’t have made it this far, but I was mad. I had a right to feel angry. Marco tried to manipulate me, and he wasn’t even alive to do it in person.

I had to find out through a letter to his brother what he always suspected, what I'd always chosen to ignore. Sure, I held a special place in my heart for Alanzo. How could I not?

What was the old adage? If it looks like a duck, waddles like a duck, then it's damn sure not a goose? Alanzo was Marco's carbon copy and their similarities went beyond their physical bodies. They acted alike, supported a lot of the same charities, and shared a strong belief system in doing for others, fitting into their appropriate roles as community servants. The almighty dollar meant nothing to them.

Alanzo opened his mouth to speak but instead turned away, shaking his head. "I'm not my brother, and I won't put up with your tantrums. And I damn sure won't stand in this house or any other when I'm not welcome."

Humph. Spoken like Marco himself.

I gasped then. After reading Marco's letter, did I really want Alanzo to walk out? Could I let him go after his confession?

The paper slipped from my fingertips, and I clasped my hands over my face and bawled. Like a little newborn baby, I cried out because the big old world didn't offer the warm comfort zone where I'd once been most secure. My protective shield, the warm body that used to hold me, no longer existed.

I cried for what I missed and sobbed for what I no longer had, and I suddenly resented Marco. He apparently thought of everything, right down to who should take care of me in his absence.

I didn't want a cheap replacement. I didn't want a duplicated body with like features and a reproduced voice. I wanted the real deal—my man, my Marco, my husband.

Alanzo walked across the room. He placed his hand on the doorknob and said, "What am I supposed to do now, Suzy? Do you want me to leave?"

I buried my face in the hook of my arm. "I don't know!" I wailed.

He took cautious steps before he stood next to me. "Shh," he said. "Shh, Suzy girl, come on, hon." He continued to soothe me with his

voice. Long fingers twirled through my hair while he brushed the locks away from my face.

“Why do you have to look like him?” I asked with obvious cruelty in my question.

“I’ve asked myself that plenty of times,” he admitted, drawing me against his chest. “If I could look like someone else, if I could’ve made the choice to have died in his place, all of these things, Suzy—I have asked them.”

I choked on another sob and wrapped my arms around his neck. While he consoled me, I reminded myself of who held me. It was a constant struggle not to kiss him. I wanted to remember what it felt like to snuggle deeper into Marco’s thick arms. Could Alanzo stand in for Marco and at least replace him for a little while?

Alanzo picked me up and carried me up the stairs, making his way down the long hallway. He pushed my bedroom door open and carried me over to the king-sized bed, placing me on the mattress and then strolling into the bathroom to start the bath water.

He quickly returned and sat next to me while waiting for the tub to fill, leaving once or twice to check on the progress and returning without a word. I stared straight ahead, listening to the steady stream pouring from the faucet.

“The last time we were here, we had a fight.” It was a struggle to choke out the confession.

“A fight?” he asked, amused. “To hear Marco tell it, the two of you never had a disagreement.”

“Oh, we fought all right, at least in the beginning.”

“I know you had some arguments over the drinking.”

I covered my mouth. The stench of alcohol reminded me of two lost days. Suddenly, I felt very ashamed of myself. Marco would’ve rolled over in his grave if he’d known his brother found me in a dark basement surrounded by liquor bottles and wine corks.

Alanzo pulled my hand away from my mouth. “I’m not my brother, Suzy. I’m not scolding you because you had a setback.

Everyone is entitled to a mistake. There's no harm done. I'll clean up the mess. I'll take care of everything."

With my arms looped around my middle, I glared at the worn carpeting, something I meant to replace but never took the time. The phone rang, and I didn't make an effort to grab it from the bedside table.

Alanzo walked over and snatched it before the bell-like noise jangled again. "Hello? Yes, Mother? No, what we need is time. Have Mark bring you back here or take you to the cottage. Either is fine. Yes, I'm sure. Goodbye."

"Dear old Anna," I drawled.

"She loves you."

"She's driving me insane."

"Mom wants to see you happy."

"She's hiding her grief behind me," I said. "After your father died, she didn't have time to mourn him because then Marco passed. She's never taken the time to grieve herself."

"She's grieved, Suzy. I've watched her."

"She's prevented me from my own mourning process!"

"Then grieve, damn you!" he exclaimed leaving the room and turning the faucet off in the bathroom. He returned quickly. "Suzy, it's been almost two years."

"One year and seven months and everyone thinks I should forget the past and move forward with a smile on my face. Two years and it's time to forget the greatest love I've ever known! What the fuck is that? Is there some sort of written law stating widows should only grieve a maximum of twenty-four months?"

"That's not what I meant."

"What did you mean?"

"I think it's time for you to accept Marco's death, that's all."

"He...was...my...husband!"

"And he was my brother!" he shouted, grabbing my arms and shaking me. "You think I don't miss him? Huh? You think there's a

day that goes by when I don't think about him? Do you? Do you think I don't wake up in the middle of the night and wonder what his life might have been like if he had only lived to have children of his own? I wonder, Suzy. God yes, I wonder. And I miss him more every day, so don't you talk to me about grief. I was his twin. I spent the first eighteen years of my life as his second skin. I am devastated, just as much as you are."

My mouth quivered. Yes, I thought, looking into Alanzo's eyes. He knew hurt. He was killed, and for a split second, I wanted to ease his pain.

I looked at his mouth. Maybe I puckered or my lips parted, but something changed between us. I fully accepted the responsibility for my actions because I did something to initiate a kiss. Alanzo followed my lead.

Chapter Three

Alanzo framed my face with the balls of his hands resting under my chin. When his lips met mine, the kiss wasn't hungry or overly aggressive. Instead, his soft mouth stole a tender moment. I sensed the dull ache beyond his swollen lips, and they matched the layers of pain I saw in his eyes.

I pulled him closer, grabbing his collar and kissing him deeply. Then I felt him pull away. *No please, not now.* He couldn't leave me again. *No, no, no!*

"Suzy," he whispered. "I'm not Marco."

Tears streamed down my face. I knew he wasn't Marco. Just because our kiss changed didn't mean I thought he magically turned into his brother.

I set my jaw and pushed him away. Didn't I know the difference? Sure. Of course I did. It didn't change the fact that I wanted to lose myself in the past. If Alanzo wanted to help me, then he could've understood and welcomed the opportunity to truly stand in for his brother.

"I shouldn't have done that," I said, pressing the back of my hand to my lips.

"No harm done," he promised. "Your bath is ready. Want me to stay here while you soak?"

I studied his expression and saw the sincerity. He wasn't offering because of some twisted need to see my nude body sliding into the tub. He cared whether or not I could handle being alone and right then, especially after the kiss, I could not.

Nodding my head, I walked toward the bathroom, and he took a seat on the small sofa in the far corner of my room. "I'll wait here."

Still buzzing, I stumbled toward the vanity and stripped off my black skirt and dirty white blouse. Then I discarded undergarments, never bothering to watch them fall to the floor. Glancing in the mirror, I looked away almost immediately. God, I looked like hell.

My mass of tangled hair needed touch-up color. Maybe I'd go for bleach blonde next time rather than keep the auburn tint. The dark eye liner I usually wore caked under my eyes, leaving the evidence of a coal black shade that once painted my lids and lashes.

Completely nude, I eased over to the bathtub and sat down in the hot water. My breasts rose and fell with every breath and I felt exposed and quite nervous. Leaning my head back against the headrest, I planned to soak and relax. I also wanted to die right there, never feel this kind of pain again. The mix of emotions seared my flesh from the inside out and the finality of mourning seemed replaced by a new feeling of betrayal.

And right then, I accepted the loss. It was time to move on. If I wanted anything to happen between me and Alanzo, and I thought I might, then I had to let go of the past. I had to say farewell to Marco.

Tearing my gaze away from the silver faucet, I looked into the large gold-leaf mirror above the dual sinks and dressing table. I caught Alanzo's eyes, and with a heated gaze I wanted him to interpret, I didn't look away.

A few minutes lapsed. We stared into one another's eyes. He finally stood, slowly pacing across the bedroom until he closed the heavy door. I heard the lock catch almost as loudly as my own breath.

This was wrong, but wrong or not, there was only one man alive who could ever make things right. Alanzo had to try and love me. I planned to let him take his best shot.

* * * *

Moments later, Alanzo undressed and stood at the edge of the tub with his cock hanging free in front of him. He acted like he hardly noticed his erection. He stood motionless, and his solemn expression proved hard to interpret.

I wanted to feel awkward, maybe even a little guilty. Unfortunately, there wasn't anything there to bring on the guilt an adulteress might have anticipated. Maybe because with my husband dead and buried, what we contemplated didn't constitute adultery.

Aware of the clear exposure the water allowed without bubbles to cover me, I wanted to seduce him but didn't have the energy, or the desire to play the part of a seductress. I don't think Alanzo expected me to fit into any particular role. Not now, and maybe not ever. He sought comfort, and somewhere in his eyes I saw what we both needed most.

Alanzo longed to love me. Perhaps this was long overdue.

He eased into the tub and his cock retreated, squishing in between his legs while he squatted for a position at the opposite end. I shifted and he found his spot.

Touching my ankle, he carefully brought my leg out of the water and planted a kiss on my calf, sliding his tongue up and down my inner leg. His lips moved like a feather, barely grazing my skin, but I was aware of his mouth and the man behind perhaps the softest kisses I'd ever enjoyed.

In some ways, I felt it was necessary to stop him. In others, it was as if I longed to encourage him. If I went forward, if I let Alanzo take me, I needed to keep in mind Alanzo wasn't Marco. Making love to Alanzo wouldn't bring Marco back. If I wanted to let go of the husband I lost, I needed to look at Alanzo as an individual man of interest, without considering his twin ties to Marco.

Like the letter from Marco suggested, there had always been an attraction there, a certain admiration. Sure, we enjoyed playful teasing, but a mutual respect for one another and Marco forced us to

keep our feelings in check. We never crossed those lines while Marco was living but should we sprint over them now?

His hands propelled over my hips, and he used the leverage I allowed him to cup my bottom and draw me closer, tugging my body upward until he positioned me over him. My legs draped over his hips and the undeniable feel of flexed muscle made me all too aware of the man under me.

With my breasts in front of him, he took a deep breath and glanced up, making the first of many compliments I'd become accustomed to receiving over the years. "God, you're the most gorgeous woman in the world," he said. Of course I'd never heard that particular one fall from Alanzo's sensual lips.

Suckling my breast, he nuzzled the fullness and then drew in a nipple, lapping over the point while nipping and teasing. But I didn't want him to toy with me. I wanted to feel him, understanding that this experience wouldn't necessarily lead to true enjoyment but rather satisfy a longing we'd both felt for some time.

Sliding down, he held his hand over the mushroom head of his cock. With my heat at the back of his hand, he rubbed my pussy back and forth, causing an incredible friction and an awareness of why he stopped the immediate joining of our two bodies.

"Suzy," he whispered, gazing into my eyes. "Tell me who you see when you look at me."

I didn't want to see Marco then, but how could I not? And how could he expect me to lie right then? What purpose would fibs later serve?

I pressed my lips to his but he didn't open in acceptance. Instead, he held me back. "I have to know who you see. Right now. Tell me."

I swallowed hard and closed my eyes. "I can't tell you what you want to hear, Alanzo. Not yet."

"Start with what you feel. Say what's on your heart."

I didn't want to hurt him and yet I couldn't lose whatever we'd only just begun. I wasn't a woman who enjoyed taking a few steps

forward and several jumps back, so I said, "I can't help but see Marco when I look at you. You're twins. Of course I look at you and see your brother just as..." I paused because he looked away. I grabbed his chin and forced him to look at me before continuing. "I used to look at him and see you. With identical twins, that's expected. None of this changes what we both want and need from one another right now."

"I do need you, Suzy. God knows I don't want to ache for you, but I can't help myself."

His body shifted and he placed his hands on the side of the tub like he planned to leave me. I closed my eyes and tried to resist the unfathomable urges building and building. He stood with his apparent intentions of deserting me.

"You're going to go now? Even after I tried to be honest with you?"

He looked down the length of his body, and his cock was clearly flaccid. His body wasn't as prepared to take me as it had been mere seconds before. He stroked my cheek, caressing my face from chin to brow.

"Do you want me to make love to you or not, Suzy?"

Make love? What the hell happened to screwing out the need, the longing? What happened to calling a good old wham-bang, a fuck? Why did he have to use the term only married couples or those committed to one another used?

"Suzy?"

No. I needed to say no. "Yes," I said, compliant, standing, and pressing my body against his. "I need you to take away this pain, Alanzo, and you're the only one who can."

"I'll soothe more than your broken heart," he promised, nipping at my shoulder. Then, we embraced.

A few seconds later, he picked me up and stepped out of the tub. Within minutes, we were on my bed, tangled in each other's arms.

* * * *

I couldn't think about the last time someone loved me in this bed. I refused to think about the man who once caressed me and held me until the wee hours of the morning. I flatly denied comparing men, noting those strong similarities or even the differences in brothers. I wanted to experience Alanzo and appreciate what he offered.

And God help me, I really needed to stop wishing for the ability to separate the men and do it, just jump forward and never look back. Laying the past to rest was easier thought than done.

Alanzo kissed me and his lips didn't lead the way right into foreplay but rather insisted on a fuller exploration, one of sensual beginnings. If he planned to kiss away the apprehension and then move forward from there, he succeeded.

What happened in that window of opportunity left me forever changed. His kisses started out soft, light as a feather. Brushing my mouth against his, my body responded to his kiss, not Marco's. His gentle touch bruised my heart but healed my body.

"You're like an angel," he told me, lowering his mouth to my breast and then taking a nipple between his teeth, teasing and nipping, encouraging relaxation almost as much as responsiveness.

"I've waited so long, Suzy."

Believing him was a curse and a relief. Yes, I'd experienced those feelings. Yes, I understood what it felt like to want Alanzo, but I'd denied myself the opportunity, ignored any half-chances because I loved my husband. I adored Marco and cherished our commitment to one another.

Alanzo wasn't asking for anything. He didn't promise anything. Oh God. Oh no, I couldn't think it, and I couldn't believe in something he didn't dare mention.

This was so wrong to make love, if that's what he called it, to my husband's brother when I thought too much of consequences and

there were still so many unanswered questions. I had feelings left to sort through.

His hands moved lower, gripping my waist and then my hips. A wide open palm cupped under my heat. Masculine fingers probed, spreading my lips and plunging inside the opening I'd once thought might remain forever sealed.

"Alanzo," I choked out, relaxing my head against the pillow.

"Shh," he said, stealing away my next breath, reminding me of how Marco used to hush me when all I craved was hard and rowdy sex.

The ripe sensation of his tongue fluttering across my stomach made every nerve ending responsive. I tingled all over, unable to stop him when he glided lower.

He would stretch my legs, widen them for a purpose. Then, he'd hover over my pussy and eat me alive. There wasn't any doubt. He kept moving down, and I wanted him there. I longed to have his tongue on me, inside of me, stroking and licking, sipping and sucking.

Bam! Bam! Bam! The knock on the bedroom door jolted away the fantasy, and then I heard Mark ask, "Suzy? Are you all right?"

Alanzo's mouth lingered inches from my mound. My ex-husband slammed his fist into the door panels once more. "Suzy? Is Alanzo in there with you?"

I shook my head and I should've known better. He was, after all, his brother's twin. The two men shared too many similarities. One upping their perceived competition trumped all others.

Chapter Four

“Mark,” Alanzo said gruffly when he opened the bedroom door.

He looked over Alanzo’s shoulder. “Suzy?”

“Mark,” I said.

“All right, now that we’ve said a few names and thought several others we don’t need to say aloud,” Alanzo scoffed and then quickly added, “Where’s Mom?”

“I took her back to Suzy’s, err...Marco’s...the cottage. She’s going to catch up with you later tonight.”

“Then why did you come back here, buddy? Did you forget something?”

“No,” he stated flatly. “I just came back to check on Suzy,” he added, giving me a disapproving glare. “And I brought over some dinner too, of course.”

“As you can see, she’s fine.”

Alanzo had dressed quickly while I found a silk robe in the closet, shrugging into the sheer material right before Alanzo greeted our visitor. Mark’s gaze drifted over me, settling on my chest. At one time, his lust-filled eyes would’ve turned me on and even provoked me into seduction. Not now.

Mark belonged to Cassie. I didn’t have the slightest interest in finding him under my sheets again. The hurt and bitterness may have been water under the bridge, but I didn’t want to go back and swim where I would most likely drown.

Cassie and I had a tough time putting the past behind us, but somewhere along the way, thanks to Marco, we’d become good friends again, remembering why we enjoyed one another in the first

place. No one made me laugh harder than Cassie. A girl in bed with three sexy men had something going for her.

"Suzy, why don't you get dressed and come downstairs? Cassie sent over a lot of food, and after your drinking binge, you need to eat something."

"I can take care of her."

Mark bit back an outright snarl. "I'm sure you can, but, you see, Suzy and I were married for a number of years. I know what she needs right now and what she doesn't need is her dead husband's twin trying to take advantage of her."

A little woozy all of a sudden, I grabbed the bedpost and tried to steady myself. Rather than make it obvious I still felt the ramifications of the alcohol, I sat down on the bed.

"For crying out loud," Mark said, refusing to let a stumble slide. "She's still drunk!"

Obviously, my attempt didn't work.

Alanzo looked at me with guilt in his eyes. He appeared mortified, like he just took a bottle from a malnourished baby.

"Don't," I warned. I knew what we were doing after all. I wasn't so toasted that I didn't understand where we were headed when he laid me down.

"This is how you show your respect for your dead brother? Come in and grope his wife?"

"My brother is dead," he reminded softly. "I didn't ask Suzy to do anything she didn't want to do."

"Well then, making your first play didn't take you long, did it Suzy?"

"It's been over a year and a half, Mark." I'd like to see him try living without sex for more than a week, much less nineteen months.

"I guess you're back to your old capers now that you have someone interested enough to bed you down and do ya dirty, huh?"

"That's enough," Alanzo warned.

I stormed across the room and headed straight into my walk-in closet. I stared at the clothes I now didn't recognize as my own. The price tags still hung loosely from the sleeves of designer blouses and overpriced evening gowns. Boxes of shoes never worn lined the top shelves. I couldn't even find a pair of old house slippers.

Returning to the bedroom, I said, "Mark, you had one purpose in coming back here."

"What?" he acted offended. I understood my ex well enough to know his response was, in fact, part of a well-practiced act. I couldn't get under his skin if I tried.

"I brought your dinner or did you forget that was my purpose for leaving in the first place?"

And here I thought he left me alone with Alanzo so I could get fucked. Silly me.

I teetered across the room to explain to Mark one of the reasons why I didn't want him there right then—Cassie—but since my head felt like a watermelon, I didn't bother.

"Get dressed, Suzy," Mark ordered.

"Get in bed," Alanzo suggested. "I'll bring you a plate."

Mark and Alanzo stood nose to nose.

"She doesn't need this right now, man," Mark said.

"This is exactly what she needs," Alanzo assured him. "*I'm* what she needs."

"I don't have a right to say either way," Mark snapped. "It's none of my business."

"That's the smartest thing you've said all day," I remarked. "You don't have a right. You gave up your rights to any opinions several years ago or should I refresh your memory with a little instant replay of what happened way back then?" Maybe I could dig out our divorce decree too and provide a written refresher.

"I still care about you, Suzy. I don't want anything to happen to you."

"Well that's sweet, sort of thoughtful," I said, trying to add a bit of sincerity but unable to find true appreciation while my body still burned for another Alanzo touch.

Mark shot bullet glares back and forth between us for a few quiet and very uncomfortable moments. "So be it," he said. "Have it your way." With a frown, he added, "If you do anything to hurt her, you'll answer to me."

"I'll never hurt her."

"And don't get too cozy here. You're not a permanent fixture in her life. Suzy has friends here. Close friends," he added with an exaggerated drawl. "She doesn't need you or anyone in your family coming here and confusing her."

"I'm not confused," I said. Horny, sadly enough, but not necessarily stunned by it, not after thinking things through and sorting out my emotions.

I kept trying to convince myself I was ready to make this next step. Correction, this huge leap.

"Suzy, you're kidding yourself here," Mark said. "Look at him," he added pointedly. "He's a walking, talking clone of Marco." He shot Alanzo another damning glare. "Hell, it pains me to stand next to him. I can only imagine what seeing him does to you."

No, actually, he couldn't.

Not quite ready to give it up, he said, "Why don't you get dressed and come home with me? Cassie and the kids would love to have you spend a few days with us."

"Oh, sure they would," I said. "Maybe you, Steve, and Corby can make room for me in that big old bed of yours, too, while you're so hell bent on taking care of me. Why don't we just schedule a good old-fashioned orgy over there?"

"Suzy," he said softly. "This isn't about me and you."

It was always about me and him. If it wasn't, he wouldn't have mentioned the us-factor.

Whenever Mark came marching back into my life, he tried to control me through his sound advice and empty plans for my future. He'd gotten worse since Marco died, like he found it necessary to step back into the role of concerned ex-husband. He pretended he was the right person to make all of the pain go away even though he once caused the majority of my heartaches.

"Go home to Cassie, Mark. Go home to your shared woman and your munchkins and love them with everything you have inside of you, because no one knows what tomorrow holds, not even you."

Exasperated, I went into the bathroom and stared into the tub. I didn't see my future floating around in the deep water, so I felt for the chain attached to the plug and pulled the brass links. Watching the water drain until the last swirl disappeared, I sat in the bathroom and waited for Mark to leave.

About ten minutes later, Alanzo stood in the doorway. "Come to bed, Suzy."

I stared at him blankly.

"I fixed a tray with everything Mark told me you'd eat. Come on, let's enjoy a quiet dinner and talk for a bit."

"Talk?"

"Yes," he said. "I think it's something we need to do before things get out of hand between us."

I stared at him blankly. "Things are already spinning out of control and you know it." I eyed his cock just to make sure I could easily see the bulge pressing tightly against the seams of his pants. I didn't want him to have second thoughts.

If Alanzo backed up and reconsidered now, I might put out a restraining order on Mark. Legal action had been taken before and Mark should've been tried and convicted after what he interrupted. Of course, lawyers and cops ignored legal documents whenever a PFC player flashed a little cash.

"You weren't so interested in chatting a little while ago," I told him.

"I didn't realize you were drunk until Mark said—"

"Mark said," I bellowed. "I'm sick of hearing what Mark said. What about what I say? Huh? What about what I want?"

Alanzo remained calm. "Do you even know what you want, Suzy?" His dark eyes scoured over me and I took the lead. Maybe I shouldn't have but at the same time, I had wants and desires, needs as a woman. I pushed back my robe and felt the bounce in my breasts when I threw my arms down to my sides.

Exasperated, I exclaimed, "Yes, Alanzo. I do! I want you. Damn it to hell, I don't want to need you, but here I stand all the same. I found you irresistible when Marco was alive but somehow resisted you. I hated myself for refusing to ask him, but at the same time, I should've taken the plunge. I should've told him how I felt and asked him to bring you into our relationship. We could've had a good life together, the three of us and now..."

He took a few cautious steps and looped his arm around my waist. "And now what, sweetheart?"

A sob broke free and the tears followed. "And now it's just me and you. I should feel guilty. I should feel ashamed, but when I look at you all I want to do is hold you...and..."

His mouth crashed against mine and his tongue worked its way into the depths of my mouth, kissing away the last of my words. Those were the syllables I didn't need to utter. He caressed my behind with one hand while the other cupped my breast, catching the fullness and drawing my nipple to his lips.

He left my chest and kissed a moist path straight down my stomach, backing against the stool in front of the dressing table before taking a seat. Eye level to my belly button, he brought my leg forward, encouraging the bend. Then, dragging my body to his, he kissed my mound with soft, hungry lips. His meaty tongue dipped inside my folds for a split second.

Gasping when that was all he offered, I eyed him, wondering why he changed his mind. With my hand working its way through his hair, I waited for him to explain why he stopped.

Alanzo patted the marble top vanity. "Sit here."

Enough said. Swallowing hard, I allowed him to help me take a seat, feeling like a china doll he'd just placed on a shelf. My legs parted when my feet hit the cushion topping the bench.

His hot gaze lingered at my pussy. Pressing my hand against his cheek, I slid my palm down his rough beard and, in doing so, positioned his head right where I wanted it.

I needed him to lick me. I wanted him to taste my sex and lap at me like he'd waited days, weeks, months, and, yes, even years, to devour me. And he had. We'd both waited for the right time.

Wrong as it may have been, now was the right time.

"Ah, Suzy," he whispered, nuzzling my leg before inching closer to my opening. "Ah, sweet Suzy. You're so perfect." He said, smacking his lips over my clit. "That's my girl. Let me have you just like this."

Those were the last words I heard him speak until after I rode one climax, and then my body slammed right into another. Afterward, his fingers and lips commanded one more while his guttural sounds turned into carnal and explicit words of encouragement. It was then that I realized Alanzo Giovanni would continue to be in my life for a very long time.

* * * *

Receiving oral sex from Alanzo was like free falling from the highest point found in any open sky. His tongue plunged deep and right when my orgasm rolled over me, he sank still deeper, flicking the tip of his tongue so rapidly I thought I'd die from the sensation alone. The rush was exhilarating, but the fall right before another building climactic moment proved indescribable.

A man in his twenties shouldn't have been allowed to push a woman in her forties to such limits. His tongue should've had a warning label attached to the tip, maybe even a white flag, or better still...an ear-piercing alarm.

One time with him and I was hooked. One moment like this and he was mine.

When he withdrew from my pussy, his hand went to his zipper and he freed himself. I wanted him in my mouth and longed to return the favor, but instead, he grabbed my legs and rubbed the head of his dick up and down my inner thigh, inching toward my vagina while allowing his pants to fall to his feet.

"I'm not putting a rubber on, and you're not asking me to," he said.

"I'm not on the pill," I blurted out.

"And I don't give a damn," he said, releasing a masculine growl and then pressing his lips to mine in order to prevent further protest while feeding the growing hunger.

His tongue worked in a magical way, in and out of my mouth with timed precision. Then, he added his cock to the equation, not waiting for me to make up my mind about protection and obviously oblivious to my concerns.

He thrust inside me and pulled back, looking at me long enough to gauge the pain and the lust. Both existed and I'm sure he found precisely what he thought he'd see.

"Alanzo, don't," I said, locking my ankles behind his back. "Just take me. Right now, just fuck me like I'm the only one here."

"You are the only one here, baby."

No, no, don't do that, I thought. *Don't try to make this about Marco.* I slapped the palms of my hands against the vanity while he pulled me toward him and then eased me back.

Our bodies found a tempo, his cock found a beat, and my hips rolled with the rhythm. We were moving to music we couldn't hear, dancing to the erotic pleasure we were destined to meet.

Looking down at the joining of our bodies, the eroticism lit the kind of fire not easily contained. His thick shaft coated in my moisture while he slid in and out of my body. I watched him retreat and enter again, draw back and thrust again.

“Ah, Suzy,” he growled, picking up his pace and gazing down too. “That’s right,” he chanted, working his hips. “Give me what I need, lover,” he encouraged, pushing himself higher into my channel. “Close around me, baby. Ah, yeah, that’s right. What a tight pussy. Fuck me, honey. I’m yours. You’ve got me wrapped, sugar.”

The things he said turned things up a notch. The heat went from mild to hot to a smoldering intensity. I completely lost my ability to speak and couldn’t watch him fuck me. All I could do was enjoy the slapping of bodies, the pleasure building. The lust he spun drove me crazy and hooked me for more.

“Look at me,” he whispered, placing his hands on my waist and continuing to sway one way and then another, rotating me around his thick dick and grinding ever so slowly.

Alanzo was a dangerous lover. Watching the lust wash over his face and settle in his eyes made me eager. His loving empowered me.

“That’s it. Make love to me, only me. Fuck me, baby. Love me like I love you. Oh God, Suzy, I’ve always loved you.”

And there it was. The half-hearted promise I felt confident he’d eventually give. The words I longed to hear and yet feared receiving all the same.

Squeezing my legs around his hips, I drew him in and rode him. I’d missed this kind of connection, the rippling sensation found in the friction when a hard cock rubbed against vaginal walls. He fingered my nipples and looked on with such admiration, like he lost himself in a solitary touch or one more hard push.

“Don’t stop, Alanzo. Never stop,” I begged, milking his cock until I felt him jerk and then stop all together. He slowly withdrew and held himself at the base, careful to maintain some form of discipline, some kind of control.

"Wait," he growled, latching his mouth over mine and kissing me hard on the lips.

"No," I said defiantly. I'd played the part of submissive partner with Marco. I did what he asked because he needed to dominate me. I wasn't stepping into the same role again, not for Alanzo or anyone else.

With only slight hesitation, he slowly inched his way inside me once more. With a sigh, I rotated my hips forward, slapping my hands against his thighs.

"God, yeah, I'm coming!" I exclaimed. "Right there, oh, yes, there! Harder! Damn it, please...fuck me harder."

I'd never talked to Marco with such provocation oozing from my lips. Alanzo inspired me. There were so many things I wanted to say to him. I felt the need to say them all at once on the chance this moment was the only intimate one we shared.

Sweat rolled off his brow and his thighs bunched. He latched his bottom lip between his teeth, and his thick, heavy flesh pounded my pussy. Towering over me, he held his palm to my lower back and stroked for his release.

"Oh, baby. Feels good, so right," he muttered.

His hips jerked and his cock slammed higher, pumping in and out. He fought for and against his release. "Now," he said. "Damn it, now!"

The orgasm rolled over me and like a tsunami with only minimal warning, my climax came forward with the strength of a violent storm, one with an undertow full of consequences. Clawing across his chest, I tried to reach for him, but he pulled away. Maybe he tried to gain some composure, but I fought to break him.

My arms were there to catch him when he collapsed against me. I reveled in the way his heavily veined cock pulsed inside me, remaining committed to the principle of bringing on pure pleasure, swelling again and responding to my every move.

The numbing vibrations continued. His dick fluttered inside me and my walls collapsed around his hard penis. I was sated but unable to let him pull away, unsure if we should part ways and abandon each other when I couldn't wait to show him so much more.

"I love you, Suzy. I've loved you since I first saw you. Now, all I'm asking is that you let yourself love me back," he whispered, kissing my chest and neck before whispering into my ear with a soft, heart-wrenching plea. "If you can't tell me, then you show me. You let me know you'll love me when you're ready."

* * * *

I fell asleep after he carried me to bed. A few hours later, I was wide awake.

"Alanzo?" I shook him but couldn't awaken him right away. Alarmed, I tried again, this time with a little more effort. "Alanzo? Get up!"

Sitting abruptly, his wide eyes blinked rapidly, proving I put him in a state of panic. "What's wrong?"

"You weren't breathing." Obviously, he was very much alive. My lips quivered uncontrollably and I tried to hide my mouth, cupping my hand under my chin.

He pressed his forehead against mine. "Suzy, honey, I'm right here. I'm not going anywhere."

I'd heard similar words before, and I didn't believe in false promises. Didn't I already have one deceased husband to prove men didn't always stick around? Didn't I have a few exes to corroborate my belief system? Men left whenever they found a better deal, and if they didn't have another opportunity, they died when their women needed them the most.

"I couldn't wake you."

"What do you need, sweetheart?" He glanced at his gold watch. "It's four o'clock in the morning."

"Your mother will wonder where we are."

"I don't care," he stated flatly, biting at my lips and then kissing his way to my ear. "What do you say we pick up where we left off?"

"No, Alanzo. We need to go back to the cottage."

Alanzo fell against the pillows. "We're not going back, Suzy."

I swallowed hard and then digested the way he'd spoken to me. "I'm going. You can stay but..."

"But what? You're going back to the home you shared with Marco. Then what are your plans? You'll have breakfast with Mom. She'll serve bacon, eggs, and maybe some dry toast along with black coffee, and then you'll make small talk, maybe argue about the house." He cradled me in his arms and smoothed my hair away from my face. "And then you'll wish a thousand times over you were right here with me, Suzy."

"No," I insisted, shaking my head. "I won't."

"So you're back to this? After what we've shared, you're back to denying what you feel."

"Yes," I said. No. No. No. I didn't want to fight my feelings, but I needed time alone to think about what I was doing. If I knew Alanzo, he wouldn't allow it. He'd move faster than Marco. Making a quick decision was what he did best.

Alanzo always took what he wanted and never considered the consequences. I had always been the exception. Alanzo and I had battled a mutual attraction because he loved his brother and Marco was my husband, the love of my life.

"At least you're honest," he said, giving me a quick peck.

"Where are you going?" I asked when he eased his way to the side of the bed.

"Don't worry," he replied. "I'm just getting comfortable." He took a deep breath and then narrowed his gaze. In a stern voice, he said, "If you leave here, Suzy, I won't come back when you've grieved all you can grieve. I won't hold you in my arms and then watch you run back to the memories you can't salvage at my brother's cottage. Now,

either curl up behind me and go to sleep or come on over here and love me again. That's exactly what you need and want to do."

Maybe he was right.

* * * *

Thirty minutes later, I found more pleasure in Alanzo's body.

"Oh, God, Alanzo," I whispered, riding his cock and letting him work my legs the way he wanted them moved.

His dick locked into the very place a woman needs a man to stroke, hitting that special spot with each and every timed erotic punch. "Good God, woman, that's it. Let me make you hot, baby. Drown my cock with your heat."

Possessing a positively wicked smile, he must've known his actions guaranteed an addiction. He hammered into my pussy, working toward his first release while allowing me to take a few more. Multiple orgasms were overrated. I climaxed on demand and damn near perfected the concept.

"Don't stop," he choked out. "Keep working those sexy legs, hon. Oh yeah, Suzy. *Damn*. I'm coming."

His strokes turned wild. He drove into me with the solid strength of one red-hot man. Then, he rolled over me, tucking my body under his while he fucked like he finally lost all control.

The animalistic sounds leaving his throat and the quick way he shifted my body here or there to accompany his, lit something inside me. Nerve endings pulsed in convulsing fervor and still, he didn't stop. His hot sperm jetted into my body and spilled onto my thighs, and he pounded more.

"Spread 'em," he growled when his knee bumped mine.

He didn't wait for compliance. Instead, he held me open, holding fast to my legs. He prodded with a damning dick, locking his cock like a loaded weapon while pushing himself deeper into my chamber.

All I could do was welcome him, milk him, and buck against and with every thrust.

“Let me see you, Suzy.” He sighed, glancing down at the joining of our bodies.

My hands slapped against his shoulders, sliding along his biceps and forearms. I held on tight, tossing my hair back and enjoying the feel of him while he rooted himself higher, pumping his seed straight into my pussy. The sensation was indescribable, and in that specific moment, my fate was determined.

Alanzo felt strangely familiar and safe. I felt right at home with his arms around me, his cock leading the way into one orgasm before guiding me straight for another.

“Good,” I whispered. “It’s so good,” I chanted. “*Oh, God, Marco.* You promised not to stop!”

And that’s when everything came to an abrupt halt.

Chapter Five

I watched him dress. There wasn't anything I could say to change his mind. One minute, he buried himself inside my body and the next, he rolled away from me. His feet hit the floor in one fluid motion while he snatched his clothes and tripped into his slacks.

At first he didn't look at me. I bowed my head in sudden shame. Yes, I had reason to feel regret and cursed myself for the lack of control. How could I let an illusion from the past tarnish what I'd managed to find in the present? How could I hurt Alanzo when I had such strong feelings for him?

When he stormed across the room to retrieve his shoes, his anger turned explosive. "I. Am. Not. My. Brother."

"I know," I whispered. "I didn't mean to call out his name."

"I can't change who I am, and you have no idea what you're missing if you let me walk out that door. Do you understand me?"

Yes, I easily translated that memo. It was scribbled across his face and etched in his bulging neck veins.

Alanzo was Marco's twin for crying out loud. A man I knew well, a person I respected and wanted to care for and if things were different, if he hadn't been Marco's brother, I would've welcomed him into my life, even now.

"I can't say anything to change what you're feeling," I pointed out.

"No. You can't." He opened the bedroom door. "And the fact that you didn't even try tells me I've wasted my time here."

I gasped when the door slammed behind him. Tears rolled down my cheeks, and I clutched one of the musty-smelling pillows to my

chest. Staring across the room, I remembered how many times I'd slept in this room truly alone in this world. Did I really want to return to that life?

Hell no.

Did I want to wake up with empty arms in the middle of the night, pour a drink to ease the pain, and try to forget the love I once shared?

Absolutely not.

I grabbed my robe, flung open the door, and barreled down the stairs, almost losing my balance. I rushed the front door. Once I made it to the porch, I was home free.

So was Alanzo.

I saw the taillights of Marco's SUV. Alanzo drove toward the main road with tires squealing. Then, he disappeared into the night.

I stood there sobbing. I had a remarkable experience, fantastic sex, with someone I knew on a personal level long before we were intimate. We cared for one another. The compassion and the passion existed between us. Then, in the blink of an eye, I ruined everything.

Walking inside, I reached for the phone without considering the repercussions. Listening to the distant ringing, I waited for someone to answer. Cassie, Corby, their housekeeper, Steve, Mark, one of their kids, anyone would do.

"Hello?"

"Mark," I cried. "I need you."

* * * *

Mark had his flaws but we'd been through a lot together. We'd shared more bad times than good, and, somehow, we'd developed a friendship, no thanks to Marco.

Marco had insisted on forming alliances with his teammates. Corby and Mark were part of his team and through him, I established a mutual respect for the men who'd once shared my bed but ultimately ended up with my best friend.

I wasn't surprised when Mark pulled into the driveway a few minutes later. With his curly hair tousled, he rushed inside and immediately hugged me. "I'm here, Suzy," he said. "I'm right here."

I bawled into his shirt and the whiff of his spicy cologne filled my senses. Startled by the way I reacted to his arms fastened around my body, I glanced up to see if his expression relayed anything more than friendship.

Thank God, I didn't find lust in his eyes. Since I was on a mission to self destruct, fucking Mark wasn't out of the question. Then again, I'd tried before and failed.

Framing my face, he said, "Let me fix you something to drink. We'll stay up late, like we used to, and talk for a while."

Leave it to Mark to work his charm. Sometimes, I missed our late-night talks, those that once carried over until the wee morning hours.

I followed him into the kitchen, fully expecting the hot cup of steamy cocoa he seemed to think cured all ills. Instead, he looked under the sink and said, "Where's the scotch?"

Swallowing tightly, I said, "Mark, you know I don't need a drink."

"Maybe you don't, but I do."

Reluctantly, I said, "The liquor is in the basement."

He studied me for a long time, weighing options and the best of all evils. Then, he disappeared downstairs, returning with a bottle of Jack Daniels instead of one of my favorite single malt scotch selections. He retrieved two shot glasses out of the cupboard and filled them.

Nearly paralyzed, I watched the brown fluid tap the rim and said, "Why are you pouring an alcoholic a drink?"

"Don't act surprised, Suzy. You obviously wanted to drown your sorrows in liquor yesterday. What's changed?"

His eyes followed mine. I looked toward the stairs. "I'm not sure. I'm vulnerable right now. I'm just numb."

"Of course you are. Alanzo shouldn't have pushed you."

I frowned. "He didn't. I swear it was mutual consent."

"You fucked him."

I glanced down at my trembling hands, folded across my lap. Then I eyed the shot glass. Damn, I wanted that drink.

More persistent than before, he asked again. "Did you?"

"Yes, of course I did, and I'm not sorry I slept with him, only upset things ended the way they did."

"So he left right after you gave him what he wanted?"

"No, it wasn't like that."

"Then why don't you tell me what it was like, Suzy, because, God help me, I can't understand why you'd go to bed with a man who looks and acts like your dead husband!"

"I have needs, too, Mark!"

"I never said you don't," he snapped, pouring another drink. "We all know about you and your overactive sex drive. I'm sure that hasn't changed just because you've buried your husband. Your desires for the opposite sex didn't die right along with Marco."

Detecting sarcasm, I said, "Maybe inviting you over here wasn't such a good idea."

He took another drink and then handed over my glass. "Drink. Forget. We'll deal with sobriety another day, Suzy."

Maybe he was right. I turned up the scotch and gulped down the first shot, pushing the glass in his direction while the fluid burned all the way down.

With the refill, he said, "Cassie told me to stay."

"We've already been there and done that, Mark."

"Yeah, we have." His gaze drifted over my body, and he added, "Marco got you in real good shape, Suz. Love looked good on you."

I took a deep breath and probably copped a half-smile. "Yeah, I think it did."

Shooting more liquor straight down his throat, he asked, "So, what are you going to do about Alanzo?"

“I don’t know,” I answered honestly. “Considering how I feel right now, I imagine I’ll love him.”

Chapter Six

Mark slept on the sofa. I woke up around ten o'clock with a pounding headache and an easy reminder of what I didn't miss about drinking binges. The hangovers lingered longer than they used to, and I also had another reminder right between my legs.

I'd been loved hard, sexed one way and then another, and left with an ache I didn't think just anyone could heal. Tossing the bed sheets away from my body, I inhaled the air, catching Alanzo's masculine fragrance before moving to the nightstand. I vaguely remembered the scent in the comforter when I'd pulled the thick blanket around me the night before.

Mark had left a note nearby with a tall glass of water. Drink this and take this. An arrow pointed to three pills, undoubtedly something for a hangover.

After I showered, I slipped into a short knit black dress with a turtleneck collar. Determined to look casual but sexy, I planned to drive over to the cottage and make my apologies while hinting at a reconciliation of sorts. Alanzo and I were close. We didn't need to part ways as enemies, bitter at one another because a shared night turned into a catastrophic event.

Making my way downstairs, I heard the earth-shattering announcement of what sounded like several fists slamming against my front door.

"Don't answer it," Mark said from the living room sofa while trying to bury his head under a large patchwork quilt. "So help me, somebody better be dead or dying to show up here this early."

“Get up, sunshine,” I said in passing. “I’m sure Cassie is probably worried sick since you spent the night with the known town tramp.”

“Yeah, well, I guess Marco worked on more than your body while he was alive, huh? Somewhere along the way, you found some morals.”

I glanced toward the door and saw Corby and Cassie with their faces framed against the beveled glass panel. Snickering, because it was worth taking a few extra seconds just to devil Cassie some, I said, “If the age thing hadn’t made it nearly impossible, I wish I’d saved myself for him, if you want to know the truth.”

“Ouch!” Mark exclaimed, sitting up. “That hurt, Suz.”

“I’ll bet,” I said, releasing a ragged sigh and opening the door to welcome our early-morning guests. Cassie glanced over my shoulder and then to my surprise, she said, “I kind of figured I owed you.”

Swiftly, I turned around. Mark stood, stretched, and shrugged. “I told you she said ‘spend the night’ but you didn’t want to believe me.” Adding with a wink, he eyed Cassie like she was the only woman in the world. “Hell, baby, if I’d known you wanted me to slide into bed with my ex, I might have gone for a random stranger last night.”

Cassie narrowed her gaze. “Don’t push it, handsome. My men share, but I don’t return the favor, and Suzy knows better.” She didn’t look as certain as her words suggested.

“Cassie, I didn’t—”

She hugged me tightly, cupped her hand over my ear, and said, “To tell you the truth, I’d send them all to you on a loaner if you’d promise to send them back.”

Laughing, I pointed at Mark and then Corby. “Been there and done these, remember?”

Mark hugged Cassie good morning and lifted her against his body, allowing her to slide down his torso before he rubbed his cock against her middle. Mark always had a morning problem. When she laughed and blushed, I didn’t have to ask.

Snickering, Cassie said, "Well if you didn't fuck him, you missed out on something pretty stout."

Corby suddenly looked uncomfortable, like he had something on his mind. Nodding toward Mark, he said, "Suzy, why don't you let him stay here until you're settled again? Marco's mother informed us they plan to sell the cottage. You need to move back over here and Mark can help you. We've all discussed it."

I turned to Cassie. "So you want Mark to stay...here with me?"

"If you need him here, I understand."

"And you're actually loaning him to me?" I borrowed her words.

"Will you give him back?" she asked, giving him a squeeze.

"Don't act like you're opposed to it," Mark said, slapping my thigh. "You might hurt my feelings."

"What feelings?" I asked, nudging him.

"Let Mark and Corby handle your affairs, Suzy. Otherwise, you're going to make the biggest mistake of your life."

Obviously, the Teller camp didn't want me chasing after Alanzo. Besides, where errors were concerned, I'd already started to collect a few. I called Alanzo by his brother's name, and then I allowed him to walk out my door. He was the only man who appealed to me on any level, and most women would consider the act of letting him get away...quite stupid.

I glared at the kitchen bar visible from the door. Could I blame it on the booze? No, but I could credit myself with one more error in judgment. Everyone was entitled to a few mistakes, right? The three people standing in front of me were hardly strangers to bad decisions. Then again, my friends looked pretty content. Regardless of their choices, everything worked out okay for them.

"Suzy, look at it this way," Cassie began. "Mark is safe. He's not going to hurt you."

"Oh, no?"

"You once trusted Mark," Cassie reminded.

“We were obsessed with one another, but I don’t remember trust existing in our marriage. Our relationship was based on sex,” I blurted out all at once.

Cassie would’ve been well served to remember some of the things I once shared with her about our sex life prior to her relationship with Mark. If she recalled some of our late-night talks back in the good old days, then she probably wouldn’t push him in my direction.

Corby nodded. “Suzy has a point. They had chemistry.”

“Thanks,” Cassie said under her breath. “For your information, I trust Suzy and Mark.”

Dumb blondes never looked dumber. That’s when it hit me. The Tellers and Mark were going to absurd lengths to keep me out of Alanzo’s bed. Something was up and someone had some answers to questions I probably needed to ask.

“I appreciate your...” I paused while I tried to find the appropriate word. “Generosity,” I quickly added and almost laughed. What the hell were any of them thinking? “But I’ll probably pass on the offer.”

Cassie looked at me with complete sincerity. “If you change your mind, we’re all willing to help. In fact, if you get lonely, I’ll send all three guys over here, and you can put them to work.”

Okay, that was it. Undoubtedly, Cassie had lost her mind. Between the children and the men, also known as overgrown babies, Cassie needed some serious help. Maybe I’d recommend a shrink.

Apparently, Corby, Steve, and Mark had fucked away her common sense, not that she was all that bright to begin with, but come on. No woman in her right mind would leave her man, or men, with me! It just didn’t happen in this town.

Then, I thought of Marco. His love changed me and because of him, others learned to trust me, even Cassie, which was a great feat in itself.

Cassie’s offer went above and beyond the call of friendship. It bordered along the lines of hilarious considering our past history.

“Thanks for the offer, Cass, but we’d kill each other,” I said, flashing Mark a smile and then grabbing my purse from a teacart located near the door. “We might enjoy a few good times, but in the end one of us would off the other one.”

After a group laugh, I walked outside and inhaled the fresh air. A light breeze carried the robust fragrance of autumn. Taking a deep breath, I closed my eyes and tried to remember what my gardener told me he planted last. The mix of lilies and chrysanthemums filled my senses, and, for the first time in ages, I felt rejuvenated.

With a spring in my step, I didn’t look back after I unlocked the Honda. This was a day I wanted to remember. If for no other reason, I wanted to mark this date down as the day Cassie Teller tried to give back my ex-husband. Of course, she really didn’t want us to have sex, but I still found her offer quite amusing.

I should’ve reminded her of the obvious. I wasn’t Wal-Mart and I didn’t offer a return policy. Sliding behind the wheel, I waved to the unusual trio staring back at me. Ah, Cassie, I thought, remembering our often tumultuous friendship. *If you ever piss me off again, I’ll remind you of this moment.*

Oh well, if Alanzo didn’t want me. At least I had options. I wheeled the car toward the main road and tried to relax. Things were looking up. The day hadn’t started off half bad, all things considered.

It was time to find Alanzo. I had a feeling he would welcome my apology. And I planned to grovel.

Chapter Seven

I pulled into my driveway and almost hit the real estate sign located at the edge of my yard. What the hell? I slammed the gearshift into park and decided I should've plowed over the damn thing.

Sliding the gears into reverse, I backed up and decided what the hell. Revving the engine, I drove over the metal sign. Humph, I thought. Apparently the real estate agent didn't understand the obvious—the occupant of the home didn't want to sell unless she was permitted to buy.

Glaring at the front porch, I stared at Alanzo for a few seconds, trying to remember I planned to issue a sincere apology prior to finding an oblong reminder in my front yard. The Giovanni family planned to sell, and they apparently didn't believe in wasting time when they decided to move the fuck on.

Opening the car door, I tried to contain the building fury, but some things weren't easy to do when a woman dealt with volatile hormones. I tried to justify my behavior prior to pitching my fit and stormed toward the porch.

“Where's your mother?”

“She's halfway back to South Padre by now.”

“I guess when you're flying on a broom, travel and flight times vary.”

He tried to conceal a smile. I started to ask him if he agreed but reminded myself that he was a momma's boy, just like his brother.

I stomped right by him and headed inside. I didn't care if he stayed on my heels or took a hike all the way back to South Padre. Once inside, I yanked open the refrigerator and found a covered pot

roast with a note attached. I stripped back the aluminum foil and read my mother-in-law's hand written note.

I made your favorite meal. Eat something. You need to keep up your strength. Moving is a tedious task.

Here I thought I couldn't be angrier! I dumped the roast into the sink, jerked open the drawer for some silverware, turned on the garbage disposal, and started jabbing the meat and veggies down the large opening in the middle of the stainless steel drain.

"Alanzo!" I shouted over my shoulder. "Call your mother and tell her I'm not moving."

I glanced outside and saw him there. He must've heard me because he glared back at me and then walked toward the detached garage. A few seconds later, I heard him start up the engine of Marco's old Mustang, a car Marco purchased a month before he keeled over with a heart attack. I didn't want this imposter, this man who pretended he cared for me driving that particular car.

Rushing outside, I stood behind the Mustang and refused to move. The taillights blinked and I saw Alanzo adjust the rearview mirror. He shifted and I imagined he was cranking the window down. A few seconds later, he leaned out of the car.

"Suzy, move."

Not in this lifetime.

"If you think I'm going to let you drive a 1968 Shelby Mustang convertible out of this driveway, then think again."

He jumped out of the car seething, and, while the steam swirled from his ears, he said, "If you think I won't drive *that* car, then you've lost *your* mind."

"Let me remind you. The house may be yours but the Mustang is mine,"

Gritting his teeth, he stormed toward Marco's SUV, the older model Lincoln his mother drove while she was in town. "And don't think you're going to drive that one either." I rushed over and snatched the keys from his hand before he had a chance to disappear

behind the wheel. While I was at it, I ran over to the old Ford and crawled halfway in the window and jiggled the key until I held it in the palm of my hand.

That's when I felt Alanzo's hand come down straight across my bottom. Furious, I wiggled out of the car and glared at the culprit responsible for burning my ass. He didn't look amused. He looked angry, hurt, and unwilling to discuss exactly what he was feeling.

"What the hell was that for?" Outside of the obvious.

"You deserved it," he stated flatly. "When you act like a child, you can take your punishment like one."

I started to hit back. Then I decided I wasn't going to waste my time until I took a moment to process everything happening here.

Marching toward the house, I heard him say, "I guess you expect me to walk then?"

"I don't care what you do!"

He followed me. Once inside, I returned to the task at hand and paid him no mind. I continued to discard the meat and carrots my mother-in-control left behind.

"We both know that's a lie," he said.

"What?" I focused on gouging the fork into the chopped meat and turned the disposal on once again. My hand rested on the small of my back while I waited for the grinding noise from the kitchen appliance to become a rattling gurgle.

Yelling over the sound, Alanzo said, "You came back early because you wanted to apologize."

Stilled by his arrogance, I flipped the disposal switch and rushed by him, heading for the bedroom.

"Suzy, this is absurd not to mention immature, especially for you, an aging woman," he said without one hint of laughter in his voice.

"How dare you?" I demanded, tossing a few of my things into a suitcase and resenting the hell out of packing in the first place. Alanzo and his mother were driving me away from my home, sending me back to the very place I left in order to move in with Marco.

Alanzo moved behind me. He bracketed his arms around me before I had the opportunity to put up a fight, resist the urges he somehow forced to resurface again. "Don't fight me, Suzy. Make up. Kiss me, fuck me, but, hell's fury, don't you fight me."

Wheeling around, I slapped my hands against his chest. "What do you want from me?"

He released me when I struck him. The obvious hurt etched its way across his handsome face. "You think I want what you had with Marco. I don't. I want what you can have with me."

I pointed outside and easily saw the remains of the bright red real estate sign. My anger well founded, I screamed, "You want to sell my house!"

"I want you to find your way home!"

"This is my home!"

"I'm your home, Suzy. Open your eyes and, damn it, quit trying to fight this thing we have."

"We have nothing," I said, scooting by him. "You just came back here, and suddenly you feel entitlement. I can't stand you!"

"You love me. Maybe you've always loved me."

I shook my head and remembered where we stood. I was in the house I'd shared with Marco, steps from the bed where I'd made love more times than I could count. All I thought about then was falling onto that pillow-top mattress with Alanzo, the man I realized owned a huge chunk of my heart. Maybe he was right. Maybe I'd always cared about him and perhaps even loved him.

"I'm going to love you, Suzy. You can fight me every step of the way, but it's going to happen." He looped his arms around my hips, drawing me up and holding my calves behind his back, even while I squirmed in what might have resembled resistance.

What a joke. Turning away a man who could move inside a woman like Alanzo proved he could was like saying no to chocolate right out of the factory.

His face didn't showcase his satisfaction. Instead, he was solemn. "I'm going to love you today, tomorrow, and again next week. And if you fight me day in and day out, I'll take the blows and count down the hours, maybe the minutes, even the seconds, until I make love to you again."

"Don't do this," I said, whimpering when I felt the bulge underneath me.

"I can't help myself," he said, kissing my open mouth and caressing my face. "If I can't touch you, my life is without purpose. I've waited too long for you, Suzy."

I didn't understand how a man like Alanzo forgave a major slip of tongue, words mistakenly spoken at the wrong time. Now, here he stood, looking like all was forgotten. It was as if he ignored the fact I had called him his brother's name in the heat of our previous tender moment.

But all wasn't forgotten. I was still in love with my husband. I would take years off my life just to have him back for a few hours. At the same time, when Alanzo's lips covered mine and he kissed me into complete and undeniable arousal, I finally accepted another fact.

No doubt about it. He was right. I loved him too.

"Alanzo," I breathed. "Make love to me."

"You couldn't stop me if you tried."

* * * *

My fingers wrapped around him once he covered us with the thin light-blue sheet. I pulled his length through my closed fist, working his hard dick up and down, marveling in the way his cock retreated into layers of skin and then pushed forward once more when I slid my hand down again.

His slender fingers found the proof of my arousal. Working between my legs, two of his fingers plunged inside my vagina. Arching for him, I continued to stroke his thick cock. He locked his

fingers high inside me and then moved away, inserting one finger and then three, switching each time until my body required much more than manual stimulation.

Rolling over me, his eyes went to the headboard. I knew what he saw without turning to view the hooks. Marco once told me where he first heard about Domination and submission. Only, something told me Alanzo wasn't his brother where Domination was concerned.

"I won't try to conform to the submissive role again," I informed.

"Trying isn't necessary," he said. "You are what Marco taught you to be and, whether you like it or not, this is what you need."

Before I realized he'd already prepared for a moment like this, he yanked a pair of handcuffs from under the mattress and clamped them around my wrists, attaching them to a pulley and then securing them on the hook behind me.

"Oh, God, Alanzo. You can't do this."

"Watch me," he muttered, placing his thumb on my clit and applying the right amount of pressure. Tweaking and teasing, his fingers and the way he used them were remarkable, skilled, and oh so damning.

"That's it," he whispered, lowering his mouth. "I want you to enjoy every second. Let me remind you of all the reasons you'll always crave a man like me."

I didn't want to remember. I wanted to experience.

Wet with desire, I spread my legs. He then held them firmly against the mattress, trapping them under the weight of his muscular arm and making mobility impossible.

The sexual tension continued to build. He watched me, staring first at my eyes, then moving his gaze down to my breasts. He apparently didn't plan to touch them but preferred to observe the rise and fall of my chest without lapping at my nipples already burning for his lips.

Then, he studied my pussy, fingering me while he hovered over me. He smacked his lips like he intended to feast but refused to eat.

“Alanzo, don’t do this. I need to touch you.”

“No,” he said, blowing a steady stream of hot air over my opening. “Let *me* touch *you*.”

I struggled to push my hands together, bracing for the coming excitement, the pleasure Alanzo would bring, especially with the fundamental control he gained through domination. He bound me to the bed and refused to give me the one connection I now completely craved.

Hooking his arms under my knees, he positioned himself in between my legs and continued to gape, studying my pussy and examining my reaction. His mouth opened and he took the first of many long, well-calculated swipes. Slow and easy, his tongue ran over the length of my folds, penetrating on occasion but only when absolutely necessary. He sipped at my lips when the teasing didn’t sate his thirst.

“Alanzo, please, let me feel you.”

“Shh,” he said. “You will, but first I’m going to drive you straight out of your mind.”

On his promise, his jaw dropped and his tongue advanced, forging through my opening and then thrusting inside with a long and steady swipe. Feeling detached, I relaxed with my arms high above my head and my legs splayed.

Kissing my mound, he muttered against my skin, “Watch me, Suzy.”

What was he, nuts? I couldn’t look down the length of my body and gaze into those dark, lust-filled eyes. I refused to follow his request, afraid of what I might find when I stared into his knowing gaze.

He raised my hips and stuffed a pillow under my bottom. Then he ate like he was hungry, sipped like he’d never tasted a woman capable of quenching his thirst, and he licked, God how he lapped, like he never planned to stop.

The pleasure was building, but he pulled away, refusing to let me ride his tongue and grab hold of the climax threatening to shatter around me. Bracing for an overwhelming finish, I finally opened my eyes to the hot gaze watching for a satisfied reaction. He withdrew his tongue, and with a swat across my mound, he said, "You'll look at me while I please you or else I'll wait hours before I fuck you."

Hours? Did he really think he possessed that kind of control? Marco never had the discipline to resist me. I'd be a crazy idiot to think any man so physically aroused maintained enough self-control to use refraining from sex as a form of punishment. I closed my eyes again and dared him to try and defy the laws of logic, the needs stirring inside of him.

I found out rather quickly where brothers certainly maintained significant differences. And I discovered the truest of Dom-sub relationships.

Chapter Eight

“I warned you,” Alanzo said, tapping the end of a dildo right where the sun should never shine.

“This has gone too far,” I complained. The toy locked inside my channel and hummed with various speeds. Maybe the batteries inside the vibrating monster realized the job at hand was a task one man fully expected performed.

“I’m just getting started, baby” he said, shoving the toy higher and slapping my pussy with smart swats, timed and precise.

A flood of excitement washed over me, and I braced for the finish. “You’re killing me, Alanzo. I need to come,” I whispered, begging for mercy.

“I’ve never heard of anyone dying due to their inability to orgasm.”

He slowly slid the toy away, replacing the device with his fingers taunting what had to be the mouth of a river, a flood waiting to happen. I humped at thin air, rising and falling against nothing in particular, aggravated and excited, a mix of emotions alerting my nerve endings and slamming the reminder into my tight chest. I realized his tongue would soon slide into place when he saw more evidence of my burning need, rising desire.

“Damn,” I swallowed and continued to roll my hips forward, “I’m coming.” Without a tongue to swipe or a finger to guide, the climax I’d worked to achieve rolled forward anyway like an invisible hand moved over my body, persuading me to take what Alanzo worked to achieve and I longed to experience.

Compliant, Alanzo used his tongue and reacted appropriately while his fingers performed. He worked his hand against my body with his mouth readily available. Lapping and growling with a famished man's intentions, Alanzo let the lust stir him even though he continued to resist taking me, branding me once again as his own.

"Alanzo!" I cried out, dying to wrap my legs around him, itching to feel his cock rippling inside me. Before I begged for specifics, he towered over me. His fingers twirled inside of me, working for complete satisfaction until I jerked one last time with the last tide to ride. Then he fisted his cock and slid inside.

* * * *

I was a new woman. His hands clasped mine after he released the binds, and, with our palms pressed together and our fingers entwined, Alanzo looked into my eyes and loved me like a man who wanted the promise of forever.

Stroke after stroke, his gaze matched mine, and as if he felt me shut off the resistance, he lowered his mouth and kissed me when he came. His tongue slowly moved inside my mouth. He screwed himself tighter and tighter, deeper and deeper.

"I love you, Suzy," he whispered, releasing my hands and touching his open hand to my cheek. "I want you to know I'll love you for the rest of my life."

"Alanzo," I whispered on a gasp.

"Don't say anything at all, hon. Just listen to me."

He slowly withdrew and tucked me against his side. "On paper you may have been my brother's wife. In my heart, you were always mine."

I processed the kind of pain I must have caused him, and, at the same time, I wondered why it took him nearly two years to approach me.

I wanted to know.

“He’s been dead for over a year, and you’re just now telling me this.”

“There were...complications.”

“Complications?”

“Suzy, I’m—damn it to hell.” He pushed me completely away from him and pulled open the bedside table at the same time he yanked his pants from the floor.

Startled, I waited to see what came next. Everything with Alanzo was a surprise, and the sudden change in his demeanor left me to wonder and anticipate a shock factor.

“I want you to marry me,” he stated flatly.

“Is that a question, a proposal?” I asked, eyeing whatever he had clutched in his closed fist.

Falling to the bedside, he clasped his hands, rolling around what I could see was clearly a stone. I squinted and sure enough, spotted the flash of gold.

“Oh, God, Alanzo.”

“Suzy,” he began, taking my hand in his. “When I go to bed with you, I don’t want a ghost under the sheets with us. My brother is dead. Bury him and marry me.”

The cruelty of the way he proposed marriage struck me as heartless, and I couldn’t respond. A dropped jaw prevented a rebuttal but the shock of it all angered me and, regardless of how I felt—and undoubtedly, I felt something for Alanzo—the need for a speedy trip to the altar struck me as inconsiderate at best.

“I’m not a PFC quarterback, and I know you don’t think I have anything to offer you, but I can make you happy, Suzy. I will. I swear it.”

“I don’t know what to say,” I finally managed at the same time he revealed a shiny four-carat diamond ring. If I’d wanted to add insult to the injury of saying no, then I could’ve easily managed. I knew whose money paid for the ring in his hand, and while I was tempted to

wear it for show, the old Suzy couldn't emerge under these circumstances.

"Say you'll marry me," he said, taking my ring finger and massaging the bone with his thumb. "Give us a chance."

"Giving you a chance and marrying you are two very different things, Alanzo."

"Not when there's love between us. You do love me, Suzy. A man can feel the love when he's in bed with a woman who's there because of what's in her heart."

"Everything is happening so fast with us, Alanzo. I don't know what I feel."

"Yes, you do. Search your heart and the only man you'll find there is me."

"That's not true."

His gaze narrowed and he pushed himself away from the bed. Pacing, he ran his hand through his hair. "You'll always love Marco. I can accept that. The love you have for him will never die completely, but you have room in your heart for me, Suzy. There's no one else for you except another Giovanni."

"And why would you say that?"

"You think I don't know how you feel when you're with me?"

"It's been two days, Alanzo."

"That's after what seems like a lifetime of waiting."

"You've had plenty of women in that short lifetime. Don't think Marco didn't tell me about them."

He copped a smile and then kissed my leg. "None of them were you."

"Of course not. In case you didn't know, the designer in heaven was fired after they released my patent."

"Is that right?" he asked, chuckling.

"Damn straight," I said trying to lighten the mood and change the subject.

“Suzy, I don’t want to open the door one day, pick up the newspaper, and see where you’re front page news. I don’t want to turn on the television and hear about a Suzy Illiani Giovanni caper. I want to know where you are when I go to bed at night and roll over to kiss you the next morning before leaving for work.”

That’s when it hit me. “Alanzo, do you even have a job now?”

“I take it Marco never told you what I do for a living?”

“No,” I said.

“Naturally, he wouldn’t.”

“Why?”

“I’m a bookie. I’m sure you know what a bookie does for a living.”

I gasped after his confession. A PFC player with a brother booking games wasn’t a favorable situation for any professional athlete.

Staring at the ring, I revisited my first assumption. The ring Alanzo wanted to slide onto my finger wasn’t one his brother had bought and paid for after all. No, instead, it was worse, much worse.

Alanzo made the purchase with dirty money. Naturally, I’d think so. PFC players and their wives were taught to run from the underworld found in sports and gaming.

“Marco knew you booked games?” I wanted him to clarify.

“Of course he knew. We’re brothers.”

“And he was okay with your career choice?” I asked, trying to understand.

“Suzy,” Alanzo said, cupping my face. “We were brothers, twins, who each took a different path when we pursued our dreams.”

“Oh,” I said, grabbing the sheet and holding it securely against my chest. “So that’s how you explain being a criminal?”

“I’m not a crook, baby. I make my money like most everyone else—pushing pens and shuffling papers.”

“Tell me something, Alanzo,” I tried to construct the question in a way designed to retrieve answers, quickly weighing the pros and cons

of asking anything at all in the first place. Did I want to know the truth? Or did I already know without further inquiry?

“Did Marco ever throw a game and cause the Rascals to lose?”

Alanzo licked his bottom lip. “How many games have you known Marco to lose, huh?”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

Scratching the back of his neck, Alanzo said, “No, Suzy. He didn’t cause the Rascals to lose any games in order to pad my pocket.”

I knew better. The way Alanzo’s eyes darted down and to the left, I didn’t believe him.

“Maybe not, but I bet he made sure they didn’t cover the spread in a few of the games, huh?”

“What do you know about spreads?”

“Enough to know that the Rascals rarely covered them the last two years when Corby had his surgery and Marco slid into the QB position.”

Alanzo looked at the ring. “You’re a smart lady, Suzy.”

“Smart enough to know what he did was illegal if you aren’t denying it.”

“And if I do?”

“I wouldn’t believe you now.” Leaving the bed, I hurried to the closet and found my robe. I tied the satin belt before turning around. “You used your own brother and his career to inflate your bank accounts.”

“I helped him out too, little woman. Don’t ever forget it.”

“How?” I turned around in the modest bedroom I once shared with Marco. “I didn’t see a lot of money. Practically everything Marco made went to charities.”

“Suzy, Marco had dreams for you, and he had plans, he just never shared them with you.”

I took the revelation like a shot through the heart. “He had plans, dreams you say?”

“Yes.”

“Dreams that included me but still he chose to share those ideas with you?”

“I was his brother.”

“And what kind of dreams are we talking here?”

“Big ones,” he said with dancing eyes. “Great big ones,” he added confidently.

“And where would someone like me find those dreams now?”

“I don’t know. I guess if you’re looking for those now, you’re going to have to look for them in me.”

“I’m talking about the money.”

“You think I don’t know that?”

“Where is it?”

“Someplace warm,” he assured.

“It’s dirty money. You know this, right?”

“There’s a lot of it. Dirty or not, and it’s ours.”

I swallowed tightly. I tried to remind myself of what I’d known to be true about my husband.

Marco was a player’s player. On the outside looking in, he had the world by its horns, but he never rode the bull.

Alanzo was full of shit. Surely to hell and back, Marco wasn’t the kind of man who placed wagers on his own games and allowed his brother to set the kind of lines guaranteed to pad bookmaker pockets. Then again, I had to go back and ponder his ninety-percent-charity rule. There was a lot I didn’t know about Marco.

And even more I didn’t understand about his brother.

Chapter Nine

Two Days Later

"Thanks for coming," I said, opening the door to greet Corby.

"Thanks for the invitation. Today was my day to watch the kids."

"Oh really?" I asked, studying the tall hunk standing in my doorway. "Where's the little woman today?"

"Sucking up to the team owners and doing the public wife thing. Making the press think I'm the world's best PFC husband."

Corby followed me to the den. I sat down after waving toward the sofa across from me. "I have a few things I need to ask you."

Corby looked toward the stairs across the foyer. "Where's Alanzo? Is he here?"

"No," I stated flatly.

Corby suddenly looked uncomfortable. "When will he be back?"

"I'm not seeing Alanzo right now," I informed. "I told him I needed some space and asked him to go back to South Padre."

"He won't stay there long."

"Why not?"

"He's in love with you, Suzy, and the man has it as bad for you as—"

"You can say his name here, you know." Then I added for smart-ass appeal, "This is a safe place."

Corby wasn't amused. "We all miss him, Suzy."

"Enough to protect him in his death as much as you did when he was alive?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

I reached under the coffee table and pulled out a large boot box. “I have enough evidence in this box to fry you and Mark while tarnishing my deceased husband’s good name.”

Corby stared at the box. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

The first beads of sweat popped on Corby’s forehead, and it was rare when I saw him sweat. “This probably doesn’t concern me,” he added, standing. “Maybe you should call Mark and ask him to stop by later.”

“Sit down, Corby,” I said firmly.

“Suzy,” Corby said, “If you think you’re going to run a game of sorts here, you’re looking at the wrong player on the field. I’m not guilty of anything. Whatever you have in that little box of yours, I’m sure it doesn’t concern me.”

I removed the lid and pulled out a few photographs from the top. The first one showcased a man affiliated with a known mob boss from New York. “This fellow was indicted three years before Marco died. You’ll recognize him. Indictments came down for gambling, prostitution, and money laundering.” The man in the picture was seated in between Corby and Marco. Mark stood behind them shaking hands with another familiar mob face, a fellow responsible for placing the mob boss behind bars. He was later dubbed a “rat” by the press.

“Where the hell did you get that?”

“I found it last year right after Marco died but didn’t think it meant anything. I shoved it under my bed, and it wasn’t until Alanzo somewhat admitted the truth to me that I decided to drag this out from under the old love mattress once more.

“I’d find something better to do with that mattress if I were you, Suzy. I suggest you burn whatever else is in that box.”

“You look worried, Corby.”

“You’re playing with a fire too large for you to contain.”

“You think?”

"I know." Corby pursed his lips, and about the time he took a step toward the foyer, Mark rushed through the front door.

"Good damn thing you're here," Corby said, extending his thumb toward Suzy. "You may want to look at her private collection there, buddy. Someone provided Suzy with pictures of our friends from New York."

"Really?" he asked, unconcerned at first, but his expression soon changed when he read and probably translated the worry on Corby's face. "Friends from New York, you say?"

"Yeah, you remember Geoff and Cort?"

He swallowed hard and then reached for the box. "Here, let me take a look at what you have there, Suz."

I tried to yank the box back, but with his grip secured, my effort didn't pay off. "I said, let me see."

He flipped through the photographs and then some of the notes. Those notes, I imagined, proved the most troubling. Those detailed accounts offered play-by-play proof of the team effort to throw some of the games or manage the point spread. Even the over or under totals, the points scored throughout the course of various games, looked rigged.

"Does Alanzo know you have this?" Mark asked.

"Alanzo doesn't care," I said flippantly.

"The hell he doesn't," Corby said, pressing one key on his cellular phone.

"Speed dialing your bookie?" I asked.

"No," Mark said, studying me. "He's placing a 9-1-1 call to a man you obviously know better than we do."

* * * *

Mark and Corby evidently thought Alanzo secured a fast hold and tight grip on me. From what I gathered, they needed him to clean up the mess his brother left behind. In the process, I suppose they wanted

him to come back to Dallas and take care of me, too, but they started sweating bullets when we seemed romantically interested in one another.

I pressed for answers, but my persistence didn't do any good. Corby and Mark weren't the kind of guys who explained their actions. They were the kind of men who, when caught with their pants down, refused to take the time to pull them up. Instead, they stood up, smirked, and later put the screws to the person they felt deserved it most.

"So, all this time, Marco was dirty?" I asked.

Mark and Corby exchanged a quick glance, and then Corby said, "Marco loved you Suzy. That's the only thing he ever wanted to do was love you, and that's really all you need to know."

"He lied to me!"

"How?" Mark asked. "By omission?"

"Yes!"

"Shit, Suzy. Grow up. The man made over ten million dollars a year with his salary and endorsements. He didn't owe you any explanations. He provided for you, and if it wasn't enough, then you should've taken it up with him while he was living. There's nothing you can do to change the past now."

"That's where you're wrong."

Without a second to spare, I gained Mark and Corby's full undivided attention. "What are you saying?" Mark asked.

"The world of sports is a big place," I reminded him. "I have friends and connections in the media."

"So what are you implying? You want to blackmail us?" Corby asked.

"No, if you tell me what I want to know, then I plan to give you this box and all of the contents right now."

Mark sat on the edge of the couch. "Start talking."

Corby paced the floor. Poor Mark, I mused. He had no idea how to handle this, and Corby, who thought faster on his feet, probably wouldn't save him.

Mark was married to me for several years, but even he didn't realize where this conversation was headed. But Corby did. He'd been played by a woman too many times in the past. He knew precisely where this conversation would take a difficult and rocky turn and he couldn't do anything to stop it.

Chapter Ten

The questions I wanted answered could've been satisfied by a simple yes or no response. Only, I expected to hear no-no-no straight across the board. When I didn't, well, things became complicated fast.

The man I loved and adored wasn't the man I married. The obvious unraveled quickly after I started digging for information. Corby and Mark were covering up something and most likely protecting their own hides.

"Start at the beginning," I said. "And don't leave anything out. How did you two get involved with this? Why was Marco rubbing shoulders with bookies when he was the most talented—sorry, Corby, but it's true—quarterback to ever play in the PFC?"

"Marco loved you, Suzy." Corby danced around the questions and, just as expected, Mark began his head nod. When Corby spoke, Mark became a yes-man.

"Yeah," Mark grumbled. "He loved you. I know he did."

"Like you love Cassie?" I asked.

"Yes," Mark snapped. "Like I love Cassie."

"Really?" I countered, rubbing my lips together. "I wonder what Cassie would think if she discovered what I know?"

"My God, are you threatening me?" Mark asked.

Corby tried bluffing. "You can have the damn contents. I refuse to betray a friendship," he said, walking toward the door. "Marco was my friend in life, and I'll be damned if I'll run him down now that he's dead. There's no way you're going to find the answers you need from me."

"He was cheating on me," I stated flatly unsure of where that came from. This wasn't about me. This was about his career.

Mark took a deep breath. Corby held his and I expected him to turn blue at any given time. Instead, he opened the door and left without saying goodbye.

What a way to answer a question.

"Mark," I said, turning to face him. Now I had cause to worry. "You owe me this much."

"I don't owe you anything, Suzy, but I'll give you something to hang on to. If I were in your shoes, I wouldn't dig for too much information. You're going to ruin your best chance for a real romance again. Don't throw that away because of some kind of sick need you have to make Marco into the kind of man you want to hate for reasons other than dying on you."

"I could never hate him."

"I have a feeling you could."

"So he cheated on me?"

"I thought you were more concerned about the gambling and his involvement in throwing the games?"

"I am but there's more to this than throwing games and collecting pocket change on the side."

"We aren't talking mad money here, Suzy."

"Millions?"

"Why don't you ask your boyfriend?"

"He's not my boyfriend."

"Maybe not, but he will be. You'd be a first-class fool if you let him get away now."

"Well that's a swift change, don't you think? Why is that, Mark? First, you didn't want me anywhere near him. Now you can't wait to hand me over to him. What's next? Will you be his best man if he asks?"

He glared straight ahead.

“How much fucking money did Marco hide and where do I find it?”

“Like I said, we aren’t talking the kind of money someone hides in their toddler’s piggybank.”

“Millions?”

“More than Marco would’ve ever made in the PFC over the course of seven lifetimes.”

I swallowed tightly. “And how much is that?”

“Like I said, you’ll have to talk to your boyfriend.”

Satisfied with his answer, I revisited the earlier question Mark didn’t want to address. “Mark, if I ever meant anything to you, please tell me the truth. Did Marco have other women?”

Mark’s skin looked white as snow, and he shook his head. “No, Suzy. Marco didn’t have other women.”

Reaching for the box, Mark’s hand touched mine and he caressed the back of my fingertips. “Walk away from this,” he said quietly.

In that very moment, something occurred to me. The package of Marco’s memories held all the answers, the evidence I needed to prove Marco wasn’t who I thought he was. Glancing inside the box one last time, a photograph caught my attention, one I hadn’t noticed before.

Yanking it out of the small container, I stared at the picture in disbelief. “Suzy,” Mark said. “Give me that.”

“This...this man has his...oh my God! He’s holding hands with Marco!”

Mark grabbed for the snapshot, but I held fast to the only proof I needed. “He wasn’t having an affair with a woman but...but...”

The door slammed behind us, and I looked up in time to see Alanzo stalking toward us. “What have you been telling her?” he demanded.

“Nothing,” Mark promised. “The pictures say plenty.” Then he said, “And no, he wasn’t having an affair—with a man or a woman.”

Fury existed in every step Alanzo took. "What the hell are you doing, Suzy?" he asked, taking the glossy five by seven and ripping it to shreds.

"He was gay?" I just couldn't process any other explanation. There was a picture of Marco and he was holding hands with a man.

"He wasn't gay for crying out loud," Alanzo yelled. "And that picture was taken right after the Rascals signed him so you weren't even a passing thought."

"I saw the picture. He was holding hands with an older man. When they were together doesn't matter to me."

Alanzo shook his head. "You're mistaken."

"Mark?"

"Suzy, I told you to drop it."

"Maybe your ex isn't as dumb as he acts after all. Why don't you listen to him?" Alanzo suggested, a dark edge embedded in his tone.

"No, why don't you tell me the truth?"

"Tell her," Mark encouraged. "You tell her or I will," he added, strolling toward the foyer.

Mark left, but I don't remember hearing the door open or close. I couldn't take my eyes off of Alanzo. I waited to hear everything. From start to finish, I wanted to know it all.

"I loved him," I whispered, the tears drifting over my cheeks. "I loved him so much."

"And he loved you."

"He. Was. Gay!"

"No, Suzy, he was controlled."

"What do you mean, controlled?"

Alanzo walked over to the bar and poured himself a club soda. Then he sipped it like he might have savored a single malt scotch.

Rubbing his finger around the rim of his glass, he finally said, "The man in the picture is Geoff Alberto. You're familiar with the story surrounding Marco's first girlfriend's death. That man is her father. If you'd looked closer, you would have noticed Marco's death

stare. Marco didn't want his picture made with Geoff, but Geoff grabbed him by the hand right before he walked away from the table. The photographer took the shot at the precise moment when Geoff reached for him."

"And you're saying Geoff controlled Marco and his career?"

"You think *a nobody* from Kansas made it all the way to starting quarterback of the Dallas Rascals without someone pulling a few strings? How do you think my parents packed up and moved to South Padre the second Marco secured his deals?"

"I've never thought about it."

"My brother was in bed with the wrong people, but not literally, regardless of what that picture may imply. Suzy, I didn't want you hurt or mixed up in any of this."

"Wait a minute. What are you talking about? Mixed up in what?"

Alanzo took a deep breath. "The charities you and Marco have supported, at least for the most part, are those set up by the family Marco supported during his lifetime, and you'll be expected to support them now."

"I'll be damned first."

"No, Suzy. Marco already made sure you were damned, or at least you will be if you don't have someone here taking care of things for you."

"I don't need your help! Don't you think you and your family have done enough?"

"Like it or not, I'm taking care of this problem for you. Marco would expect me to protect you."

"Protect me? So now I needed protection?" I stared at the crumbled photograph in Alanzo's hands. Then, my gaze lifted to his. "Are you in bed with them too?"

He leaned back on the sofa, crossing his left leg over his right while spreading his arms out over the top of the cushions. "Do you honestly think I'd ever snuggle up with someone hell bent on controlling me?"

Looking at his thick arms then, not to mention every other visible masculine feature, I seriously doubted Alanzo was any man's financial bitch. Then again, Marco once looked much the same way. I shook my head and walked to the kitchen, leaving him to sit in his sexy little position all by himself.

"Go ahead, Suzy. Pour you a drink. Drown your sorrows. The truth is still going to slap the shit out of you tomorrow."

I walked across the ceramic tiles still faster, allowing the clickety-click of high heels to sing to me while strolling toward the cabinet where Mark left the whiskey several nights before.

Yes indeed, I was pouring a drink. Oh, hell yeah, I was sinking into my misery. But first, I had a few things to say. I immediately turned around, facing off with a man who needed to understand how I interpreted the problem.

"Marco didn't tell me because he wanted to protect himself. He was afraid I'd go to the PFC commissioner or worse, go public. Marco loved the image he created for his fans. He was such a good guy, an upstanding citizen who happened to make a little more money than the average fellow and for what? To funnel money to the mob? He knew shit would hit the fan. I don't support this kind of thing."

"Oh really?"

I glared at him. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Forget about it," Alanzo said. After a beat he said, "Marco didn't have a choice."

"If he didn't have the right to choose, how in the hell do you expect me to think you do?"

"Because," he said smirking. "I'm not my brother. I've been trying to tell you that for quite some time. Suzy, you need me right now, and you need me more than you know. Now that the speaking engagements are over, you'll be approached. Alberto's men have already been circling here. Mom saw some of them stalking the cottage."

“Oh my God,” I said, covering my mouth. “That’s why you wanted the cottage sold?”

“Yes, part of the reason. You’re safer here.”

“Safer? You think they’ll kill me?”

“If you don’t do what they tell you, probably.”

“You mean if I don’t pay up when they ask?”

“They know Marco skimmed off the top.”

“Skimmed off the top?” Oh I was angry. “It was his damn money!”

“He was supposed to pay them ninety percent of everything he made, one way or the other, through one charity or foundation or another. Since they didn’t get what they thought they were owed, they’ll suspect someone did. That someone is you.”

“I’m a wealthy woman,” I told him. “But my wealth didn’t accumulate because of Marco or what he gave me.”

“No, but you have more than enough coming to you to keep up with their demands, at least initially.”

I resented the hell out of this. “How did Corby and Mark get involved?”

“There were a few thrown games where Corby and Mark were suspicious. They’ve been involved in football long enough to notice. They approached Marco and he didn’t deny it. Come to find out, Mark was already in deep with Geoff Alberto, too, or at least soon would’ve been. Alberto’s men approached him after a season opener three years ago and threatened Cassie and the kids.”

“I can’t deal with this,” I whispered, turning back toward the kitchen.

“You’re not going to cope with the truth any better tomorrow.”

Like hell.

“This problem will still be here when you sober up, Suzy. You have to face this. You can run from it, but you can’t hide because you’re scared of what you don’t know, or what you didn’t understand about Marco’s life.”

I took a deep breath and studied Alanzo. He didn't seem too worried. He, in fact, looked relaxed.

Good, I decided. Let him worry about this. His brother caused this mess. Alanzo should clean it up.

I wouldn't face anything tomorrow or even the day after. I was going to drink until I couldn't feel. Then, I'd awaken from the first binge and crack open another bottle, so I could start all over again.

Maybe when I finished with the booze in the basement, Alanzo would be gone. If not, he was a better man than his brother.

Chapter Eleven

Two Weeks Later

I woke up in a strange place. Numerous hospital lights overhead were dim but blinding nonetheless. The blue fluorescent bulbs cast a glare across the room where it met the bright sunshine gleaming outside the window. The dust particles in the place lingered in the center of the space like they had nowhere to hide.

Rolling over to a plaster wall, I looked up to see if I spotted an IV hooked to my arm. No IV and no hospital gown. Oh shit, I thought, sitting up all at once.

Rehab.

“Nice of you to join us, Mrs. Giovanni.”

“It’s Miss and it’s Illiani,” I corrected. Hell, I might as well take back my maiden name. After recent discoveries and feeling like the butt of every man’s joke, I needed to return to the Suzy I was before I met Marco, the woman I liked much better than the mousy broad Marco created for his own pleasure.

“All right, I’ll make a note of it,” the nurse said.

I studied the older woman. She looked nice enough. Her salt-and-pepper hair was pulled tightly into a neat bun high on top of her head. She showed off her pearly white teeth when she flashed a pleasant smile, and she had kind eyes proving she had a soul somewhere, which was a relief. I’d had enough of rubbing shoulders with those who didn’t possess one.

“Do you know where you are?”

"Sure I do. I just woke up about five minutes ago and, what do you know, I'm in a hospital, a rehab, I presume."

"Yes and you're in South Padre."

"Perfect," I drawled. "And let me guess who brought me here."

"Your mother-in-law."

"I was going for the brother-in-law, but Anna makes sense."

"Do you want to leave?"

"I have a choice?"

"We all have choices in life. I think you should stay, but we can't hold you against your will."

"How long have I been here?"

"Seven days."

"And I'm just meeting you for the first time?"

"You were sedated."

"Excellent. Can you knock me out again for the rest of my natural life?"

The woman took a deep breath. "Your brother-in-law filled me in on your particular case. You went on a drinking binge because of some disturbing news you discovered about your deceased husband?"

"Sure, disturbing. If that works for Alanzo and Anna, I can play along."

"What would you call it?"

I coughed. "I...well, I can't exactly tell you. Ask me again in a few hours. Disturbing works for now."

She handed me a clipboard. "I need you to go over these papers. You were originally here under a court order for your safety, but now you have the option of leaving or staying. We'll need you to sign over your consent for treatment."

"Court order?"

"Yes, your mother-in-law secured a court order to seek emergency medical and detox treatment for you after your brother-in-law found you in your Dallas home."

He didn't find me. He was with me. Evidently, he wanted to protect his name in the media. Apparently, they didn't think about mine when they secured a court order. I was probably front-page tabloid news by now.

"I'm not signing these papers."

"I recommend—"

I stood and the act wasn't easy. Wobbling to find my balance, I said, "I don't give a damn about your recommendation. I need you to call someone to pick me up. I can give you my ex-husband's number."

"If you want to call a friend or a family member," the woman said sweetly, "you can do it yourself. We don't offer concierge services here, Miss Illiani."

At least she had the name right now.

"Can you point me toward the nearest phone?"

"No, ma'am. If you choose to leave here, you'll walk out. There's a convenience market about a mile down the road, and if you have change in your purse, you should be able to use the phone there or at least use your debit card at the ATM."

I scoured the room for my handbag. "Where is my purse?"

The woman walked across the room, and before she left, she said, "Beats me. I wasn't here when you arrived. However, we have a policy here at Oceanside Detox, and all of our patients are assigned private rooms with lockers. Your personal effects are in the locker behind the bathroom door. If you came here with anything other than the clothes on your back, I imagine you'll find your belongings there."

With her last remark, the nurse, who I mistakenly believed could become an ally, walked away with a tight grin on her face. She must've decided she wasn't in the mood to form alliances when I didn't agree to sign her stupid forms. So much for a soul, the woman didn't even have a heart.

Taking short steps toward the bathroom, I slammed the door and found the locker. Desperate, I yanked it open and found nothing there except my house slippers.

“Fuck my life!”

This definitely had the earmarks of Anna Giovanni. This was the last straw. It was time to take my life back. The Giovanni family had controlled me for the last time.

Sliding the slippers over my feet, I glanced around the room for anything else that might belong to me. Then I marched out the door and down the hall.

* * * *

It was raining. I didn't care. I crossed my arms and stomped down the twenty-some brick steps and followed the long brick driveway back to the main road.

I could smell the salt water in the air and resisted the urge to run for the beach, assuming the only way to the ocean from where I stood was on the other side of rehabilitation. I rushed by the large sign welcoming guests to Oceanside Detox Center. Right under the logo, a mission statement read something along the lines of “Where privacy and rehabilitation remain our priority.”

Yeah right. That was prior to my entry there. I bet they had a long list of individuals waiting for admission after they signed me in as a patient.

In the PFC, one didn't have to worry about keeping up with the Joneses. It was more along the lines of keeping up with the Tellers, and since I was still affiliated with them, it was a safe bet every wealthy woman in the state of Texas wanted their twenty-one days at Oceanside Detox.

I kept walking. Surely, I'd run into the press, and if I did, then someone there would gladly take me home.

The rain came down in sheets. I rounded the bend and that's where I spotted him. At first I was relieved. After all, walking down the street in the pouring rain with my slippers splashing from one puddle straight into the next didn't offer a lot of appeal. Then I remembered.

The man behind the wheel of that little red Corvette was ultimately responsible for my trip to South Padre. I kept right on walking even when his wheels rolled through a few deep puddles and the automobile slid to a sudden halt.

"Suzy!" Alanzo called out. "Suzy! Damn it. Get in this car."

"No way in hell." I kept right on trucking it, swinging my arms as fast as I could in order to get to where I was going. I didn't care where I ended up as long as I wasn't near a Giovanni or a detox center.

I broke into an outright run, and soon after, Alanzo grabbed me from behind and swung me over his shoulder. "You're not running away from me."

"Like hell, I'm not!" I screamed, hit, and kicked.

And a lot of good it did. Alanzo marched to the car, yanked the passenger door open, and swatted my ass a few times as a warning. "So help me, if you don't sit still when I put you in this car, I will strip you down to bare ass and spank your bottom until everyone in South Padre comes out here for the show."

When he put me in the passenger seat, I kicked the dashboard and screamed out. He took his time, even in the pouring rain, before he opened the driver's door and sat down next to me.

"What are you doing to yourself, Suzy?" he asked, rain dripping off his dark bangs and running over his forehead and cheeks.

"I want to go home."

"You are home."

"Like hell I am!" I kicked the dashboard again.

"Do you mind?" He used his bare hand and swiped the mud off the interior.

"Take me to the airport."

"I don't think you want to go home looking like that."

"I don't give a shit. I'm not going anywhere with you!"

He pulled back onto the main road and then drove along the ocean toward Anna's South Padre home. I recognized several of the places we passed. We ran into traffic around The Isla Grand Beach Resort, and Alanzo glanced over at me.

"Don't stare at me," I snapped.

"When the hell are you going to quit acting like a child?"

"When you and Mother Bitch stop treating me like one."

A few minutes later, we pulled into the Sea Vista Condominiums. He waved to a groundskeeper, and we continued deeper into the parking lot. Once he found a parking place, he walked over to help me from the car. I was out before he offered his hand.

"Suit yourself," he mumbled, walking toward one of the seaside units.

"Since when don't you live at home?" I asked, trailing behind him.

"Since I bought this place for you."

Glaring at the arrogant son-of-a-bitch, I said, "Beachfront or not, I'm not staying here."

"Then go ahead, Suzy. Walk away. You're not going to use me for a hot shower and dry clothes and then leave me once you have Mark or Corby on their way down here. I've told you over and over again, I'm going to love you, but I can do that from a distance. I can also practice tough love."

I snickered sarcastically. "Yeah, I just bet you can. You are more like your brother than you'll ever know."

"I'm nothing like him. When you move past flesh and bones, you'll see we are two very different people. My brother is a good man, but he's also blinded by the love he feels for you."

I stilled, gasping and unable to process everything at one time. Everything I knew to be true suddenly seemed like a big, fat lie.

Marco was alive. I had no reason to doubt that. Alanzo had just spoken about him in the present tense and for whatever reason Alanzo and even Marco wanted me to believe he was dead.

Taking a few steps at a time, Alanzo stopped in front of unit 210 and retrieved his keys. He opened the door and stepped to the side. Slowly, I approached, calculating what I wanted to say, what I should and shouldn't ask. If Marco wanted me to believe he was dead, then there had to be a good reason.

I gulped. Was my mind playing tricks on me or was it possible? Could Marco still be alive?

"I hope you like your new home." Alanzo's words jolted me back to the here and now.

"Taunt all you like," I snapped, walking by him. "I'm not staying."

"As long as you're carrying my child, I'm in your life. After you have my son or daughter, then you can walk away forever, but I will know how you spend every waking hour while you're pregnant whether you're here or in Dallas."

I stopped dead in my tracks. "What did you say?"

He tossed the small keychain on a slick marble-top table in the foyer. "You're pregnant, Suzy."

"Like hell I am. I had my tubes tied."

"Liar. You went to have them tied when you and Mark were married and told everyone you had them snipped. The truth isn't quite so dark. You didn't go through with it, thank God. And like you mentioned once before, you aren't on birth control. A woman who has her tubes tied probably doesn't have a need to mention birth control, you know? You're carrying my baby, and I couldn't be happier."

I processed the new information right along with the new belief that my dead husband never kicked the bucket. Then I did what every woman with child probably does at some point after hearing such blissful news. I sat down on a nearby chair and sobbed.

* * * *

Hours later, Alanzo was seated on the lounge chair staring at the sea when I walked out on the balcony. "Feeling better?" he asked without looking in my direction.

"Some," I admitted, glancing down at the pink jogging suit Alanzo must've left on the bed for me. "Amazing what a shower can do for a girl."

He glanced up. "You're not a girl, Suzy, and now you're going to be forced to behave like a woman. I can't have you drinking until you pass out when you're pregnant with my child."

"It's not yours," I blurted out.

"Is that right?" he asked, clearly amused.

"No," I said flippantly. "Mark is the father."

He rubbed his chin. "Wow, that's pretty pathetic. Does Cassie know you slept with one of her fellows?"

"Why, yes, she does. She walked in on us at the house. Ask her. Call her right now and see what she tells you."

"You didn't have sex with Mark."

"I did."

"After you had sex with me?"

"Yes."

"Well, then," he said angrily. "I guess the papers were right all along, weren't they?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" I asked when his shoulder brushed by mine.

"You're nothing more than damaged goods, an older woman who finds her thrills in the arms of younger men who, by the way, Suzy, are no longer standing in line to bed a babe used up by one too many football greats."

"You bastard," I whispered.

“No, I’m not a bastard, and I’ll be damned if the child you’re carrying will be.” He marched inside, pulling the sliding screen door shut behind him. A few minutes later, I heard him on the phone.

“Mark, this is Alanzo. I have a question for you.”

Chapter Twelve

I woke up in his arms. I'd fallen asleep on the balcony, but at some point, I remembered feeling him cradle me against his body. He'd stepped inside the condominium and then later knelt down on the bed with me.

I also remember how he swiped the hair out of my face, carefully removing one or two extra strands of hair glued to my face because of the rain and tears. The weather was so unpredictable in South Padre. It had been raining when I left the treatment center but later turned into a beautiful afternoon. Apparently, the rain came back again after I fell asleep.

The weather matched my mood and my inability to make a decision about Alanzo and my feelings for him. I didn't want to love anyone with the last name Giovanni.

My hand went to my belly. "That doesn't include you," I whispered, touching my lips and remembering the soft and gentle kiss that had been placed there when I was somewhere between waking up and returning to my dreams.

Rubbing my fingers back and forth across my mouth, I suddenly inhaled a quick intake of minty air and remembered everything. Oh my God, I thought, sitting at once. It's true! *Marco is alive!* He'd been there.

I quickly jumped up and ran over to the closet. Yanking the door open, I felt for the light switch, gasping when I saw a designer closet larger than the average master bedroom in modest homes. I tip-toed inside the L-shaped area, and when I turned the corner, that's when my suspicions gained merit.

Lining one wall, photographs from Marco's PFC days and our wedding pictures were in silver and gold frames. On the other wall, the kind of wardrobe Marco liked most. Jeans and sweatshirts, flannel pajama pants, and collegiate T-shirts. Since Marco skipped college in order to go straight into professional football, he'd always kept an assortment of college shirts, especially those from Virginia Tech and the University of Southern California, two schools that once pursued him with scholarship offers.

I rushed to the hanging garments and pulled them to my face, smothering my head in the material while inhaling the scent of him, the Polo cologne he often wore filling my senses. God love him. *He is alive!*

Tears streamed down my face and my breathing increased. Reality punched me in the gut. He's alive and had gone to this extraordinary trouble to make everyone, including me, believe he was dead. There had to be a reason and a very dangerous one at that.

What kind of man deserted a love like ours?

"I didn't want to go, Suzy," he said from behind me, and his husky voice spilled into the room like shards of glass breaking against a tile floor. I didn't just hear the raspy fall of his tone but I also felt it against my skin. He seemed to whisper the statement right above my ear, yet he wasn't there beside me.

Scared, frightened to death that all of this was an illusion, I slowly turned around. I gasped. Sure as I was standing there, my husband was standing there too.

My hand flew to my chest, and my heart pounded against my palm. "Is...is...this a dream?"

His lips thinned, and he shook his head. "No, sweetheart."

"But I saw you. In the casket, I...I watched them *bury* you."

A peculiar smile tilted his lips even though he looked burdened; deeply saddened by the events he'd placed in motion. "Suzy, what you saw was a replica of me, a doll made to order."

"You can't be serious," I said evenly.

"Thanks to your little fascination with sex dolls, I found a company that created a perfect copy of me. The year before I died—left—I ordered it, claiming I wanted to give it to you for Christmas."

"You ordered a sex toy manufactured to bring about pleasure in order to bring about pain and heartache?"

I was furious!

"That wasn't my intention."

"Then what was your intention?" I bellowed. "You always said those dolls were a waste of money and time. You were the very one who said I couldn't fake orgasms with a damn doll, but then you buy one specifically for the purpose of faking your own death? Who does such a thing?"

"Suzy, let me explain."

"Why would you do this? Why would you leave me?" I was shaking so hard, locks of hair fell into my face. Swiping them away, I glared at him, and that's when I melted.

"Honey, you don't know how difficult it was. I didn't have any other choice."

Honey? He'd also called me sweetheart, speaking to me with such compassion that he fully expected me to what? Forgive and forget? Rush into his arms and beg him to touch me? Love me? What?

"You're alive," I whispered, unable to tear my eyes away from his piercing gaze.

"Yes," he said. "And I want to explain everything to you, but first...can I please hold you?"

I shuddered. I thought of the Marco and Suzy we used to be. I thought of all the joy he once brought into my life only to strip it away and let me experience more pain than I'd ever endured.

He looked like he fully expected me to accept the fact that he reentered my life with few initial explanations. He acted like he'd simply disappeared rather than created a façade while faking his own death. Either way, and much to my good fortune, Marco was back again and apparently ready to act like a husband.

Too many emotions collided at one time. “How could you?” I asked on a whisper. “How the fuck could you?” The second time around, I spat the words, and my fists went to his chest. Rushing him was far better than staring at him from across the room.

He held my wrists with one hand and stared at me. I saw the pain and the truth of many burdens he’d had to carry all this time. “Everything I did, Suzy, I did for us. I had to do this to save us.”

“What the hell are you talking about, save us? You’ve fucking destroyed us!”

Alanzo walked in at some point. “No, honey, he didn’t. He saved your life and his own. He couldn’t keep up with the demands anymore. The mob bosses wanted more and more.

“Marco didn’t have the means to satisfy what they wanted once they discovered he used me to profit on the games they taught him how to throw. He was losing everything he had that was important to him, including a career he deserved.”

“And you lost that anyway, didn’t you?”

Marco nodded. “Geoff Alberto is a very powerful man. When he lost his daughter to a drunk driver, he blamed me as much as the driver who struck our car. I was, after all, driving Francine. He’s made a sport out of trying to recoup what he lost in his daughter’s life by making sure I never have financial gain, making me pay again and again for something I had no control over.”

“You could’ve gone to the police,” I said.

“And what then? End up dead? Stand by and watch something happen to you or Alanzo? These people don’t play around, Suzy.” He reached for me then like he couldn’t withstand the urge any longer. “I have a lot of explaining to do but first I need a hug from my wife.”

He wrapped his arms around me, and the second his forearms crossed right above my ass, I was home again. I felt his love surround me, and sensed the security I missed when he went away.

Clawing at his head then, I pushed my fingers into his thick hair and kissed him with an open mouth. I needed to inhale him, kiss him, and breathe in his life all at the same time.

Framing his face, I smothered him with kisses, loving the taste of him, loving the way he eagerly held on to me while allowing me the pleasure of having him the way I wanted him.

"Oh, Marco!" I cried out, draping my arms over his back and sobbing into his shirt. "I've missed us."

Gasping when I heard Alanzo shift behind us, I peered over Marco's shoulder and came face to face with a new obstacle. I moved away from Marco abruptly and studied the brothers.

Alanzo looked skeptical, like he might believe he'd lost me forever. Marco looked expectant, like he probably felt I should forget the fact he died in front of my eyes, right on national television so the whole world could see him go down on the football field. The papers had later printed press releases from the PFC Commissioner and doctors who'd worked tirelessly to save him. And all of it was a scam.

They made the mob bosses into believers.

Why hadn't he told me the truth? Didn't he trust me enough? I searched Alanzo's eyes and saw the hurt inching its way into his moist eyes before he turned to walk away.

"Don't go," I whispered. "You promised you'd never leave me." I eyed Marco. If what I said hurt Marco, he'd have to deal with the consequences of his premeditated actions.

There was a time for everything. The time had come for us to practice a little honesty and try to keep our integrity in check at least when we were around one another.

"I'll never leave you," Alanzo said, looking past his brother and eyeing me.

"But you lied to me," I reminded. "You knew Marco was alive."

"No, he didn't. He found out a few days ago when mother finally told him."

"Your mother knew you were alive all along?"

Marco studied Alanzo briefly. They were twins, but more than brothers, they had been best friends. Did Alanzo feel as betrayed as I did?

"I had to have someone in the family watching for Francine's family members, waiting for them to surface. Mom knew the Alberto family well. It was too dangerous to tell Alanzo everything considering his business."

Of course it would be, and yet that truth alone devastated me all the more. I shot Alanzo another quick glance. I wanted to cry for him.

I saw his pain and understood he was so distraught over his loss that he could barely comprehend it when his brother died. Then, when he loved me the most, when he'd gone through as many trials and tribulations as a man could suffer with one woman, the only true competition he'd ever had, resurfaced.

"I love Alanzo," I blurted out all at once, watching the acceptance wash across Marco's expression.

"I know," Marco said, unaffected by my confession.

"I'm not giving him up."

Alanzo arched a brow. His smile warmed my heart and his expression mirrored his brother's.

Marco took a deep breath, diverting my attention back to him. "Well then, we'll deal with it, won't we?"

"Yes," I whispered, smiling at Alanzo. "And I think we'd better do that now."

Chapter Thirteen

I used to wonder what life would've been like to have two men bidding for my time and loving me with everything they had to give. There were countless times when I even wanted to suggest a threesome with Alanzo, but because of Marco's love for me, I pushed my desires aside.

I loved Marco. I didn't want to hurt him. Maybe everything happened for a reason. Perhaps I was always destined to love Marco and Alanzo. Since the longing for one brother matched the other, I imagined we finally made it to the place where we were always destined to be.

Watching Marco and Alanzo act somewhat uncomfortable as they waited for me on the bed, each with a white sheet draped across his lap, I couldn't help but feel loved from all sides.

I didn't want something I couldn't have. There would never be another time when I would wonder what might have been. I was going to experience everything I'd longed to enjoy.

Standing in the doorway, I eyed my men, the lovers I couldn't wait to feel taking me, sharing me, loving me.

Marco had come back to me. Alanzo, even after everything we'd been through, still wanted me.

Alanzo winked and Marco motioned for me with a crook of his finger. When my knees hit the mattress, they surrounded me.

"What a beautiful woman we have," Marco said, licking the lobe of my ear and pulling me to him.

"I couldn't agree more," Alanzo rasped, kissing my forehead and then running his fingers over the sheer straps of my thin camel-colored slip.

"I hear we have a wedding to plan," Marco whispered, kissing a path from one shoulder to the next, moving his body against mine, allowing me to feel his length.

Chill bumps ran up and down my spine. Marriage? Why did I already feel strangely committed to Alanzo? Was it possible to love two men at the same time with equal passion and unwavering desire?

"Wedding?" I asked, elated when I saw the smile on Alanzo's face.

Marco gave a terrific massage. He rubbed my shoulders and worked his way down to the small of my back. "I can't have my niece or nephew running around here without a father."

Turning my head slightly to the left, I studied his expression. "You're okay with your brother fathering my child?"

"He gets the first one, Suzy. I'll try for the next one."

"But..."

"And I want you to marry him," he said without looking at Alanzo.

"I'm still married to you," I whispered, hearing my heart pulsing in my ears more than the words I'd simply spoken.

"You can't be married to a dead man, Suzy."

"I can't marry two men."

"Why not?" Alanzo said, gripping my hips. "The Tellers pulled it off."

"Yes, but they have an unconventional arrangement, and it's not legal."

"You're going to make it legal with Alanzo." A beat later he said, "You do love him, right?"

I looped my arms around Alanzo's neck and kissed him lightly on the lips. "More than he'll ever know."

Marco slapped my hip. "Then making it official seems practical. You married me. You'll marry him."

"And we're really going to do this thing?" I asked, looking from one man to the next.

Marco pushed against me. Alanzo stroked himself, rubbing his length up and down my thigh.

"Oh, we're definitely doing this," Marco promised. "And we'll keep doing it until we make damn sure we get it right."

My heart fluttered. Adult fairy tale dreams were coming true. Marco and Alanzo were going to love me.

Alanzo moved away from the bed and Marco laid me down, kissing me. He towered over my body, bracing his hands on either side of the pillow, making love to my mouth while letting his cock hang right at my mound, the sheet long gone and no longer separating us.

Oh how I wanted him. I wanted the slow and easy lovemaking, but I also needed something more. This was my first threesome experience with the men I planned to spend the rest of my life loving. I wanted something special to remember the occasion by.

When Alanzo returned to bed, I quickly understood they must have longed for an incredible first experience as much as I did. They had every intention of making memories and, apparently, planned for them.

With a toy kit tossed aside, Alanzo fumbled with a tube of lubricant while Marco's lips spun magic. There wasn't a place his kisses missed as he moved around my body, revisiting familiar territory he deserted for far too long.

When Alanzo inched closer, his heavy cock bumped against my ass. "We're going to drive you crazy, Suzy." His hands propelled up my legs and he paused a moment to dip his fingers between my thighs. "Hmm..." he whispered.

"I want to remember everything about this night."

“Rekindle old flames. I want to watch,” Alanzo whispered at my ear.

Marco slid closer, fisting his cock at my folds. “Thank God you didn’t want to play rough. I’ve been waiting a long time for this.”

I wondered then if Marco had been with another woman. If he’d been away from me for nearly two years, had there been someone else? Had he made love to another person when I’d been mourning him?

When his cock touched my pussy, and the tip parted my lips, I gave up the questions. Alanzo walked away from the bed and claimed a nearby seat on the large ottoman.

I turned my head to the side, curious about what he was doing, and my eyes widened with the view. With splayed legs, Alanzo caressed his thick dick with a slow hand, a hand he could’ve used to manipulate my pleasure but instead watched me find mine while he worked at managing his own.

Marco glanced down at our bodies. He slowly entered me. “God, Suzy. I’ve missed this.”

Locking my ankles around his back, I rose to greet another kiss, stretching my neck and longing for the intimate joining of mouths just as much as I wanted to hear the slapping of bodies.

Once Marco kissed me, it was all over. His legs tightened and he buried himself inside of me, screaming out my name and crying, yes crying as he came.

My hand went to his neck, and I massaged his nape, pulling him closer when he fell against my chest, nuzzling my breasts and squeezing my sides. “God, I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you too,” I said, kissing the top of his head.

Marco’s cock remained inside me. I didn’t want him to pull out, and he didn’t offer to move.

My gaze met Alanzo’s, and immediately, my mouth watered. He squeezed and released his hard dick with a firm tug, giving himself

one hell of a hand job, while tilting his head to the side. The longer he stared at me with lust-filled eyes, the wetter I became.

"Join us," I said.

He shook his head. His hooded eyes concealed some of his desire but not enough. No, there was too much there to go around, far too much to explore.

Tangled sheets and Marco kept me confined. "Come to bed."

Alanzo winked. "Not yet."

Marco started to move again. With tongue in cheek, he said, "Am I not enough for you?"

I should've reminded him that he shot off like a rocket, but I was grateful he did. The way he couldn't hold back more or less made a believer out of me.

He'd missed having a woman. He'd missed loving me.

Marco's strokes were like gentle caresses. I felt him swelling inside my walls, the strength of his erection gaining substance once more.

Unable to settle on one Giovanni, I watched Alanzo, eyed the way he handled himself and caressed his cock without a care in the world. Then my focus returned to Marco, and I was thankful to have him, grateful for another opportunity to experience his love.

Alanzo joined us. He moved to the side of the bed with his penis in hand, tilting my chin toward him. "Suck my cock, little one."

Marco smirked. "Damn."

I guess he was surprised at how Alanzo talked to me, but I didn't mind. Nothing made me hotter.

I lapped at the end, tapping his balls until he flinched. Then, when the pre-cum topped the head, I swiped my tongue across the crest and drew him inside my mouth.

At the same time, Marco exploded again and Alanzo pounded down my throat until I yearned for his release. Instead, I found my own.

* * * *

Hours later, I awoke in a spooned position. Marco ground his cock against my ass, reaching across me and Alanzo for the lubricant.

"I've missed this sweet bottom," he whispered.

"She needs a spanking," Alanzo grumbled from the other side of the bed.

"Does she?"

"Yes," Alanzo said. "She's been playing with my cock for the last hour."

"If that were true, you'd have me sealed off by now."

"Marco, what do you say we give the little lady what she wants?"

"She can't handle us."

Alanzo arched a brow. "You mean because of the baby?"

"Yeah," Marco said, kissing my nape.

Alanzo squeezed my breasts, drawing one nipple to his lips.

"What do you think, sweetie. Can you take us both?"

I wiggled my way out of the sandwiched scenario, climbing over Alanzo at the same time. Before he could put some kind of Domination and submission into his foreplay, his cock slid inside my pussy, and I moaned, throwing my hips back. "You'd better hurry, Marco. I won't last long."

Marco took my hips like I presented them as a very special gift. His thumbs parted my cheeks. "Oh hell yes, this is where I want to be."

Marco plunged into my ass. Alanzo took his own sweet time claiming my pussy, sliding in and out until I was dripping with need, dying for a thrashing I'd never forget.

"Are you okay?" Alanzo asked, staring at my lips.

"Are you kidding," I replied softly. "I've never felt anything so erotic in my life."

"Somehow," Marco said, grabbing my hips. "I always knew you'd feel this way."

That's when they both started to move. The ride of a lifetime was set to begin.

Epilogue

In the wee hours of the morning, I stared at my future and saw nothing but the love waiting to find me. I looked at Marco, thankful—oh so thankful—that I could see my husband again.

Placing my palm to my stomach, I remembered the little one I'd soon bring into this world all because of the perfect planning. Even with its minor imperfections, Marco must've weighed the pros and cons of the decision he made and felt good about them before he left me. Did his perfect planning include all of us together?

Whatever his original goals were, I was incredibly fortunate. While the Giovanni men were identical in many ways, they'd each maintained their own separate identities, taking different paths in life that somehow coincided with extreme circumstances guaranteeing they would eventually live parallel lives again.

I didn't worry about tomorrow or what the future might hold. And I didn't want to ask questions about the past. The present mattered. The future counted.

Everything else had to be left behind.

Marco chose to run. He decided to deal with his problems in his own way. He had his reasons. He wanted to take care of me and secure a future we could, in fact, live to enjoy. He'd done that. Somewhere along the way, he'd also given me something more than I ever expected. He'd given me his brother, and that in itself was one of love's most unselfish gifts.

My name is Suzy Illiani Giovanni. I am deeply indebted to the men who changed my life.

Marco Giovanni's love once rehabilitated me, and through him, I discovered a side to myself I never knew existed. Alanzo saved me from heartache and the sorrow that threatened to destroy me. Through Alanzo, I found Marco again, and through them both, I discovered a love stronger than I'd ever known.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Destiny Blaine began her writing career as a ghost writer. Accustomed to working in the shadows, it's really no surprise to find her writing is often classified under the paranormal genre. She particularly loves writing about fang-bangers and leans toward creating sexy-hot alpha males ready to dominate the world and the women they love. Her other writing passions include western ménage and sports-related romances.

Destiny Blaine and her pseudonyms are best selling international e-book and trade paperback authors. She lives in East Tennessee with her husband and their two children.

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