

# Laid Bare Cerise DeLand

Tate Ryder has spent his life savoring plenty of women—until luscious Anna Stevens comes along, who doesn't seem to know he's alive. Then, inexplicably, Anna is attacked outside his condo. Tate keeps her safe by whisking her to his yacht, where he vows to enchant her sleek body with pleasures she'd only imagined.

Anna answers his intimate kisses with scorching caresses and wild revelations. She's been on the run from thugs for years. She's not who she claims. But one thing is real – her deep craving for Tate.

Enthralled, Tate lays bare her body...and is equally determined to lay bare her nameless enemy.

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Laid Bare

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# LAID BARE

Cerise DeLand

# Dedication

To the wonderful friends I've made in Mexico, a land of enchanting people.

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# **Chapter One**

Tate Ryder tore his eyes away from the elegant vision of Anna Stevens strolling onto the veranda of his Houston penthouse talking on her cell phone, and reminded himself once more of the three rules he never broke. Don't borrow trouble. Don't start anything you can't finish. And most important of all, don't fuck the staff.

Leaning back on the railing, he gazed through the glass walls of his condo and faced the party raging inside. He congratulated himself he'd never approached Anna as anything other than the CEO of Ryder Resorts and Spas. God knew, every time he got within twenty feet of his director of oriental meditation services, he needed to chill out. Even now from the corner of his eye, he could feel her seep into his pores. Sense how she'd fished her cell phone from her black satin trousers and answered in the sandpaper contralto that rubbed his body into a hot rash of desire.

*Like her voice is the only asset that drives you nuts, Ryder.* How about those long legs in those flowing slacks? Those pert breasts poking up in that ruffled silk blouse. The grace of her in stilettos. The full-throated laughter that usually marked her personality. That wasn't apparent tonight, but what the hell. The whole package drove him crazy.

Don't fuck the staff, Ryder.

For the past two years, he'd been such a good CEO and followed that rule with her. And it killed him.

Sure, he praised himself for his dedication to being an ethical boss, but damn, if he didn't still want her. Good thing she hadn't ever indicated any interest in him. Didn't matter. Her rich beauty burned his brain. Worse, his cock got locked and loaded every time he looked at her.

He downed a swig of his champagne and cursed his dilemma.

She was nothing like the women who used to attract him. Lithe, delicate, Anna sported a cloud of rich rosewood hair, sprinkles of freckles on her nose, flawless porcelain skin and the biggest set of hazel eyes he'd ever seen. The yoga and Pilates director at the Texas Gulf Coast spa he owned with his brother Cord and sister-in-law Sienna, Anna moved like a sea breeze. She had firm breasts that stood up without benefit of a bra, her huge flat nipples outlined in the ridiculously thin leotards she wore to the club. But what really worked him over were her legs. Long as a gazelle's, they were beautifully cut from years of working out. The hollow of her inner thigh near her pussy was a curve he longed to bury his face in. Better yet, her thighs were supple muscular treats that deserved to be grasped and opened often by a man who knew how to lavish kisses on her labia and her clit and make her cat purr.

He licked his lower lip, wondering for the thousandth time what her flavor was. Sweet? Salty? Both? His shifted, his cock rising to the fantasy that never left him.

Hell. He swallowed back his frustration. He was the host here in his condo, he should act like it. Mix. Mingle. Try to summon some interest in one of the new women here who neither worked for him nor wanted anything from him except maybe a great time in bed.

Like he'd even been able to get it up for any woman except Anna for the past year. For all the exercise his cock was getting, he might as well become a monk. "Time to think about getting laid with someone you can have."

"Talking to yourself, Bro?" His older brother Cord clamped a hand on his shoulder. Mona Travis, their friend and owner of another chain of spas in the U.S., stood beside him.

Tate shot them both a grim look. "What I do best."

Cord chuckled. "Only about one subject."

Mona arched a long thin brow. "Are you drooling over Anna again?"

Tate scoffed. "Should I wear a billboard?"

"Ever since the day you hired her away from me," Mona taunted Tate, "you've had a fever for the lady."

"Does not compute, you guys," Tate warned. "The lady is not interested."

"I do wonder why," Cord mused. "You are a catch, man. Rich, good-looking." He ruffled Tate's auburn hair.

Tate shrugged. "Says you. But I'm resigned. She's never given me a second look and my poor damaged ego cannot bear to ask her why. Plus, I am not going to break our rule." Cord had spoken to Tate frequently lately, recognizing Tate's desire for Anna was a temptation. But Tate had never broken a trust with his brother—and didn't intend to. Not for a woman who couldn't care less for him.

Cord nodded. "Good thinking. Me? I'm just saying good night. I've greeted everyone. So we are officially in shape for the opening of the Texas spa. But I've got to go home. Sienna needs me."

Tate smiled. "Sure. Do it. Those twins are demanding little guys."

"Sienna's still exhausted from their birth."

"I've got control here. Get the hell out of here and go home to your wife and babies. I'll show all these folks the door soon anyway. I need my beauty sleep to get an early start in the morning. The boat's ready, stocked with food and supplies."

"Mexico?" Mona asked.

"Yep," Tate said. "They screwed up the plumbing on the first foundation and have to pour a new one."

"And they're late," Cord added with a scowl.

"What else is new?" Mona commiserated, then leaned forward to kiss Tate's cheek. "I'm leaving too, honey. Early day tomorrow with one of my importers from Monterrey."

"Take it easy, Mona." Tate smiled at the svelte older woman who had become a good friend over the past few years. As she walked toward the door, he surveyed the

people in his living room. The builders, the architects and suppliers for the Texas Gulf Coast property mixed with the resort spa's staff, laughing and joking, celebrating the beginning of construction of the Mexican spa and resort. He glanced at his brother. "Go on, Cord. No worries."

"Give 'em hell down there, Tate. That new foundation should have been poured last month."

"Not a problem, Cord."

As his brother made his way through the throng toward the front door, Tate's gaze swept the laughing crowd and he noticed that someone did have a problem. Anna.

She still faced the twinkling lights of the Houston skyline on his veranda with her cell phone stuck to her ear and the expression on her face was like nothing he'd ever seen from her. Fear.

What the hell?

She had no family. He'd learned that much about her during the past two years. Friends. Sure, she had droves of girlfriends. He saw them come for her by the carload often to pick her up after work or dart into the spa to meet her for lunch. Men were another story. She didn't date. Or no men he'd ever heard of. None he'd ever seen her bring to their corporate dinners or parties. He'd wondered at one point if she preferred women all the time, but his sister-in-law Sienna had soon cleared up that misperception.

"Anna is saving herself for Mr. Right."

That told him four things that alternately thrilled him and destroyed him. She liked men. Wanted one. One right man. But clearly, he wasn't a candidate.

He examined her now as she argued with whoever was on the other end of that conversation. Was that a man?

Curiosity and jealousy drove him forward. If it was a guy who put that expression on her face, Tate would crush the asshole.

Tate halted in front of her and lifted his chin toward the phone, a question forming on his lips.

She watched him approach, her eyes growing rounder, starker with some terror that made Tate narrow his gaze at her.

She put a hand up to ward him off. "No," she ordered the person on the other end, "do not do that." The person replied, something dark, angry and male. "I told you I am not—" She stared up at Tate, blinked and evidently thought better of whatever she had been about to say. "Goodbye. Do not call me again." She snapped her phone shut and dropped it in her trouser pocket.

"What's wrong, Anna?"

"Nothing."

"Really?" He put two hands to her upper arms. Something he'd never done. But now he was jarred by the feeling of the sleekness he'd yearned for years to touch. He sensed the strength of her triceps. The tension rippling there. "Do you always tremble for no reason?"

She jerked out of his hold. "This is nothing for you to be concerned with."

He stepped forward and contrary to that rule about borrowing trouble, he raised her chin with two fingers and told her with his voice and his eyes that she couldn't escape him. "This does concern me. You're scared. Why?"

"None of your business, Tate." She pulled away from his touch. "I've got to go."

Once more, she did what she'd done so well for two years—she'd been impersonal with him. Professional. Putting him in his place. Far away from her.

He cursed silently as she marched toward the hall closet and collected her shawl, and flung it over her arm. On her way, she hugged Mona who was saying her own goodbyes to a builder. Then Anna opened the front door and let herself out.

He'd never seen her afraid. Never seen her angry. She was so even-tempered, happy, throwing back her mane of rich chocolate hair to laugh at most of life. That had

been the first thing that struck him about her. Her enjoyment of little things, all things small and joyful. He'd never known a woman like that.

And he liked women. Loved to be with them. Especially in bed. With another man to spice up the proceedings. But as years went on and his brother Cord had married and dropped out of their ménages, Tate prowled alone. He found fewer and fewer who attracted him out of bed. And those he did take there were certainly beautiful. But vacuous. Voracious. Self-impressed. Self-gratifying. Eager to say they'd been laid by Super Bowl football legend, Tate Ryder. But Anna was none of that.

And it gutted him that she couldn't give a rat's ass if he ever looked at her. Wanted her. Craved her.

But damn if he was going to let some man frighten her.

He strode over to his caterer and instructed him to go around and signal that the party was over.

The host was leaving and determined to break one of his own rules.

With one of the staff.

## \* \* \* \* \*

Anna punched the elevator button to the garage level in Tate's condo. The steel doors swished closed and she shuddered at what had just happened with the caller – and with Tate. She had to get home to her own place, lock the doors, swirl the dead bolt, and turn on the security system. Why had she ever decided to venture out tonight to the Ryders' celebration party?

She sank against the cool wall and felt her ears pop as the elevator whooshed down the twenty floors to the bottom. You know why you came tonight. You can't ignore any opportunity to be near Tate Ryder. Can't deny yourself the chance to revel in the knowledge that your wonderful, mouthwatering sexy hunk of a boss wants a lying little nobody like you.

But he wouldn't be so interested if he knew your real problem.

Like this jerk who was after her now. Whoever he was.

Oh, god, she was all kinds of a fool to ever think she was safe from fly-by-night idiots who thought they could corner her, trap her into revealing the truth of her own existence.

Hell. She dug in her evening bag for her car keys, wishing she were rummaging instead for the cool, hard feel of her Sig Sauer. Then she wouldn't feel so naked.

The thick doors slid open.

She hung back for a fraction of a second, heart pounding, vulnerable, weak. Exactly the way she never meant to expose herself. To anyone. Ever again.

She reached down and slid off her six-inch heels, hooking them on her fingers. She had parked her car over against the far wall and she was going to race to it with the speed she'd trained herself to use at times like this.

Sprinting, she flicked her key pad door opener and the birdie chirp made her wince. But she heard nothing. Saw nothing here in the subterranean garage. No headlights, no humming motors told her otherwise. Yanking open her door, she sank into the plush leather of her Sebring convertible and hit the lock.

"Home, baby," she told herself as she turned the ignition, snapped in her seatbelt and flicked on her high beams to begin the serpentine coil toward the exit two floors up. She pulled out of her slot, spun the steering wheel—and she heard the squeal of a car pulling out of another parking space. Stunned, she hit the gas. It was him! Here! She tried to straighten her car. But she jerked forward as the other car banged headlong into her bumper.

"No, no," she vowed, glancing back to see a man driving what looked like a red Rodeo. "You won't get me." She twirled the wheel, overshot and headed straight for a man coming out of the elevator. Tate Ryder almost stood on his toes as he skidded to a halt in what had been a dead run toward her. "Oh, Christ, no!" she shouted to herself, jammed on the brakes, wild that she'd nearly hit him. If she hadn't seen him so soon, she might have killed him. Oh god. *God.* 

The Rodeo jammed into her bumper again, crunching metal and sending her headfirst toward the dash. Her seatbelt caught her before she hit.

Tate yelled something at her.

She couldn't stop. Instead, she backed up, straight into the Rodeo, pushing him back into a concrete pole, crunching his rear. Terrified, she put the pedal to the metal and off she sprang, barely missing crashing into the other cars as she rode round and round to the exit. She sped up quickly, noticing with hot thanks that no one was in the control booth and the exit bar was up. She zoomed out onto the main street, careening into her proper lane of traffic and jockeying to hold her place.

But she had to get away.

Did this creep know where she lived?

*How could he*? He always called on her corporate cell. Never her private number. So she was safe to go home. Wasn't she?

She tried to breathe deeply. *Center yourself, kiddo. What's best here?* 

In a second, she knew. She took the first road east toward Interstate 10. Away from her townhouse. She could lose him. Confuse him. She certainly wasn't going to the police with her problems. What could they do for her? What had they ever done when guys like this thought they had found a rare prize? Nothing. She had always been able to fake them out, lose them, and change her home, her work, her life.

Yeah. In her own defense, she was smart, hard and fast.

Tears in her eyes surprised her.

She flung them away with the back of her hand, took the ramp east toward Louisiana on IH 10. Feeling freer, safer, she punched the speed up to eighty and noticed no one was behind her. She could do this. She'd escaped before.

Problem was this time when she left her life in Houston behind her, she'd leave friends she loved. A job she adored. And one special man she'd never had.

"Life's a bitch, babe," her mom had often offered up as salve for all the wounds of their migratory lifestyle.

"Ain't that the truth." Anna hit the steering wheel with her fist, cursed her loss of serenity, and in her rage, forced her car up to ninety on the dark and lonely road to nowhere she wanted to go.

# **Chapter Two**

Tate watched from his own darkened Mercedes as Anna's silver Sebring cruised slowly around the corner toward her townhouse for the second time. If she made out his presence, she didn't acknowledge him as she passed him and parked her car twenty feet up on the opposite side of the street. Still, she sat there a few minutes, casing the street. When she finally turned off her headlights and decided to climb out of her car, he opened his door and stood up.

At the sound, she spun toward him. She glanced up and down the street, before she hissed at him, "What are you doing here?"

Was she outraged?

Good. He had every intention of summoning every hot emotion she had. After that escape from Rodeo Man in the garage, Tate wondered where in hell she could have gone and if she'd survived Rodeo Man's tail. He'd called their corporate consultant for security and recounted the story. Grant Warwick had put a man on tracing calls to and from Anna's phone tonight—and he'd ordered a south Texas search to begin at eight sharp of local chop shops for a red Rodeo with rear-end damage.

Tate strode up to her, locked his car with a backward flick of his remote and examined her crumpled rear bumper as he passed. Interesting damage, he'd have to call Grant about after he saw that she was okay.

Tate zeroed in on her eyes. "I'm here to help."

"I don't want your help," she seethed at him in a loud whisper, trying to be quietly enraged in a residential area at two in the morning.

He took her elbow. "Then don't want it. What do I care?" Problem was, he cared too damn much to see her brush this off or brush him off without some kind of remedy for Rodeo Man.

She shrugged and ground her teeth. "Oh, you can be so pushy."

"Call it my training as a linebacker." He led her toward her own front porch.

"How do you know where I live?" she asked, walking but petulant when she should be as grateful as hell he had the inclination to see she was safe.

"Got all the personnel records on my BlackBerry. Come on now," he ordered her, as they climbed her front steps and she blustered at him all the way. "Invite me in for a midnight chat."

"I don't want to talk."

"Key to the door?" he asked, nonplussed by her bad-girl behavior. "I'm tired. So are you and we both need a strong cup of coffee."

"Coffee," she huffed. "I'll be awake all night."

"Brandy, then. Let's get inside to argue, shall we?" As she put the key in the lock, he could feel from his hold on her upper arm that the tension in her body was draining away under his fingers, even if she gave him a whole lot of lip about his commandeering her.

She got the key in, but her hand shook and he took it from her.

"Let me," he crooned and swung the door wide, hauled her in after him and shut it soundly behind them both, throwing the deadbolt in the next moment.

With her in arms' reach, he looked down at her. Her beautiful big green-brown eyes were hollowed with fear, her mouth firm but beginning to quiver, her body trembling.

The most natural thing in the world was to gather her close. Wrap her tightly against him and rub his palms down her back.

But he hesitated. He'd already broken one rule tonight. He'd borrowed her trouble. If he hauled her close, would he care, would he criticize himself that he had started something with her he couldn't finish?

What the hell did rules matter at a time like this?

He stepped up to her, ran his hands down her temples back into her wealth of waving hair and pulled her torso flush to his. She leaned back, her startled eyes searching his for meaning. But her hands grabbed him, clutching at his waist for support. His lips parted in wonder at the delicate bones of her scapulae beneath his hands, the gentle curve of her spine, the tight feel of her belly as he pressed her against him in a groaning culmination of two years of want. At once, he realized he'd done the right thing to come here. To hold her. To comfort her. To hell with what separated them. He didn't have to be her lover to be her friend.

With a tiny cry, she pushed herself back. Flinging her purse on her sofa, she marched away from him. Her hips round, her ass firm in the satin trousers, she stalked toward her kitchen.

He stood where he'd been left, panting for the kiss he might have had if he'd been quicker. Bolder.

"You want brandy," she barked at him from her kitchen, "come and get it."

He could hear her opening a bottle and pouring liquid into glasses.

As he walked around the dividing wall, she stuck a snifter in his hand. "Here. Drink up. The night is old."

Tate took a sip, vaguely aware of the heat in the liquor, very aware of the heat in his body and the heat of her anger at him. "I'm not going away until you tell me what happened there."

She savored her drink for a moment and met his gaze with her own proud one. "None of your affair."

"You are my employee." Wow, applause for the lame beginning, Ryder.

"Does not give you the right to demand answers of me about my private life."

"Is it your private life?"

That made her frown. "Of course."

"You're sure?"

"Definitely," she shot back.

"How?"

"Because..." She waved a hand. "Because."

"You conduct your private life on the corporate cell phones?"

That made her stare at him for a long minute. Her eyes said he got her on that one. "No."

He looked down at the brandy and swirled it in its bowl. "Who hits you in the rear and then takes off like a bat out of hell?"

She broke eye contact with him then. "I don't know," she murmured.

"Your car is damaged."

That brought her head up and her gaze once more to his. "Really? God." She ran a hand back through her hair. "I didn't even stop to look."

"He hit you hard enough that he left a so-so impression of his license plate on your bumper."

"Wow." She scowled. "I wonder if we can find him."

Her speculation on that set him back. Did she even want to find him? "In the garage, I caught the first two letters of his plate. That should help. I've got Warwick on the case."

"No! You shouldn't have done that."

"Why not? This happened to my employee in my condo building. And you'll be telling all this info to your auto insurance company, surely."

She took a drink of her brandy and didn't have a comeback for that logic.

Tate flexed his jaw in frustration. "Your insurance company will search DMV records. A red Rodeo, late model, with Texas plates should be easy to find."

"Sure. Easy." She seemed trapped, glancing at his shoulders, his hands, anywhere but his face. "Thanks. What are the letters you saw?"

"E. R." He took a swig of her very good brandy and wondered if she was even going to call her insurance company with the claim. "He rammed into you hard. Did you hit your head?"

"No. I had my seat belt on so it was more of a wobble than a jolt."

"Good to know. But just in case, if you get a headache you should tell me."

She looked at him askance. "You think you are staying?"

He pursed his mouth and nodded. "I do."

Fury colored her cheeks pink. "Why?" she demanded.

"Because you've had a shock. Because there is a lot you are not telling me. And because I would never forgive myself if you had a head injury from this, I left you now and tomorrow morning, you wound up dead."

"Gee. You have an overactive imagination." She set her glass on the counter with a thunk and poked her index finger into his sternum. "I do not have a head injury."

He caught her hand, pressed it to his chest and shook his head. "Can't know until twenty-four, maybe thirty hours after a thump."

"But I'm telling you –"

"I'm telling you I know the wily ways of head injuries. Years of crashing into mountains of mountain men have taught me to be careful. Vigilant."

"I'm telling you, Tate, I'm good."

"I'm telling you, Anna, so am I."

That close to her with her pink lips parting as she gazed up at him, he knew his cock was very interested in all kinds of issues about her body, none of which had to do with head injuries. But he had more important things to do than make love to her. He had to save her. From herself.

"You are very stubborn," she told him on a breath of sound.

"For you, yes."

"You shouldn't be," she warned him, her voice pleading, her eyes tortured that he was so insistent. "Go home, Tate."

"Why won't you let me help?"

"I can manage myself. I always do whenever—" She caught her lower lip in her teeth and stared up at him.

Her slip had him hauling her up to him. "Whenever?" Was she crazy? "Whenever what?"

Her shapely mouth quivered as she sought for words and only a harsh sound of agony came out.

"Are you telling me this hit-and-run is not a one-time thing?"

She swallowed, shook her head and fought to get away from him.

Damn if he would let her go. "Anna! No, baby, you are talking to me!" He raised her chin with a finger. "You can manage whenever *what* happens?"

Tears pooled in those lovely leopard eyes of hers. "Go home, Tate," she burbled in her misery. "Don't ask about things that don't concern you."

He gathered her closer. So near now he could feel the rapid tattoo of her heart, the lush press of her breasts and the cushion of her pussy against his thigh. "You concern me. You have for a long time, Anna."

She flung her head back. The same way he'd often seen her laugh, he now watched in horror as she racked herself with the pain of whatever in hell she was hiding. Her fingernails bit into his arms and her voice dug into his heart as she sank her head against his chest and moaned.

He cradled her to him, bent and picked her up to walk with her into her living room and sit down with her in his lap on her couch. For long bad minutes, he held her as her fierce storm of tears raged and just as quickly dried. When she was once more quiet, she didn't rush to get away from him, which gratified the hell out of him. But she

considered their entwined hands and pleaded, "Please go home, Tate. That guy doesn't know where I live. He can't find me here."

"How do you know that? How can you be sure?"

"Because I have no landline phone. No listing."

"He found you at work. On our phone. At my condo. Why can't he find you here, Anna? He's resourceful. He'll dig. It's not wise to assume that he is without resources."

She stared into his eyes for ages and ages. "He can't trace me here because I rent this house. The owner lives in Mexico."

"But you get your electricity bill here. Your water bill. They have your name on them, don't they?" She groaned at his logic and he rushed on. "Anyone can pick them out of your mailbox. I'm worried for you, Anna. That guy was not playing games."

She put her palm to his cheek, her warm, wet lips to his to speak and drive him mad. "You are sweet, Tate. But go home."

"You need help. Big help. That guy was a meathead. A big sucker. And you are small." He squeezed her hand. "Delicate. I won't let anyone hurt you."

"I don't want anyone to hurt you!"

He couldn't believe his good fortune that she cared about him. Couldn't believe his outrage that she refused his care. "I'm a big boy, honey."

She smiled tightly. "I also know krav maga. Learned it years ago."

That gave him a start. "Just for fun, huh? The most aggressive martial art for the little lady."

"Don't pursue this, Tate."

"Why learn *krav maga*, Anna? Why?" he asked, shocked that his voice was a rasping mix of outrage and need, like a little boy who'd had within his grasp the one gift he needed for Christmas but saw it disappear from his hold.

She struggled up from his lap and walked toward her front door, then spun to face him. "You think you want me, Tate, and heaven knows, if I could be free, I'd have

answered the seduction in your eyes years ago with more than denial. But I am trouble. You don't want to mess with me, Tate." Her words were torrid. But her tone was pliant. "You don't want to get involved. You don't want to ruin your life and spend your time on me."

The yearning for him in her words and the desperation she felt for her own predicament wrenched him up off the sofa. In two strides, he had her in his arms. For the first time in two years, he had proof that she wanted him and he couldn't walk away from her need or her rebuff.

He wrapped one arm around her waist and plunged one hand up into the wealth of her hair. "Christ, baby, I am involved. Like it or not. I have been for so damn long, I can't remember when I didn't want you. You tell me not to mess with you. But Anna, that's all I want to do." He cupped her head and god, if she didn't look at him like he had always dreamed she might. Like a woman who couldn't get enough of him. Like a woman who'd never want any other man her whole life long. "I want to mess with you all right. I want to mess with your mouth. Like this," he whispered and put his lips to hers in a savage claim that had her gasping and grasping at his shoulders. "I want to mess with your ears." He bit an earlobe. "I want to mess with your beautiful hazel eyes." He blessed both tenderly with two kisses and she groaned. "I want to mess with your throat. Here," he growled and licked at the tiny hollow he'd admired for two lonely years. "I want your breasts. Your nipples. In my mouth." He bent her backward over his arm and found one huge rosebud beneath her silk blouse to suck between his lips. "I want to mess with this." He shifted her in his embrace and ran a hand down to her mound and almost groaned at the feel of her pillowy softness. "I want to mess with this, baby, make you cry for me, make you come for me, and most of all, make you happy."

She had her eyes closed. Her mouth open. Her expression blissful as an angel floating in his arms.

He knew surrender when he saw it. Ecstasy when he felt it.

"Tate," she whispered, came out of her trance, catching his face in her hands and pressing her lips to his. "I've wanted you, too. Oh, god, forever. But I can't get you involved in this. And there's no way to change it!"

He shuddered in delight and terror. Searching her tear-filled eyes, he saw her agony. Whatever the cause, at the moment when she declared she wanted him too, he knew that barrier was small. Tiny. Compared to how he had to claim her. "Anna, you've got to let me try." Then he gave her no chance to deny him. He kissed her.

With lips that savored, he pressed her lavish mouth against his. Her arms clutched him close. With a tongue that probed and danced with hers, he invaded her. Taking her. Making her his. Better than fantasy. With teeth that nipped her invading tongue, he bent her backward in his arms and sent his mouth across her cheeks, down her throat, to her generous, heaving cleavage.

Savage with joy, he scooped her up again, pivoting to find the stairs to a bedroom. He climbed them, two at a time, she was so light, cuddled so close, her mouth on his throat, kissing him, her hands in his hair.

But he got to the top and paused in the hall. What the hell was wrong with him?

He shut his eyes. Grit his teeth. Never in his life had he wanted a woman more. But he couldn't think with his dick here! And he couldn't make love to her now either!

"Where is your bedroom?" he asked, surveying three doors.

She nodded toward the left. He shouldered it open and the blues and grays of her décor seemed too cold for the serene sylph he knew as Anna. But he set her down on her comforter, crawling up to kiss her again. Mindless is where he wanted her and he was going to keep her that way for long days and nights.

But he drew away. Stood. Found her dresser. Yanked open a drawer.

She rose on her elbows. "What are you doing?"

"Get a suitcase."

She was at his side, pulling on his arm. "No! Stop this."

He swung on her then and crushed her up against him. He could hear the air leave her lungs. "Listen to me, sweetheart. We are going to make love so hard and so well for so long you won't know how to spell your name. But we are not doing it now. We are not doing it here. And we are not doing it at my place where Rodeo Man may revisit. You are coming with me to Mexico tomorrow morning on the yacht. So get a bag and let's get some clothes for you. God knows, you aren't going to need many if I have my say. But do it." He held up a handful of bras and lacy stuff. "Now."

# **Chapter Three**

When she awoke in the master stateroom on Tate's yacht hours later, she could feel the languid relaxation of having fallen deeply asleep at dawn. She stretched, realizing she was naked and recalling how she had stripped herself of her evening clothes and fallen into this bed like a shipwrecked sailor.

Throwing back the light covers now, she felt the warm Gulf air of late June washing over her breasts and belly and thighs. She tingled at the remembrance of how Tate had touched her in all those places last night and promised her more. More of him. She hugged herself, needing him to make good on those promises now that she was here and totally at his disposal.

The time between then and now seemed a century. She remembered how she'd stood in her bedroom and given in so easily to his demand to come with him. She recalled how she'd yearned for whatever peace and solitude she could claim with him. She knew that what her subconscious and her body wanted more than any of those other things was Tate. Just Tate. All of Tate. She'd been eager, willing and silly enough to believe that she could leave all her worries behind if only for a few hours, a few days, wanting to get somewhere where she could kiss him again, tell him how thrilled she was he wanted her, had wanted her for so damn long. She remembered how she'd examined his sharp profile in the silhouette of night along the highway as he had driven south to his Galveston marina. She recalled how she ached to crawl into his embrace after they left her townhouse and hidden her car in a private garage near his corporate offices.

"We don't want anyone to be able to track you until Grant and his staff find this bastard," Tate had told her. "Meanwhile, corporate security will ensure no suspicious types get near the offices or my condo."

Anna sighed now in relief at Tate's willingness to get Grant Warwick involved. Grant was top notch, well regarded in Houston, and on call to the Ryder brothers for their internal help. But she also had to admit she was relieved at Tate's admitted desire for her. She had known for so long he wanted her, just as she had reciprocated the feeling. Now after last night and its horrors, she had no energy left to argue with him. Nor did she really want to. She'd run from her problem for so many years that she was grateful for the respite this rendezvous with him offered her. How she'd deal with her situation now that he had declared he wanted to be involved with her, she couldn't imagine.

# Later, for that, Anna.

At the moment, all she wanted was to feel his arms around her again. Have him kiss her. Caress her. She needed his affection to kill the fear that had swamped her last night. And for once, she wasn't going to deny how much she wanted Tate Ryder. How much she yearned to possess him and be possessed by him.

# *That's not going to happen if I stay here all day.*

Enjoying the rock of the boat as it cruised over waves, she luxuriated in the comfort of the linens as she raised her legs to do her morning yoga stretches. She'd had only three bed partners in her thirty-two years, all of whom liked her body. She'd seen Tate's hunger for her turn his navy-blue eyes to black and suddenly, she couldn't wait to taste him.

She swung her hips to one side and rose from the huge bed. Padding on bare feet, she reveled in the sumptuous pile of the tailored oriental beneath her toes and made her way to the hand-carved teak double doors leading to the bathroom. She'd been on his and Cord's yacht a few times before for private parties. Never in the private master bath but she'd enjoy the rich amenities now. Turning on the golden jets, she stepped into the hot shower, lathered up with lavender body soap, rinsed off and flexed her sore muscles, then stepped out to towel dry. Finding her comb and toothbrush in her bag in

the bedroom, she strode back in and donned one of the thick terrycloth robes hanging on the far tiled wall.

Back in the bedroom, she rustled through her suitcase and found some French lingerie she'd been wise to bring, a pair of jeans and shorts, two tees, a sweater and her Sig Sauer that she'd dropped in when Tate's back was turned. No need for the gun here, she sighed. Quickly, she decided that a lacy set of white bra and thong, plus the shorts and a tee would do nicely.

A moment of devilishness made her wonder if she should forget clothes and just cover her nakedness with the robe. *Safety from terror is making me stupid*.

As she rose up the steps to the deck, the sun hit her hard. She shielded her face with one hand and with squinting eyes searched for Tate. He was up on the bridge, seated on a super-wide captain's chair. He looked over the bow, sunglasses on, white tee, dark deck pants, his blazing auburn hair tousled by the Gulf winds.

She stepped up to join him and view the brilliant reflection of golden sun off bluegreen water.

When he sensed her, he turned and smiled, his grin generous as he took in her brief outfit. "Hey, sleepy head. It's almost one."

"I slept like the dead. Thanks to you."

He spun the wheel to head them toward a shoreline she could barely make out along the horizon. "You needed it. Up all night is not a good way to improve your health."

"I know. I don't do it often." She smiled at him, so close she felt his body heat, so near she wanted to kiss his shoulder, cup his cheek, and sink her fingers in his thick curly auburn hair. Licking her lips, she said, "You should sleep yourself. You haven't at all, have you?"

He shook his head, then put his sunglasses on the dash. "Too much to do to get out of town."

"Thank you," she murmured. "I am grateful, even if I didn't sound it last night."

He shot her a glance, his long-lashed dark navy eyes fierce. "*No* was not an answer I was going to accept, Anna."

"Now that I'm here, I'm glad I didn't dissuade you."

His features stilled. "Are you, honey? God knows, I am."

She reached over and took one of his hands from the wheel. Then she turned up his palm and kissed him there. "I know I should have fought harder, but Tate," her gaze met his and got lost in the fathomless depths, "I didn't want to."

"Thank god. I was ready to carry you off like a caveman."

She chuckled and broke the heavy heat of their attraction. If she just jumped his bones she'd make a fool of herself, showing him how inexperienced she was. "Speaking of primal needs, I am starving. Is there food in the galley? Can I make us something?"

"Yes. Lots to choose from. Wine, too, if you want. Make whatever you'd like. I'm going to kill the engine and drop anchor. We need to talk."

Happy to busy herself, she left him. Within minutes, she'd made a veggie omelet with tons of mozzarella. Tate came down from the bridge just as the cheese was melting.

"Shall I open a bottle of wine?" he asked her as he approached the counter.

"Not for me." She turned the water on to wash her hands. "A Coke is good."

He turned to the refrigerator, pulled out two cans of soda and popped the tops.

"Toast?" she asked him as she pulled two slices from the toaster.

"One, please. Smells wonderful," he complimented her as she brought both plates toward him and motioned for him to sit in the small booth with kitchen table. "I didn't know you could cook."

Sliding into the banquette, she smiled up at him. Oh, he was so tanned, so taut, so handsome, such a ripe temptation. If he were food, she'd eat him instead of the damn

eggs. "I do many things very well," she tossed off cavalierly. "Cook, dance." *Admire you*.

He took her hand, gently removed her fork from her fingertips and brought her palm up to his lips. Then, like she had done on deck, he turned it over and kissed her there with a lick of his tongue to follow.

"Come here." He wrapped an arm around her shoulders and slid her toward him. "I need to kiss your mouth." He put his lips to hers in such a delicate claim that she gave a sob of delight. He drew back and smiled. "Here, have some egg." He scooped up a forkful and presented it to her. "Eat, honey." She complied.

He got another forkful and presented it to her. "Again, baby. You are going to need lots of energy for what we're going to do."

She chewed and swallowed as fast as she could. Then she cupped his jaw. "Tate, I can't believe I'm here. Told myself I shouldn't ever be with you." She kissed him, hotly, quickly.

His lips were welcoming and warm, but as she pulled away, his face was so sad. "Why's that, honey?"

"So many reasons." She took his mouth again and moaned with the sensation of how he opened his lips for her, let her tongue explore his hot recesses.

As she drew back, he murmured, "I never saw any hint you wanted me."

"I know. I made certain of that."

He combed her hair from her cheek. "The employer-employee thing?"

"The famous football star who bedded lots of women thing."

"Ah." He pushed her curls behind her ear. "That guy doesn't live here anymore."

"After a while, I saw that. The papers ran no stories about Red Ryder and his bevy of girlfriends. I had heard you liked threesomes."

"You heard right, honey. I did do that."

She ran her hand over his shoulder down his powerful chest to his thigh. She searched his eyes, eager to have him know where her boundaries were. "I wouldn't ever want another man and you together. I want only you, Tate."

He framed her face with his hands. "I don't want to share you, Anna. I want you all to myself, all alone. In fact, honey, I haven't wanted another woman in so long, haven't even been with one in so long that I wonder if I'm gonna be able to make you happy!"

She burst out laughing. "Big hot Red Ryder? The caveman? You can't mean that!"

"No?" He stood up, walked around to her side of the table and hauled her up in his arms. "Only one way to find out!"

She giggled.

"Not good to laugh at a caveman, baby!" Then he lifted her by the waist and flung her over his shoulder.

"I need food!" she objected.

He pivoted, clutching her legs with one arm and clamping a hand on her ass. "Fine! Pick up the plates and let's go. My appetite is growing—among other things, and damned if I can wait any longer to satisfy it."

"You are not only pushy but bossy," she babbled at him as he made his way down the hall, turned and headed for the master bedroom.

"Do not forget it, either."

"I'm losing our lunch!" she complained as she tried to hold the plates upright and catch bits from one plate with another as they fell to the floor.

"But you're so coordinated!"

"I'll show you coordinated, Tate Ryder."

"Damn straight, you will. Here." Now in the bedroom, he turned and offered her the dresser top for her plates. Then, he up-ended her and slowly slid her down his torso until her face was level with his and her mouth was a hair's width away from his beautiful sculpted one. "Want more eggs before we do this?"

She curled her arms around his neck, breathless from his funny, dear, ardent possession. "No, no, I just want you inside me, all over me, all around me. I've wanted you since I was born, since I was crazy with it, since I couldn't stand to look at you and not weep inside like a sex kitten who hadn't ever been petted."

"Whew! That means I've got a lot to live up to!" He rolled his eyes at her.

"Oh, hurry. I think I'm gonna come just looking at you."

"Really, now? Is that possible?" He feigned objectivity.

She pulled his hair. "Yeah. That's possible. I've done it many times just admiring you work. Or looking at you walk. Or work out. Staring at your buns and your pecs. Or listening to you talk." She ran her lips over his cheek to his ear, whispering to him, "Tate. I love the sound of your bass voice. And the way you say my name. Like music. And flowers."

He shook with her in his arms. He pressed his mouth to her shoulder.

She inhaled, never more proud in her life of saying or doing anything. When in fact she'd done nothing except tell him how she needed him. Wanted him.

He let her slide down his body but his eyes were misty with a raw emotion she'd never seen on his face. It stunned her. Humbled her. As he framed her face with two big hot hands, he brushed his lips over hers as if she were priceless glass. "I'm gonna make this so good for you." Then he kissed her, gently as if he were an angel come to bless her. Madly, as if he were a devil come to absorb her. Thoroughly, licking the outline of her lips, pressing the fullness, invading the caverns of her being, as if he were already a part of her.

She spun in the vortex of his desire. Feeling his fingers push up her tee shirt, she got her balance and raised her arms. He flung the garment to the floor, plucked open the button of her shorts, then circled his hands around her back to unhook her bra. She skimmed her hands down her hips, pushing her shorts over the swell to let them drop to the floor and then just stood there as his gaze swept down her body.

"Aw, honey." He lifted her breasts, his thumbs defining the circumference of her nipples as he bent her back, lifted her to meet the homage of his warm and careful mouth. "You are so lovely. These," he murmured as he licked one areola, "are so perfect. I've stayed awake so many nights wanting these in my hands and my mouth."

She clutched at his massive shoulders as he sent his hand down her waist, over the flat of her stomach to peel down the flimsy thong and sink his hand over her pounding, needy pussy.

"Oh, god," he groaned and shuddered as his hot palm cupped her labia and paused there. "You're bare."

She caught her breath. "Do you like me?"

"Oh, baby. How could I not?"

He groaned. "But oh god, I've got to go slowly and discover everything about you."

She made a sound of joy. Nothing in the world compared to the delight of his fingers sliding between her labia, finding her seam and sinking into her folds.

He growled and lifted her, one arm under her legs, and took two steps to lay her out on his bed. Cool air rushed over her skin as he stood over her, his gaze wide and greedy as he looked his fill.

She put her arms out for him to display as much of herself as she could for his enjoyment.

His gaze raked her from head to toe, her nipples beading, her cunt flowing with new cream. Any remaining anxiety fled as she watched him strip himself of his shirt. His broad, golden shoulders gleamed with perspiration. His pecs rippled as he flexed. His hips were sculpted, lean cords of sinew that curved down to his groin, where his penis stood boldly erect. Full, red with a hard blue tip, his cock was huge and everything she imaged it would be. She moaned, wanting that inside her. Needing him inside her, she breathed hard in impatience as he opened a dresser drawer, removed a string of condoms and in one move, tore open a packet, and in another, rolled the latex down his long shaft.

He put a knee to the mattress, another between her thighs, hovering over her like a muscular jungle cat. Her big red lion, she mused in some vague and sensuous fantasy. Primal now too, she arched up to him, her arms reaching for his shoulders. He seized her head and kissed her like a madman. Furiously, he took her lips in one kiss after another.

Just as she began to rub her breasts against his, he caught her hands, pushed them to her side against the bed and began to lavish kisses down her throat to her cleavage, her nipples and her navel. Sinking between her legs, he pressed his mouth to her inner thigh and licked the hollow with a reverence that drove her nuts.

"Lick my pussy," she pleaded. "I need to feel your mouth there."

He growled and turned his attention to her moist slit until she moaned and spread wider for him.

"That's right, baby. Let me see it all. Christ, you are so plump and swollen for me," he groaned and nuzzled her with lips that sucked at the edges of her folds and drove her to give a low keen. "Feel how wonderful you are, honey." He let go her hands and settled himself so that he sent careful fingers to the top of her seam. Then he opened her. "What a pretty clit." He put his warm mouth atop it and in the wet delight of his possession, she bucked. "I'm gonna make this lovely little button bigger and harder for me."

"Oh do, please," she begged and wiggled.

He gentled her with one set of fingers spreading her lips and one finger tapping over and over the mount of her clit.

"Tate!" She jumped at his electric touch and lolled her head on the mattress. "Please, honey, have me. Taste me."

"Soon enough, sweetie. God, I've never seen such thick lips. And I love the way your folds peek out below your labia. I'm gonna explore every bit. Lick every frilly edge until you know them yourself. Suck every tip into my mouth and make you come every time I caress you. Make you call my name."

"I've never wanted anyone like I've wanted you!" she shouted now, her hips undulating on the mattress as he tried to kiss her clit and she needed more, more, now.

"Ever had a man eat you?" he asked, his fingers fucking her so rhythmically.

"No." She was almost sobbing with the friction of his fingers. "I heard how you loved to eat pussy. Were an expert. Tate, please—"

He pinched her clit. "There, honey. Don't panic. I'm here 'til I die. Eating you. Loving you. What else did you hear?"

"That you were good at it! So good at it. It made me wet just thinking you could be so good to a woman, but it also made me nuts to think you wanted other women." She drove a hand over her mound, slid in to find her clit to rub it.

"All of those women were before you, honey." He nudged her fingers away and kissed her little clump of nerves, sucking it up into his mouth and eliciting a giant moan from her. "What else, baby?" He drove the fingers of his other hand up inside her channel and the sound of her creamy welcome filled the room.

"I wanted you to eat me. I wanted you to nibble on me, suck me, bite me. So I went and had a complete wax there. I've had it done for so long now. I could pretend the warmth of the wax could be you, thinking what if this were Tate. What if I could have him."

He rolled her nub between two fingers. "Did you masturbate, thinking that was me?"

She flung her arms wide and exhaled loudly. "I did. I did!" She rose up and glared at him. "Make love to me now or I am going to die right here!"

He shifted up to cup her neck and kiss her. "Want to know how you taste to me?"

"I do. I do! Tell me and then for god's sake, fuck me!"

He grinned, a lopsided wicked thing. "You taste as sweet as crème brûlée. Soft, luscious, velvet. Rich." His fingers swept over her mound and sank inside to swirl in her wet channel and make her moan. "And you are so much mine." He positioned his

cock near the entrance to her cunt and the excitement of the promise had her hurtling over the edge of an orgasm.

Helpless, she vibrated in his embrace. Her fingernails dug into his arms. Her torso pulsed against his.

He held her, as she rippled to completion. "And that's only the beginning. Here's the rest of this." He slid inside, slowly, so reverently she gasped at the size of him. The blunt, steely girth of him. The fulfillment of taking him in had her grabbing at his shoulders, raising her knees and watching him lean back and hook her legs over his arms. His teeth were gritted, his eyes hell-dark with need as he plunged deeper with each thrust and set each cell in her body on fire for him.

"I wanted you, too, honey. Never thought I'd get you. But last night," he whispered and gazed down to where their bodies were joined, "I couldn't see you hurt. Couldn't walk away." He drove inside her with longer and harder strokes until he was fully seated. She whimpered with delight as his eyes drifted closed and he said, "Never thought having any woman could feel like this. But then, none of them was ever you."

She strained closer to him. How perfect could this be?

She must have said that because he grunted, "No better," and lifted her ass higher against his thighs to pump her in a rhythmic glide that raced higher and higher. She braced herself and went with the ride. The friction of his penis along her channel. The force of his thrusts. The driving power of his passion. She loved the ride, possessed by his fury and knowing no other man would ever give her this. Could ever give her this. She cried out as he grunted and doubled his pace, driving her to frenzy. She cried out as she felt him hit his summit. He paused, shuddered, shouted as he came with hard thrusts, then draped his long hot body over hers.

# **Chapter Four**

He wrapped his arms around her and swung to lie on his side. He felt every pore, every muscle, every inch of his body had just discovered some elixir. Some kind of magic. More – and he had to laugh at this because it was what she personified and what she worked at – she brought him to a nirvana he'd ever known before.

Cord had told him this would happen once Tate found the right woman. He hadn't believed him.

But then in walked Anna Stevens to his office one morning two years ago to interview for a job as yoga instructor. He'd been struck by her grace. Her long-legged, taut body. Her discussion of what yoga could do for a person's outlook and fitness. He was lost. Enchanted. Tate Ryder. The man who could not be cornered or tied down by any woman. Had been possessed by an intelligent creature who wanted no part of him.

Or so she'd convinced him.

And now, he had to learn if there were reasons for that, beyond her reluctance to date a man who was known for his preference for ménages.

He gathered Anna closer to him and she smiled, tracing the outline of his lips with one fingertip.

He sat up, puffed up a few pillows against the headboard and rose. "Get comfy. I'll take care of this condom and be right back." He winked at her in approval as she stretched and raised her breasts toward him.

"Hurry back," she purred. "I need to eat and so do you."

Off he went, bringing back with him another string of condoms.

Balancing their two plates on her bare legs, she arched a wicked brow at him. "Great expectations?"

"Believe it. Objections?" he asked as he dropped the condoms on the nightstand, crawled back toward her and sat next to her.

"Not on your life," she whispered and gave him a quick kiss. She forked up some of her omelet and held it to his lips. "A chaser for that?"

"Depends." He took her offering and chewed. "Do I get a kiss for every bite?"

Her eyes darkened with desire. "Finish your plate and see what you get."

He rolled his tongue around his mouth. "Going to wear me out?"

"I am going to do my best. So eat!" She presented another bit of eggs and another in such rapid succession that he was chewing, swallowing and chuckling all at once.

"Meanwhile," he managed and held up a hand, "you need some sustenance yourself!"

She took a bit of omelet with two fingertips and dropped it in her mouth as if she were a courtesan dining on tiny grapes.

He stared at her, suddenly very uninterested in food.

She took another bite and another. Each act more deliberately erotic as she placed her plush pink lips around the morsels with sensuous seduction.

He cock grew red and hard, hungry for her.

She rose up on her knees, taking her plate in hand and stretched across him very unnecessarily to deposit her plate on his side of the bedstand. "I think I've got the best nourishment right here," she told him as she turned back, put her lips to his and kissed him with open mouth and a darting tongue.

He captured her jaw with two hands. His breathing became deep, needy.

She swung her leg over his thighs, sitting so close to his very ready shaft that he could feel the moist heat of her cunt. She leaned forward, her mouth playing with his, her hands descending to cup his rod and his balls.

He jumped.

"Did I hurt you?" she asked and opened her fingers as if she'd been burned.

"No, honey. No." He had all he could do not to grind his teeth. "Touch me again."

She palmed his cock. "I can't believe how big you are." She kissed his throat while her hands stroked him and he shivered, wanting more. "I've never had any man so huge. But then," she paused a second, then looked him in the eye, "I haven't had many men."

Christ, that thrilled him like a Neanderthal to know, too, no man had ever loved her with his mouth. No man had ever enjoyed her or excited her like the very thought of his mouth on her pussy had.

"So you see, Tate, I'm-I'm not very sure that I'm going to be that interesting here in—"

"Stop right there, honey." He put a fingertip to her lips. "No, not stop what you're doing. Stop thinking you're not experienced enough for me. For this. For us." He threaded his fingers through her long silky hair and looked into the faceted golds and greens and browns of her hazel eyes. "Great sex is not about what you've done with others. It's all about what is mutually enjoyable with your partner."

"So you won't mind if I flub this up?" she asked, partly serious, as she began to circle her thumbs over the head of his very sensitive cock.

"This," he grunted, "is no flub."

She hummed and watched her strokes. "Why do you like this?"

He considered the ceiling a minute. Jesus. "What's not to like, baby? Your sweet hands on me. Hot, careful. Your fingers getting all nice and wet with my cum."

Smiling, she became bolder, stroking the length of his shaft with one hand and squeezing his dripping helmet with the other. "What does it feel like when you're inside?" She caught his gaze.

He had to bite his lower lip to keep from losing it all right there. "Like a furnace. Like a juicy vise. Like a glove of steel. Like home."

She grinned and kept on massaging him. "You feel wonderful. Like completion." She slid her legs back along the length of his.

Oh, god. He braced himself. He knew he was going to come soon with her tempting hands on him. He yearned to go with the flow, rush toward it, yet hated to destroy the tension. Then she slid down over him and in a move that made him gasp, she finally took him in her mouth. He had to bite his lower lip to keep from screaming how good her lips felt as they sank over him. How slow she was. How firmly she sucked him. How delicately she laved him. How warm. How determined to lick every inch of him and circle her tongue over his cock head.

Growling, he stretched his arms across the top ledge of the headboard. He watched her. She explored and marveled. He smiled, a tight joy that he might, with all his socalled experience, find this the most exciting, more endearing blowjob he'd ever had.

She licked his slit.

Made his hips rise off the bed.

She took his cock and ran her teeth gently along one side.

He gulped. Hard.

She switched to the other side and ministered to his heavy member that way too.

God, she was going to make him crazed to have her mouth on him every day.

But hell, if he could stand it.

He had to return the favor, didn't he?

Sinking a hand in her hair at the crown of her head, he whispered, "Honey, come here. Stop for a minute, and come up and kiss me." It was too damn early in their relationship for him to come in her mouth and he knew he had a big package he was about to ejaculate soon. He didn't want to frighten her, but wanted to make her feel treasured and happy before he rocked her with how much he could give. He wanted to teach her new things one by one. If he went too fast, he'd hate himself because he needed to do more than taste her. He needed to savor her. Honor her, all of her, as he

developed with her an affair he now knew would enthrall him. And he wanted to enthrall her with him, too.

"But I want to feel you as you come," she objected with a pout, her hands immobile on his shaft and balls.

"I promise you will. But consider me, baby, and how hungry I am for you." He shifted, loomed up and over her to let her fall backward to the mattress. "I want to lick your beautiful nipples. You've driven me nuts for years watching you at the club in those damn leotards without a bra." He ran his hand over the pebbling areola of one pert breast and she sighed. "I don't want you to wear any bras ever again. Not when you're with me. Do you hear me?"

Her gaze snapped of sexual promise. "But other men...?"

He leaned over her and bit her pert pale nipple. "Will want you. But they'll know you are mine." He nipped her again and tugged the point higher with his teeth. She squirmed. "And I will be able to get to these quickly when I need a taste and you need my mouth on you."

"Oh, Tate! I love the idea."

He pinched her nipple between two fingers, then licked the other to a hard diamond, too. "These are beautiful rosebuds. And they are mine to care for, water and tend, to open and nip." He demonstrated.

She undulated on the bed. "More. I want more."

His hand caressed her belly. "After we finish with the crew tomorrow in Tampico, we'll go into town and I'll take you to my favorite tattoo artist. I want him to see your lovely navel and give you a heart here." He pressed her just below her bellybutton. "Is that good?"

"Yes, yes, whatever you want. I'm yours." She kissed his forehead. "What else?" He looked into her love-drugged eyes. "I want to eat your pretty pussy now." She widened her legs. "Yes," she whispered. "Hurry."

"Never a hurry for me to make love to your beautiful cunt."

She bucked. Rubbed her pelvic bone against his ribs. "Should I ever wear panties again?"

"Never. I need to know that you are always ready for me. Open. Hot. Swollen."

She cupped her pussy. "I think I'm coming right now." She sank a finger inside herself.

He smiled and let her feel the power of their desire pound through her body.

His cock jerked. Needy. Wanting. *Minutes now*, he promised himself as he watched her flow with her orgasm, then crawled closer to her.

He yearned for her, felt his body reach out to her.

He knew his prowess with women in bed came from his patience. But for the first time in his life, he was on the verge of losing it all. Coming right now. He had to lean down to cup his penis and preach to himself he was going to fuck her soon. But right now, he was going to make this the best damn oral sex he'd ever done, ever enjoyed. "Spread your legs wider for me, baby."

He slithered lower to land on his elbows looking at the high smooth mound of her plump little cat. At the sight of her lushness, he closed his eyes. From her round labia protruded long, lovely red folds. Coated and glistening with her fragrant desire for him, her frilly petals were a gift for him alone, a perfect present for his particular penchant for luscious pussy and a treasure he was going to take his sweet time to trace and stroke, to lick and kiss. He couldn't seem to get his fill of looking at her, she was so precisely formed for a man who'd always loved to feast on a woman's delicate lips. Who'd always begun his seduction of a woman by treating her and him to nibbling and sucking her until she throbbed with passion for him. Who'd always devoured luscious pussy with a gourmet's devotion and been rewarded with countless searing, soaking, shuddering orgasms around his very happy, very resilient cock. But this sight of Anna's lacy wet folds sent him into a low growl. Feral, ferocious to taste her and consume her,

he took one last look before he caressed her beauty. He'd never seen a woman so richly endowed. So fully formed and so exquisitely made. Just for him.

She stared down at him, breathless. "You like me?"

"I am almost afraid to touch you, you are so perfect. Perfect for me."

"I'm not going anywhere," she offered, insistent as a kid who needed to be petted and pleased.

He put one palm over her full pubic mound and let their heat mingle. "I know you're not, honey. I am going to kiss you into delight."

She moaned, bit her lip. "I love your words. I want your mouth."

"Shhh." He gentled her with a kiss to the curve of her fullness, at the start of her slit. "It's okay, sweetheart. I am here. Let me take you up slowly." He traced her opening with a careful fingertip. "You have such a long pretty seam. I want to be careful not to touch your lovely folds too soon."

"Why not?" She was petulant.

"Because you and I will both love what I do to your hollows and curves." He sat back on his heels between her legs and crooned, "Don't move now."

"No, never." She stiffened and he smiled.

He grasped her upper thighs then. "Relax, darling. I want you coated with juice and fiery when I fondle each fold. Like this," he whispered as he used his fingertips to part her just at the point of her clit. Her engorged button gleamed with promise and he bent to run the full length of his tongue over the nub and listen to her keen. Fulfilled, he drew away.

Her pussy seemed to swell with his ministrations. She moaned and he knew he had to satisfy her with possession. One hand to her pubis, he ran his fingers along her seam, tempting his own sanity, as he lightly avoided the tempting furrows of her cunt's folds peeking out of her. But her scent rose up to his nostrils, empowering him with her need for him. He sank his finger inside her warm channel, hugged by her walls, bathed by her readiness. Torturing himself, he withdrew and sucked one fingertip, loving her thick cream. He knew he had to have more or die of thirst. So he traced the lacy edges of one fold, and then another. He tugged on another and bent to titillate her frilly edges with the tip of his tongue. Then he opened his mouth and sucked as much of her as he could deep inside.

She screamed and he placed a hand to her mound and beneath it, felt her orgasm take her. He could not refuse her more. A madman now, he parted her again quickly. If he did so gently, he pleaded with himself that it was so. Her bouquet surrounded him, struck him. Ravenous for her on his lips and in his mouth, he spread her glistening, gorgeous pussy wide and almost cried in the delight of how she flowed with more moist lube.

"My beautiful Anna," he murmured and sent his tongue inside the slick, warm sweetness that was her core. Delicately fingering aside her folds, he speared his tongue inside her, over and over, sucking up her essences and giving her his tongue's homage for the joy of it. He wended his way to her clitoris and once more marveled that she wanted him. Voluptuous, her clit was smooth with inflamed liquid need and he licked her and fondled her over and over with lips that savored and teeth that nipped. She gripped the sheets, tore them up from the bed in her agony of ecstasy.

He pinned her hips and nuzzled her until she came once more with wild vibrations. As she quieted in repletion, he slowly salved her seam with his tongue.

"I want you inside me," she demanded, pressing her hands to his shoulders. "I want to come and pound around you. Tate," she said his name like a madwoman's prayer. "I've never felt like this before."

He pulled himself up, tilted up her hips and admired the beauty of her welcoming red cunt. One hand out, he slapped it over the package of condoms, ripped one off and rolled it on. He nestled near her again. She whined in outrage and desire. He took his cock and sank down inside her so far, so completely, he felt a yell rising from the bottom of his lungs. "More," she demanded and rocked her hips to take him deeper still.

He gave her all of him there was to give. Down to the root, twisting, turning, driving into her, he told himself to be more careful, tender. All his thoughts went with the glorious sensation of her hot, creamy walls milking him to a ripe full fuck. He rode her and she surged against him, flowed with him and ground her teeth. He had wanted her for eternities and when he burst inside her, he knew he'd come as far as a man might from attraction to affection to possession and love.

# **Chapter Five**

The sun sent rays of red and gold into the bridge hours later, when Tate walked up the steps to stop and gaze at her sitting, totally nude in his captain's chair.

He grinned at the sight, then winked at her. His navy blue eyes grew dark with remembered desire.

Her nipples pebbled in response and she knew with pride that she wanted him as much as he desired her. Her cunt pulsed too with need when she saw that he hadn't dressed either. But he must have taken a shower, Anna thought, as she admired his wet auburn hair seemingly set afire by the dying light of day. His entire body glowed with drops of moisture, his sun-gold beauty stunning to her, as it always was. His nakedness made her pussy gush with new needs and she squeezed her thighs together at the sight of his long cock.

She tossed her hair over her shoulder and gazed into his eyes. "You slept well. You needed it."

With sweeping glances, he took a three-sixty survey of their position near the shore. Satisfied, he pivoted and strolled toward her, his hands swiveling the captain's chair so that he stood between her thighs. "I had great dreams too," he said, gruff with exhaustion. "Of you, laid bare on my bed here on my boat." He bent down and kissed the base of her throat. "And then, imagine, I woke up and remembered it's no dream. You are here with me in all your gorgeous flesh."

Shivering at his compliment, she smiled at him. "I made dinner while you rested," she said as she leaned back to give him access to her breasts. "Spaghetti," she supplied as he lifted one breast and sucked the nipple into his mouth. "With marinara," she elaborated as he nipped her and laved her with a dexterous tongue. "And meatballs."

He pulled her against him, his fingers tangled in her hair as he claimed her lips in an astonishingly sweet kiss.

"I am hungry," he murmured. "You cannot believe how starved for you." He pushed her hips forward so that she slid on the chair and her groin met his. "God, you are so warm and moist."

Between her tender folds, she felt his shaft rise and grow more turgid. She wanted to take him inside her again, but knew the time for revelations had definitely arrived. No story, no relationship. No honesty, no chance of a love affair with him.

She traced her fingertip over his upper lip. "I came up here naked for a reason."

He grinned. "I'm ready to hear."

She tipped her head to one side, smiling with sadness. "I want to be totally open with you."

His expression went from sexy to thrilled. "No barriers? No secrets?"

"None. I was honest with you downstairs and the feeling was incredible."

"For me, too."

It was her turn to show him how pleased she was at his honesty. "I want to feel that way again. Soon. So let me tell you what I know. I'll feel better. Hopefully, you will too, knowing I am not—"

He tipped his head. "Not what?"

"Crazy. A felon. A liar."

"I don't think you are any of those things. Never did."

"You could," she insisted.

He cupped her jaw. "Stop this. I never thought you were anything but smart, tempting and private. Very private." Then he dropped his arms, stepped back and gave her space. "Go ahead, honey. Tell me what this is that's going on. We can stay here for as long as we want. It's a nice cove. Then we can go southward again tomorrow morning." He sat down in the matching chair to face her.

She squinted out toward the shore. Mexico. That was part of her story but not where she should begin. "I was born in Bayonne, New Jersey, but at the age of three, I moved with my mother and my older sister to Albuquerque, New Mexico. That was twenty-six years ago. My father did not come with us." She dropped her gaze to her hands, her fingers entwined. "He was sent to prison." She sought Tate's gaze and he did not blink, did not flinch. "My father was convicted for murder and eleven counts of trafficking of illegal immigrants into the United States from the Ukraine and Georgia."

Tate frowned. "He was connected to—"

"He was a member of an international syndicate that imported women from all parts of the world to the U.S., Mexico, South America, you name it."

Tate frowned and folded his hands. "As prostitutes."

Anna nodded. "My mother, my sister and I moved to Albuquerque before my father's trial, though my mother went back to testify. The three of us were put in federal witness protection."

Anna saw Tate scowl, but he remained silent.

"My mother had helped federal investigators by giving evidence against my father and two of his accomplices. She said it was the only way for her to make herself feel clean after living with him and finding out what he did. And it was a way out for her from what had become an intolerable marriage and a frightening life. But I remember very little of my early years. My sister, Christine, was five years older than I and said she remembered quite a lot. She told me of the calls in the middle of the night that our father would get. How he'd leave and return days, sometimes weeks later. She was so happy that she never had to see him again. He was often angry, physically abused our mother, and drank often and to excess. Maybe he did drugs, too. Who knows.

"We stayed in New Mexico for twelve years. We had a good life. Mom had a job as a bookkeeper at a construction company and earned a good salary. Each year, she checked in with the Marshals Service, just like she was supposed to. We had a house we rented and a dog we loved. My sister went to the University of New Mexico to study

art. I was a freshman in high school when I came home late one day, opened the kitchen door and saw our Labrador dead on the floor, his neck twisted at an odd angle. I heard my mother crying inside the house. My sister was there too and I heard her sobbing. I was about to walk in when I heard a man yelling at them and hitting them."

"What did they want?" Tate asked.

"A list my father told the feds he had made. He said he'd given it to my mother to hide the last time he saw her before he had been arrested."

"A list of -"

"Names. Members of his organization. The structure." Anna's gaze met Tate's. "As many names as he could remember."

"Why suddenly did your father talk about a list twelve years after his conviction?" Tate was perplexed.

"To buy him a shorter prison term. He found out he had cancer of the stomach and he wanted to use it to bargain so that he could be released before he died."

"Why didn't he turn as a government witness and hand over the list when he was first arrested?"

"He said back then he'd still been loyal and he assumed he'd be killed while he was in jail. He had no idea he'd be held under close surveillance in prison where few others could ever get near him."

Tate shook his head. "And what happened that afternoon when you came home? What did you do?"

She bit her lower lip and gazed out at the horizon. "I ran to a neighbor's and called the police and told them what was happening. They sent a SWAT team to the house but by the time they arrived...it was too late. My mother and sister were dead. The men had shot them. Executed them." She shivered, clutching her arms. "They got away. I couldn't remember the make of the car. Only the color. Black."

Tate rose and pulled her up into his embrace. Wrapping her to him, he turned and sat in the captain's chair with her in his lap. His hands around her shoulders, he held her tightly and waited for her to continue.

"No one was ever arrested. I was put in child protective services. Although under age, I was so much older than most in foster care that I just went from family to family and each one got worse than the last. I was nothing more than a meal ticket for the people who took me in."

"Where were the feds? Why didn't they come back in and put you in a decent home?"

"My mother had never told me much about the witness program and I had no idea what her obligations were or who her contact was. My sister knew more but wouldn't share with me. She said what I didn't know kept me safer. I trusted both of them. Why wouldn't I? We seemed fine in our new life. Never had a problem. Never had anyone ever threaten us. So when I told the local police I needed to talk to the U.S. Marshals Service, they thought I was nuts. But I kept insisting and finally they sent an agent in to me. She was kind, asked me a lot about the men who had killed my mother and sister. I told her what I knew. What they said. What they were looking for. The agent asked me if I knew whether my mother had such a list and I told her I had never heard her talk about one. She asked me who my mother's friends were, what she did outside of work. The agent investigated and came back to me months later to say that she'd found nothing unusual. No notes or letters. Nothing suspicious on my mother's home computer or the one she used at work."

"What about phone records?"

"I think they looked at those, too. We had a house phone. And this was 1995 so my mother and sister and I didn't have cell phones then."

He stroked his fingers through her hair. "What happened after you went into child services?"

"Even with all the changes from one family to another, I managed to graduate high school and got a partial scholarship to college. A small one in Austin. So I moved there, got a job as a receptionist at a yoga and fitness center and worked my way through school." She stopped, overwhelmed with fresh fear at the memory of what had happened next. "One day I went to work and a man came in. A big ugly guy. Acting erratic, talking ragtime. At first I thought he was just high on meth or coke. He demanded an appointment, but we catered only to women. I told him he could go down the street to another facility, but he refused. He stormed out but the next day, he showed up at my apartment and tried to barge his way in. He said he knew who I was and he wanted the list.

"I told him I had no list and didn't think one even existed. He just laughed at me."

"And?" Tate encouraged her to continue.

"He hit me."

Tate pressed his lips to her forehead.

"But by that time, I was an expert at krav maga."

"I see."

"I knocked him out, called the police and got the U.S. Marshals Service involved again. Only now I didn't trust them. So I-" She broke off and gazed up at Tate, "Left town."

"Without their help?"

"Yes."

"Where did you go?"

"Mexico City." She curled into Tate's embrace, her lips to his throat. "I was so scared and I thought if I went to another country, far away from all this, I could disappear. Maybe find some peace." She looked up at him. "And some courage."

"I know you have courage. Not many could have survived what you have, sweetheart."

She hugged him and went on with her story. "When I left Austin it was August 2001. I took my clothes, my cat and my car, and just got out."

Tate widened his eyes.

"I had a Texas driver's license and before the attacks of 9/11, to get across the border no one ever needed more than a license. And I had no passport. Had never had one. That didn't create a problem for me because I always asked to be paid in cash. In 2002, I got a job in a resort in Monterrey that was popular with Americans." She sighed. "The next year, one of those Americans who was a resort owner herself, approached me, said she was impressed by me. She offered me a job in San Antonio."

"Mona," he said.

She nodded. "Mona promised me a promotion, too. The pay was certainly an incentive plus I was tired of hiding. Tired of Mexico and being a gringo and the thought of going back to the States appealed to me, so I decided I'd leave. But I had a problem." She looked into the concern she saw in Tate's dark navy blue eyes.

"Since the attacks on New York and Washington, the Americans had increased their security especially at the borders. They tightened things up so that new fences were built, even across places where the Rio Grande was nothing more than a trickle of water. Now everyone had to go through extensive checks at border stations, their cars examined by border patrol and bomb and drug sniffing dogs. And I knew I couldn't get through because the only thing I had was a Texas driver's license – no passport. But I certainly wasn't going to return to the States under my old driver's license name. That would have been suicide if some other creep decided to find me and threaten me."

"What about your birth certificate? Couldn't you go to an American consulate and get them to issue you a passport on your birth certificate?"

"No." She hated to tell him more, but he could never understand her reclusive nature and her need for privacy if she didn't tell him absolutely everything about who she really was.

"Your mother hadn't kept it for you?"

"No, Tate. I am not sure if Witness Protection ever made a new false birth certificate for me or if they ever gave one to my mother. After my mom and sister died, child protective services issued me a new name and Social Security Number. I kept that until I was in college and that thug came to threaten me in San Antonio. In Monterrey, I used another name, not the one on my Texas driver's license. One I'd made up. And when I went to San Antonio, I took another name. All of which means, I have had my name changed or done it myself for a total of four times."

"So now you are Anna Stephens."

"Yes. Anna Stephens is the newest one I made up to work in San Antonio."

"And how did you do that?"

"I found a good forger in Nuevo Laredo whom I paid to create a new driver's license and a new American passport for me."

"And Mona accepted this name change?" He frowned. "Easily?"

"She said she wouldn't care if my name was Minnie Mouse."

His eyes widened. "Why?"

"I told her some of my history."

His jaw dropped. He looked horrified. "Did you give her names and dates? Things she could look up?"

"No. Nothing definite. Some people you know instinctively will never hurt you. Mona was one of them." Anna explained how serene and balanced her former employer was, how cool and objective. "She hooked me up with an apartment, helped me buy a car. Became my friend, really. I have had so few."

Tate cupped her face. "You have another one now."

She smiled briefly. "I only know that every time I get a handle on a normal life, it all goes to hell at a moment's notice. And this time, now with you, here like this—" Her gaze swept over his handsome face and suddenly she was flooded with grief that she

would ultimately have to leave this wonderful man. "I can't bear that it's going to be over before it's begun."

He began to object.

"Don't," she pleaded softly as she sank her fingers into the hair at his nape and kissed him with fierce regret. "I have wanted you for so long. Stayed away from you because I didn't want you involved. I'll leave, I promise. Disappear as soon as we go back to the States. I shouldn't have come here with you but I couldn't resist you and the possibility of being with you for a short time. No one will ever hurt you, Tate. I couldn't live if anything ever happened to you."

He stood with her in his arms and marched down the steps back to their bedroom. There he laid her gently on his bed and sank over her. "Do not forget what I am about to say. I am not as afraid of keeping you as I am terrified of losing you. We are going to find out who is hunting you and we are going to put them behind big, solid bars and throw away the key. No more running, honey. No more talk of disappearing. You belong with me. To me."

"Oh, Tate," she cried out and circled her arms around his neck, "you can't do what police and the Marshals Service weren't able to do."

"No?"

"No!" She felt her stomach knot in fear she'd lose Tate to their savagery.

"Anna, listen to me. There is big difference between them and me, honey. They were just doing their jobs. I'm here because I love you."

# **Chapter Six**

He trembled that he'd spoken words he'd never uttered to another woman. But he bent down to kiss her with all the passion and devotion he knew raged through him.

"Tate," she insisted, tears trailing from the corners of her eyes, "you shouldn't say that!"

With one hand at her nape, he kissed her as he grabbed for a condom from the bedstand and rolled it on one-handed. He had so much to prove to her about who he was, what he wanted, what he'd do to get what he needed. So he took her mouth endlessly, ravishing her, filling her mind with who he was, preparing her for how he was going to possess her from now on. And his background had prepared him for the challenge. He'd grown up in a loving home with parents who'd taught him how to be fair. He'd grown up with an older brother who taught him how to play fair and be aggressive at the same time. After Cord had married Sienna, Tate had wished for a mate of his own and never dared to believe that woman might be Anna Stephens. But now, in less than a day, he'd seen that she meant more to him than any other and that he would move heaven and earth to keep her safe. And keep her with him.

"Anna, I'm saying things I should have said long ago." His hands coursed down her throat to her arms and cupped her breasts. He laved her pointed nipples. "Every part of you belongs to me. These. And this." He sent his tongue inside her navel and bathed her in his care. "This smooth mound belongs to me." He massaged her hot pubis. "The sweet, wet core of you is mine, too." He sent his fingers inside her seam, spread her thick juicy labia wide and found her clitoris. Blowing on the plump little bulb, he fastened his lips around it and sucked her hard into his mouth. She bucked as he backed off to titillate the lacy edges of her cunt's folds. "You know how I love your bare, sleek mons. Your channel. All of this was made to be loved by me," he whispered.

"A man who adores every inch of you. The sculpted beauty of your inner thighs. Here," he said and buried his mouth in the moist place he described. "And here," he crooned as he blessed her other hollow with a lavish kiss and hooked his arms under her knees. "Come up here, honey, and let me fuck you good and hard. Let me show you that from now on, you are not going anywhere without me."

He watched himself position his cock at the entrance to her core. With her pussy up high like this, he could see how his blunt helmet teased her entrance, how it pressed aside her frilly folds and headed inside her slowly, so slowly that he groaned in his own exertion and she could only open her mouth in awe.

He delved inside, the heat of her driving him blind. He retreated and as he heard her object, he smiled and inched inside her swollen labia again. "Oh, baby," he said as he seated himself to the hilt, "you have to know no man could love you better."

"I do," she whispered and squeezed his cock with her inner muscles. "Prove it again, Tate."

A man who knew how to find his rhythm in sport and business, Tate Ryder had known for decades how to find a pulse that rocked a woman's world and made his own vibrate. But this time, he knew his challenge was to bring her up to an orgasm not once or twice, but to give her a series of erotic delights she'd never find in any other man's arms. He gave himself to her with fast jerks of his hips and then in long languid strokes of his cock. He gave her an orgasm with his fingers stroking her clit and filling her core over and over until she throbbed in release. Not done, he flipped her over, to hold her tightly to his hips and fuck her from behind, his fingers rolling her huge sopping wet clit until she screamed. Turning her back over, he opened her cunt once more and sucked and kissed her pretty bundle of nerves, as she beat the mattress and gave up more cream for his ardor. Limp and murmuring little sounds of nonsense that he knew were pleas to fuck her sweet and bad, she put her feet to the mattress and dropped her knees open. He smiled, sent his cock inside her once more, held her hips securely and

then filled her to the max. His cock bathed in her liquid heat, he delivered to her a long, slow exquisite drive that ended in fierce wild rams of his body's claim of hers.

She shouted, dragged him close and caressed his back down to his buttocks.

He rested a minute or two, kissing her throat and trying not to crush her as he caught his breath. He pushed up and grinned at her. She had fallen instantly asleep. Exhausted.

He ran a hand over his face and knew he could use a few winks himself.

But, god, he'd had this burning in his gut to make her see he was the only man for her. In bed. And how about out of bed? Had he done that, too?

He wouldn't know for a while. Her reaction to shut him out when they went home killed him. She wouldn't leave him. He wouldn't let her. Not after he'd caressed every fabulous inch of her. Not after he'd fucked every pretty part of her, put his stamp on her, claimed her for his own. Not after he knew he loved her. Now he had to help her free herself of this awful mess. That would take time. Days, weeks. Hell, he'd love exploring her lush, lithe body while he convinced her he was the best lover, the only lover, she should ever have.

He looked down at her. In repose, she stirred him to new tenderness. Her swollen mouth was as lovely as her ripe, red cunt. He picked up a curl of her long wavy hair from her shoulder. Rich chocolate lined with dark cherry highlights, the strands were wispy but luminous as gossamer. He cherished her. Did so now more than ever. He had to help her.

But he was aware of the problems.

Of all the screwups in Anna's life, the initial fault lay with the Federal Witness Protection Services in Albuquerque, which had been charged with sheltering this family of mother and two daughters. If Witness Protection's failure weren't confusing and infuriating enough, this had been followed by irresponsible failures in the child protective services.

Those two were bureaucracies into which Tate would have to burrow through warrens of people and paperwork. But would there be any record after so many years? Would anyone remember? Would anyone own up to it if they did recall this case?

Then there was the forger in Nuevo Laredo. Hopefully, Anna remembered his name. But there was a danger there if the man were connected to other criminals, which in that Rio Grande border town was very likely. How had Anna found him? Who had sent her to the man? Nuevo Laredo was a crime-ridden city on the U.S-Mexico border right across the Rio from Laredo, Texas. Three hours south of San Antonio and as many hours north of Monterrey, Nuevo Laredo was ruled by Mexican gangs into drugs, gun running and anything else that Americans needed to buy cheap and fast. Nuevo Laredo as a functioning Mexican city had virtually closed down in the past decade. Its economy corrupted by the gangs' bribery, the town was an armed arsenal. Its citizens had been murdered in street raids, many more executed for any failures to accept the gangs' authority. The town's economy had once thrived on gringo tourist trade. Since the crime spree, the Americans stayed home and the townspeople survived mostly on the cash transactions of illegal traffickers. Worse, the gangs that began as drug and gun runners joined with others that ran illegal immigrants, prostitutes, child labor and even terrorists. Shepherding people and goods across the Mexican border into the States, these cartels of gang members earned fortunes hiring "mules" to transport illegal goods and "coyotes" who bilked the illegals and led them on foot across miles and miles of high desert into California, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas. Meanwhile, the Mexican Federales were too weak to fight the bribery that destroyed the peace and decimated the entire town.

Mona Travis seemed like no challenge at all. To Anna or Tate. After all, he knew where Mona lived, geographically and ethically. A savvy business woman, Mona was hard-working. Tate had met her over a decade ago and liked her and her business. She had come on to him at one point but because she had a sarcastic edge to her, he never took her up on her offer. Wealthy and wise, she had built a chain of resorts and fitness centers among the best in the country. In fact, when he and Cord and Sienna had begun

plans for their own, they went to talk to Mona to sound out her intentions in Mexico. They didn't want either of them surprised that they might be competitors south of the Rio Grande.

But the big questions in Anna's life centered on the existence of this list of the members of this New Jersey crime organization. Did it exist and if so, where was it? And if he and Anna could never prove its existence or lack of it, could he and she ever hope to have a normal life, free of fear?

But he had to try. He rose, went in to the shower and turned the spray on full blast. He stepped in and recited what he had to do.

First thing when he got upstairs to the bridge, he had to catch up with Grant Warwick. Have a long phone discussion. Tell him what he knew—and pray the man who headed his security and had worked in the Army's Criminal Investigation Division and the FBI could shed some light on what to do to find a way into this puzzle.

And Tate would find every piece of this jigsaw because he wanted Anna. For as long as she wanted him.

He was painfully aware she hadn't said she loved him. And that was all right.

He didn't want her to say precious words she might not feel. He wanted her freely and for as long as she wanted him in her bed and in her life. Just because he was crazy for her didn't mean—

Hell, Tate. Be honest with yourself.

He toweled dry and padded back into the master cabin where Anna slept deeply. He stared down at her and pulled on a tee shirt and khakis. He had to weigh anchor, chart a course for them south to Tampico and get to the meeting with his builders at the spa's construction site. Once that was over, he would focus on Anna's issues.

Minutes later up on deck, he strode to the bridge and noticed a red blinking light on his marine telecom system. Someone had faxed him while he was downstairs with Anna.

He strode to the machine and read the message.

"Tried to call. No answer. Have lead on owner of Rodeo: Good news/Bad news. CALL ME asap! GW."

Tate picked up his cell phone and hit the autodial for Grant's personal line.

"Hey, you okay?" Grant asked first thing.

"Fine. We're about three, four hours out of Tampico harbor. What's up with the owner of the car?"

"The tags are licensed to a man in Laredo, Texas. Thirty-two years old. Natural born American citizen. Eduardo Escobar was his name."

"Was?" Tate echoed. "Tell me the rest."

"He's dead. Shot last year on his way to work. The sheriff's homicide detective says they had little evidence and could not identify any suspect. No surprise there since law enforcement is so overworked along the border. But the detective speculates that Eduardo was in the pay of the Sinaloa gang."

"Why's that?"

"He worked at a used car dealership. A salesman. Since Escobar's death, the detective says they have turned up other cars with false titles. Sinaloa's head man in Laredo lived next door to Escobar when they were kids. The two were tight. So our detective concludes Escobar must have been running his own side game for Sinaloa, giving out fake titles for his buddies. Risky business, right? So the detective says one day, Escobar doesn't do as his *amigo* tells him and it's *adios, Eduardo.*"

"Any record of this Jeep Rodeo sold at that dealership?" Tate asked, but figured he knew the answer.

"No."

Tate cursed. "No hint of the Rodeo for sale in any gang shops in Houston?"

"None yet. We'll keep looking. He can't drive around with a crushed plate without some Texas State trooper stopping him for a look-see."

"Let me know what develops. Meanwhile, Anna has told me more about her problems. I want you to look into the arrest and conviction of a crime boss in Bayonne New Jersey in 1979, 1980."

"Name?"

"Hasn't come out yet. Too much for her to tell in one sitting. But I'll get it."

"Okay, with the location and date, that'll give me a start," Grant provided.

"That's what I thought," Tate agreed then recounted Anna's story about her father's activities and arrest, her mother's testimony and their subsequent submersion in the Witness Protection program. After he related the tale of Anna's mother's and sister's deaths, he said, "I'd say someone leaked something here."

"Hmm," Grant mulled that over. "Does Anna have any ideas who that might be?"

"No. She was three when they left New Jersey for New Mexico and in the next twelve years, they had no problems, no threats. But something is wrong there."

"I have an old Army buddy who's in the Marshals Service. I'll give him a call, see if he can take a peek at any of those old WitPro records. But I gotta tell you, Tate, it's not likely that he'll be able to find or tell us much."

"Yeah. I would expect the Service keeps a tight lid on all those cases."

"Their entire mission is to sequester these people forever and deep six their real IDs. Any breach would be grounds for dismissal."

"That's why I cannot believe the feds were at fault here. But stranger things have happened." He sighed. "So maybe this is ridiculous to ask, but I have to," Tate persisted. "Could the Service have been infiltrated by criminal networks up along the East Coast?"

"Phew," Grant made noises of disbelief. "Tall order for a bunch of crooks. I'll sniff around though and see what I find."

"Go look at child protective services in Albuquerque, too. They failed Anna, bigtime."

"Get me some names of staff from her," Grant directed.

"I'll ask. Then, see what you can find out about forgers in Nuevo Laredo."

Grant whistled. "Nuevo has one on every street corner! Got a name for me on that?" When Tate promised him one, Grant sounded very grave when he said, "Tell me why I'm going there."

Tate told him about Anna's fake driver's license and passport. "One more thing, not a priority, but still someone to look at."

"Well, hell. Hope you have a name for this one," Grant complained.

"I do. Mona Travis. San Antonio."

"The white-haired beauty who owns those fancy weight-loss spas?"

"One and the same."

"What am I looking for in her background?"

"Anything that smells bad," Tate replied.

"What did she do to Anna?"

"Gave her a job. A good one."

"What else? No girlfriends I need to run? No old boyfriends lurking in the background?" Grant persisted.

"I'll ask. But I do doubt the boyfriend angle." *She's been so careful of her life, even refraining from acting on her attraction to me.* 

"Yeah? Ask her anyway, Tate. I've seen how you look at her. I see how you're reacting to this, but be clear. It's better to cover all the territory initially or we'll wind up with our dicks in our hands. Especially dealing with syndicates. Drugs, guns, slave labor, drone missiles, automatic assault weapons. They sell so well along the Rio. It's the devil's web."

"Agreed. Which brings me to the last issue," Tate said with trepidation.

"I'm listening."

"The reason the mother and sister were murdered was because the mob in New Jersey was led to believe by Anna's father that he'd given his wife a list of names of all the members of the network. They came looking for the list."

Grant whistled. "They killed the mother and sister to try to get it?"

"Right. And Anna knows nothing about any list. Her mother never said she had one. Anna has no idea if one even exists."

"And the mother never gave Anna anything? A diary? A letter? Anything?"

"As far as I know right now, no, Grant. That's all I've got."

"Sounds like you've got a good beginning. But you've also got something else."

"Yeah. What?"

"A bad case of loving Anna Stephens."

Tate clutched at the sound of the words. To hear someone else say them made it all real. Bigger than life. "Bingo, Grant. Just get me all that. I'll work from here."

"Meanwhile, stay safe."

"I have protection," Tate told him, eyed the deck compartment housing his harpoons and the mount for the spear gun, and on the other side lay his set of knives for gutting, dicing and filleting anything he caught. "Got my Smith & Wesson, too."

"Carry the gun with you on shore if you think customs is lax there. In any case, do not let Anna out of your sight. You want her to live a long and happy life."

"Goes without saying," Tate said as they ended the call.

Tate sat watching the sun climb in the sky, reviewing what he now had to do to help Anna. With a jolt, he realized how few people really ever had helped her. Everyone had failed her. Mother, father and governments.

He'd be the one to help her out of the mess others had made.

"Because I want her," he told himself minutes later as he sat in his captain's chair, his task of plotting his course south-southwest into Tampico's harbor forgotten. "I want her to be free of her shadows. Free to come to me if she wants. For a lifetime. A long and prosperous six or seven decades. At any cost to me."

# **Chapter Seven**

"Getting through that checkpoint was certainly easier than I anticipated," Tate told her the next morning as they drove from the huge stucco harbor customs and immigration bays out of Tampico.

"I've never had any problems with this driver's license or passport," Anna replied, sighing with relief that once more she'd passed through such a barrier easily. She had wanted to stay on the yacht but Tate had refused to leave her there alone.

"I'm capable of taking care of myself," she had told him over breakfast. But her ability at *krav maga* had cut no mustard with him—and she wasn't going to tell him about her Sig Sauer or her superb marksmanship. He'd want to know details about how she'd acquired both and she wasn't eager to frighten him for her safety any more than he was. To tell him how she'd practiced for years with the handgun at target ranges would mean he would lock her up and throw away the key to protect her. And she knew the only way to end this particular episode of someone chasing her was to either find out once and for all if her mother had ever possessed this infamous list—or disappear. Become someone else. Again.

Tate shifted into higher gear in his rented Toyota sedan and turned onto the highway north toward the site of the Ryders' new resort construction. "This forger was certainly an expert. Do you remember his name?"

She smiled ruefully. "Men like these don't have names. They don't need them because they work for cash. But I do remember where he was located. A house in back of the main street of Nuevo Laredo. Near the central Mercado and the city square. The house was typical stucco, two-story emerald green with bright eggplant purple shutters." "It's easy to find a forger like this?" he asked, his eyes wide in incredulity but trained on the road that narrowed to two lanes.

"In Mexico? Of course. Since the gangs have taken over the border towns the last ten or more years, it's even easier. You just go and ask around discreetly in the streets. As long as you have American dollars to pay the street boys who seem to know every type of vice you need, they'll point the way to whatever you want. Cocaine. Meth. Handguns. Assault weapons. Women of every age and color." She crossed her arms and starred out her side window at the palm trees lining the coast. "I was not proud of the fact that I had to stoop down to that criminal level. I became the equal of my father, but I felt I had no choice."

"I hear you, sweetheart," Tate consoled her. "After we finish here with the builders, we'll go back to the yacht. Do you think you can draw a map of where this forger might have lived?"

"I'll try. But honestly, Tate, I doubt he would still be there. People like this move around often. It's a precaution against being arrested."

"We have to try." He reached over and squeezed her hand. "And I need you to tell Grant and me a few more things. Tonight when we get back to the boat, we'll call him."

"Sure." She tried to smile.

"One thing we need to know is your real name and all the others you've assumed."

"Anna Marie," she said, pronouncing the unused sounds with a reverence she had reserved for quiet moments alone with her happier memories. "Anna Marie Sellers was my second name. The one I had when we lived in New Mexico. The one I grew up with. I remember struggling to write that name. Marie didn't seem correct to me. My mother told me later that in Witness Protection you keep your first name so that the transition to your new life seems easier. But I was only three and when I wrote my name right after we moved, I always put down my real name."

"And your real name?" he asked, glancing at her quickly and back to the road.

"Anna Karina," she pronounced with an accent she could not trace to anything but a hazy childhood memory. "Anna Karina Sukova."

"Russian?" Tate said, under his breath. "Your parents were Russian immigrants to America?"

He was startled. She couldn't blame him. Russian and Eastern Bloc émigrés had acquired a nasty reputation in the U.S due to the minority who affiliated with criminal elements. "My father, yes. Not my mother. She was Irish-American. Her family had been in America for three generations. But she fell for the bad boy in the neighborhood and regretted it years afterward." Anna faced Tate, a man so kind, so loving, so attentive, she knew she could stay with him and never suffer what her mother had for her poor choice. Proud of her own instinct to care so deeply for a good man like Tate, Anna was awash in shame of her own lineage. And regret. "A terrifying prospect, isn't it, to think I come from Russian *mafiya*?"

"They're ruthless."

"Determined," she added.

Tate turned into a smaller road, one lane, marked by a large sign pointing toward the resort's construction site. "You've not had any help against them. And when push comes to shove, we've got Grant and his team with us plus the resources of the U.S. government."

She shook her head. "The U.S. government failed me before, Tate. I have no reason to believe in them now."

"I understand. But we have to win, honey. We're the good guys."

She smiled at him, knowing he meant his words. But she turned away, admitting once more to herself that she cared for him as well. If she loved him, she would not permit herself to say. That was too much to bear, knowing it would bring her and him only sorrow—at their separation. And separate they would. Must. His declaration of love had thrilled her, humbled her and made her promise herself she would not let him delude himself into thinking they might have a long-term relationship. She had come

here with him too readily, too easily. A comforting choice for her at the time, it had been an act he insisted upon and one she agreed to.

Fool.

What had made her think she could change years of running? Desire for a charming man? Need for a few nights of passion with a man she deeply cared for?

Yes, the hours in his arms had refreshed her, even inspired her for a few moments to live in a fantasy thinking she could be capable of having a normal life. But that was such a lie. Such an impossibility. All because she was in an insolvable dilemma. She had rejected looking for the list years ago, telling herself its discovery might help the government, but would only bring her more trouble. More threats. More thugs. And death. Worse, she had no ideas if it even existed.

Which brought her back to nowhere with Tate. Nowhere good for him. Nowhere wise for her.

Because I love him.

She stilled in her seat.

"Hey, there," Tate reached across and stroked her long hair over her ear. "We're here. Come inside with me." He nodded toward the construction trailer for the foremen and the tent that provided shelter for the laborers. "I want you to see the work to date, too." He nodded up the hill toward the cleared terrain and the pebble-filled area that would soon be covered with concrete for the foundation.

She pushed her sunglasses up her nose and reached for her purse. "Looks wonderful!" Eager to focus on something other than her brooding, she knew she'd have to return to the huge admission she'd just made to herself of how dearly she cared for Tate. "Let's go."

## \* \* \* \* \*

An hour later, she strolled the hillside with Tate and the foreman for the plumbing and foundation. The sun was high in the noon sky and baking into her skin at a *muy* 

*caliente* ninety-five degrees or more. She'd wandered away from Tate to examine the shady terrain where the cistern for rainwater would ultimately stand behind a bank of trees. The whole resort project was to run on green energy, with solar heating and cooling, plus recycling all the water in their pools and hot tubs. They'd even refilter their gray water and use it for the plants in the landscaping wherever they could. She removed her sunglasses to examine the depth of the excavation for the receptacle and the angle of the runoff pipes down to the main level of the spa.

"Anna Marie?"

She whirled to face a construction worker, an orange hard hat on his shaggy dark hair. He filled her vision, a broad-shouldered man with meaty arms and hands.

"I could never mistake you," he boasted, a grin on his fleshy face.

She took a step backward, instinct working when her mind could not. "I'm sorry," she managed and retreated one more pace.

He advanced, his stride relentless, his demeanor friendly. "I haven't seen you in years. How many?"

"I think you are mistaken," she replied, sheathing herself in the cool façade that served her well in such encounters.

"No, couldn't be. You're Kathleen's daughter all right."

Kathleen. My mother's real name.

"Don't you remember me? Jose Alvarez? Albuquerque? I dated your mother for a while back in the nineties. I worked at the home builders' where she did the bookkeeping. I came to the house a couple of times. You were ten? Eleven?"

"You're mistaken. My mother was – "

"Kathleen!" He nodded quickly, then froze as if he had forgotten something vital. "Kathleen Sellers! Your hair color and those eyes. They're the same big cat's eyes. Wow, it's like looking at her again. How is she?"

Anna pulled herself up to a rigid stance, got her footing and stared the man in the eyes. "You're wrong. I must go. Mr. Ryder is leaving soon."

The man wrinkled his brows. "Okay. Sure. But – Whatever."

Anna was already ten fast paces away and climbing down the rock-strewn path toward their rental car. Heart pounding like a kettle drum, she ran to open the door, slid into the front seat and bit her trembling lower lip. She could see Tate examining her from across the site, motioning to the foreman that he was headed for the car.

"What's wrong?" Tate asked, when he was seated next to her.

"He knew me. Knew my mother."

"Who?" Tate was scouring the hillside.

She pretended to search in her purse for something, but her hands shook so much she had to clamp them together. "The one by the cistern. The big dark one."

Tate squinted. "Tell me what he said."

"He called me by name. Said he'd recognize me anywhere. My hair. My eyes. He thinks my eyes are the same as my mother's. He knew her name, too. Said he dated her."

"Do you know him?"

She put her head between her knees to stop the rush that flooded her with nausea. "No," she groaned. "My mother never dated anyone."

"Are you certain?" Tate persisted, his hands massaging the back of her neck and shoulders.

"There were men who asked. She said she never accepted because she was too scared of being found out." She rose and tears dribbled down her cheeks. "When can we go back to the yacht?"

"Soon. Stay here." He opened the car door again. "I'm going to talk to the foreman and find out what he knows about the man."

She plucked at Tate's shirt sleeve. "Tate, be careful."

He riveted her with the sternness of his gaze. "I'm good, babe. My foreman is a stand-up guy. We have to know more about this man. If he knew your mother and if he knew you, then perhaps he knew other things about all of you. Perhaps he has friends who needed to know, too."

She swallowed hard.

"This has to end, Anna. You can't run all your life."

"I don't want to," she told him honestly.

He reached over and gave her a fast kiss. "Want to stay with me?"

She nodded, flinging her arms around his neck, throbbing with the desire to love him and be with him for days and weeks and years of peace. But could she hope for that, when her whole life had been run by someone else's needs?

# **Chapter Eight**

Frantic to take what she could wring from the minutes with Tate, she fidgeted like a child as he drove them back to Tampico.

Tate's persistent investigation of the man who had approached her at the construction site didn't help. After trying to get cell phone coverage repeatedly, he now finally connected with Grant Warwick and gave him the man's name and what had happened. "My foreman says this Jose Alvarez is an American." Tate gave Grant the man's Social Security and passport numbers. "The man has a good reputation personally and he is one of the best plumbers and gas fitters in the southwestern U.S. That's why my foreman hired him. And no, Anna says she doesn't remember him. But Alvarez certainly knew her name and talked about her mother... Yes, okay, I'll ask her and get back to you. Anything else on the Jeep?"

Tate hung up. "Nothing more on finding the car."

Anna wrung her hands together at the memory of the guy who rammed into her the other night.

"Grant's at the International Bridge in Laredo, about to cross into Nuevo Laredo," Tate said with a look into his rearview mirror. "He'll be asking around for the forger you used."

Nodding, Anna sank into her own misery as they wended their way down the slope of the mountain.

"Here's a restaurant up ahead," Tate said, pointing toward a roadside establishment that looked reputable. "Let's get lunch and a cool drink."

"Let's not," she countered, rubbing her upper arms. "I want to get back to the boat." Out on the water, she felt safe.

"I need to stop, honey," he insisted with another glance into his mirror. "We might have company. No! Don't look." He decelerated and flipped open the compartment between the seats.

Inside, she saw a silver revolver. "Tate?"

"No worries. I'm a good shot."

Her fingers strayed to her purse where her own Sig Sauer rested, fully loaded, safety off. "Who could be following us?" she asked him and herself. "Alvarez?"

"Sun's refracting off his windshield. It's a man all right, but not certain if it's Alvarez. So we'll see." He turned into the access road to the restaurant and slowed as he took the revolver in his right hand and positioned the car perpendicular to the highway.

This new development spooked her. Fear closed her throat.

"He didn't slow," he said with finality as they came to a stop and saw a car whizz past them. "Perhaps it's a false alarm."

She shook her head. "If it wasn't Alvarez, then who could it be?" she asked, her despair rising with the idea someone else would be interested in her. Someone else she didn't know. She ran both hands over her mouth and down her throat.

He took her fingers. "Look at me. We're going to get a taco and a lemon soda and see if our buddy there in the yellow Camaro comes back. Then we're driving straight to the dock."

\* \* \* \* \*

But Anna couldn't eat, could only drink a sip or two after he warned her of dehydration in the summer heat. Added to that, she was as nervous as a cat on a griddle and Tate tried to talk her out of it, then just gave in to her need for silence.

Back on the road, they hadn't encountered the yellow Camaro again. Nor did they encounter any other cars overly interested in their route to the Tampico marina's dock.

About four they boarded. Anna volunteered to help him depart, but he sent her below to rest—and to clear his mind to find a new way into hers. He'd never known her

### Cerise DeLand

to be so withdrawn and her silence coupled with her fear worried him. Was she processing what had happened at the site and at her home in Houston or was she hiding something from him? He couldn't tell. And it gutted him but spurred him on so that he did a speedy job of clearing them for departure with the harbor master's crew. By six, he had them headed north-northeast to Galveston.

He took them due west until he saw no shoreline, then anchored for dinner. More importantly, he wanted time with Anna. Long minutes unbroken by old memories or fresh anticipations of thugs attacking her. Long minutes when he could refuel her desire for him and he could build a reserve to ensure she never left him.

He found her in the galley, assembling a tray of appetizers. "Looks good," he told her. "I am hungry." *Though not for this*. He pulled her backward against him. His fingers delved up under her tee shirt, her nipple already blossoming for him. He cupped the silken tip of her breast, so soft, so warm. She was his fantasy woman, lush breasts, plush juicy pussy lips and a mad passion for him. His lips on her throat, he inhaled the citrusy scents of her skin and her hair. "What have you got for me?"

"An apology," she told him in a sad tone as she turned in his embrace.

He cupped her ass, her firm cheeks hiding a sleek pussy he had to stroke. His fingers yanked up the cuffs of her shorts. He smiled at the feel of her moist skin. She hadn't donned any panties either, just like he'd told her. He growled and burrowed his fingers inside her juicy cunt and made her moan. "Don't need another of those."

"What you've done for me—"

"Is what I wanted to do." He moved his hand back, his index finger circling her dark little hole. "Because I want you." He tapped her ass. "All of you."

"Oh...um..." she moaned as his finger deftly massaged her tiny orifice. "That is wonderful." Her head fell backward.

"I can tell." He held her up with one arm around her waist while he made a foray inside her ass. He licked the hollow of her throat, his purpose to let her see that making love to him was what she was made for. "No thinking. Just feel," he crooned and

carried her over to the galley table. There, he laid her down, unbuttoned her shorts, skimmed them off her legs and with two hands to her tee shirt, whirled it up and over her head. Her total naked beauty in the bright sunlight of his galley took his breath and wrenched his heart. Her swollen mons—labia pouting and giving off so much fragrance his nostrils flared—was a delicious sight as she scooted back on the table and opened her thighs.

He settled between her legs, stroking those taut hollows of her thighs he loved next to her pussy. He'd kissed her there before. He felt the power of her muscles there now and knew soon he'd have her offering him this sweet meat in his bed, her thighs spread over his face. Right now, he needed to take the sadness from her expression and put a smile there.

"I'm gonna make you happy, honey."

She scooted forward to nestle her moist folds against his groin. "Hurry, then. I'm soaked with need." She put her hands to her nether lips and slowly parted them. "Can you hear how you tempt me?"

His eyes admired how ready she was. His ears loved how the sound of her wetness made his cock rise higher, harder in his pants, eager to come out and play. But this was not about him. Only her.

He bent to show her how enthralled he was. The first succulent taste of her cream sent violent ripples of need through him. "Your pretty clit is so full," he told her and she hummed in excitement. "It's red and glistening for me. Let me show you how I appreciate such beauty." He flicked his tongue over her bundle of nerves again and she groaned.

The boat rocked.

Tate smiled and bent to spread her wide, find her G-spot and lick it all the way to the very tip of her clit. He wanted her intoxicated with him, so lost in a whirlpool of delight she'd lose all thoughts of threats to him or her.

A thump alongside of the hull had him pausing. Freezing.

## Cerise DeLand

Anna clutched the table. "Tate?"

He cocked his ear.

A thump again. Or was that a grunt?

He straightened. He was already leaving her. "Go below."

She began to object.

He spun. *Do it,* he mouthed.

Yanking open a utensil drawer, he sank below the cabinet and fished around to grab two carving knives. Like a crab, he crouched and maneuvered toward the galley steps up to the main deck. From there, he could see out the back to the main deck.

A glimpse out the rear told him what he had suspected.

Another boat was attempting to come alongside. It was smaller, older, its engine killed. They were skilled sailors, whoever they were, to creep up on him so quickly, so quietly. But that didn't matter as much as ensuring the bastards left as quickly as they came.

How many were there?

He caught a gander at the boat. It looked like craft was half his size. Still, aboard could be ten or twelve men.

At that moment, Anna inched round the edge of the counter and in her left hand was his revolver. In her right hand she sported a handgun. He frowned at her, shocked yet realizing she had good reason to own one. With a narrowed gaze and tilt of his head, he asked her if she could use the weapon. Understanding, she widened her eyes and shrugged one shoulder as if to say, the world was full of surprises.

Surprise was what he needed most of at this point. But how to get it? Keep it?

Taking his .45 from her, he motioned for her to keep low and follow him. He had no way out onto the deck other than the one before him so he had to pray that he had enough knives and ammo to waylay them.

The first man came over the side of the back deck, a rope in one hand, a handgun in the other.

Peeking above the counter, Tate glanced out the side window just in time to see the top of the head of another intruder rising above the rail. From the corner of his eye, Tate saw Anna shaking and he reached out, hoping his hand was warm and his grip firm. With his touch, she stilled and he marveled that she could turn in an instant to a serene creature.

At the same moment, he heard the first man clomping around the bridge. *Go ahead, asshole. Try to start this puppy.* Tate had digitally locked the engine before descending from the bridge minutes before.

Tate's head jerked left as he spied a third man at the helm of the smaller craft. He called to his buddies to hurry.

The first man rumbled down the steps from the bridge. "What the hell's the matter with you, Frank?" he scolded in a ragged whisper. "Shut *up*!"

"Where the hell are they?" the second man persisted, unabashed.

"That's what we're finding out, brainy," the first man responded. "Get down there and see where they are."

"Don't see you going down there," Frank taunted.

"I'm behind you," assured the first man. "Go!"

"Behind me," he muttered and stood tall, then bent as he loped into the low-roofed entrance to the quarters below.

Tate waited until the third man was within three feet. Then in one fluid zigzag, he feinted to one side and sprawled to the other side, his decades of catching line drives, firing off passes and being a royal bastard to opposing teams had him focusing in second-by-second frames. He fired the .45 once, at Frank's guts. Fired again as Frank sank to his knees and clutched his cascading entrails. Fired a third time at the man behind him. That shot clipped that man in the shoulder. The second one—Tate's last

bullet – ripped open a knee, blood gushing from his leg as he glided to the floor on his remaining good leg.

Tate's gun wobbled in his hand.

The man screamed in agony and anger, then he reached out, his gun poised again at Tate point-blank. Anna spun into a cross-legged crouch on the floor, yelled at the intruder and with a two-fisted grip, took her aim and fired at him once, twice, three times. The man jerked with each bullet, mouth working, stunned, as his body crumpled like a house of cards.

Tate scrambled to the outer deck, around to the side where the deep sea fishing gear was stowed. He could hear the third man attempting to board using the net and grappling hooks they'd employed to come aboard. But he was clumsy. Out of shape. A landlubber.

Flat to the deck, Tate snapped open the compartment. He hauled out the harpoon. Six feet long and two inches in diameter, the weapon was built to bring down big sea monsters. Tate and Cord had caught sharks with it. *I'll catch a bigger one today*.

Grunting, he grabbed the harpoon, pushed himself up, and hoisted it high. Running had been his profession. Running now would save his life and Anna's. He charged toward the deck where the third man was just lifting a leg over the leeward side. Tate estimated his distance, the harpoon's weight and trajectory. In one long arc, Tate sent the weapon across fifty feet or more to pierce the center of the man's torso, skewering him through his heart. Impaled, stunned, the interloper looked down in disbelief. He convulsed, then his face went lax, his fingers lifted. He stared at Tate, asked him a soundless question and with arms waving in the air to gain a balance he could not find, he sank backward to his own deck with a heavy thud that marked his death.

Anna ran to the side at the same time Tate did. She gripped the rail and examined the dead man.

"Tate! That's Jose Alvarez!"

A low cry in her throat, she stumbled backward.

Tate caught her, buried her head in his shoulder as she trembled. There they stood for long minutes, until they stopped shaking and the sliver of the blood-red sun dissolved beneath the gray horizon.

Tate kissed her forehead, led Anna down to the master cabin carefully sidestepping the two dead bodies crowding the galley entrance.

He told her to shower and dress warmly. "I'm calling Tampico harbor master and the Mexican Coast Guard to investigate this. We're still in Mexican waters so the Federales have jurisdiction. Then you and I are calling Grant and deciding what we should do next."

# **Chapter Nine**

Grant Warwick hurried into the Mexican Coast Guard office the next afternoon.

Anna paused in her pacing to look up at Tate's security consultant whom she'd met a few times before. A huge man with the proportions of a heavyweight professional body builder, he put Anna in mind of a Norse god who wore a frown permanently. Shoving his sunglasses up on his tanned, shaved head, Grant remained true to character as he trained hard silver eyes on her and then Tate. With muscles in his jaw jumping, he approached, his broad shoulders blocking out the round faces of the Mexican police beyond the glass enclosure.

"Got here as soon as I could," he told them as he shook Tate's hand. "I finished up in Nuevo Laredo right after you called last night. Most of the road from there to Tampico is worse than a ditch."

"Glad you're here now," Tate responded and nodded toward the farthest glassed-in office of the chief investigator. "They've grilled us until we're empty."

"Multiple times," Anna added, folding her arms. Relentless quizzing by the Mexican police and coast guard had her weary, frustrated and bursting with anxiety. The death of Alvarez—his very presence—on Tate's yacht implied he must have known her mother. But to what degree? And why was he working at Tate's construction site? Was that a coincidence? She shuddered, knowing her gut reaction.

# I don't think so.

She walked away from the two men toward the window and gazed out over the harbor, the sun striking the water in a glaring sheet and blinding her. She closed her eyes. Beneath her lids, she drifted to a scene she'd replayed all night and this morning. A scene that she couldn't place. Except for the flower-shaped swimming pool, its walls an azure blue. The floor painted with a flower, a raspberry colored fuchsia. It was

another brilliant day. Hot. Her sister was laughing. And someone was calling, "Jose! Jose! Show Anna how to float!"

Anna startled. Was that her mother's voice she recalled?

She bit her lower lip, recognizing that she stood amid the dingy gray walls and drab olive-green furniture of the chief investigator's office. Was she dreaming? Fantasizing? How could she be if instinct told her she knew this woman's voice? But if that were her mother, why did she not recall anything about her mother and that man Alvarez?

"Did they run any IDs on the men who attacked you?" Grant leaned against the edge of the desk.

"They have one of the men pegged from fingerprints," Tate informed him. "John Baynard. Born in the Bronx and convicted of racketeering in New York in 2000. Served seven years of twenty. Was out on good behavior."

Grant scoffed. "Name familiar to you Anna?"

"No," she told him.

He scribbled something in his small notebook. "Anything else?"

"No idea from the Federales on the ID of the second man yet." Tate focused on Anna. "The third man Anna knows."

Grant consulted his notebook. "This is the one you told me last night goes by the name of Jose Alvarez?"

"Yes."

"I ran him through our database back at headquarters and he has no record."

"Yet," Tate pointed out, "he winds up with two other jerks who attempt to hijack us or kill us. That doesn't smell like innocence to me. Unless Alvarez is an alias."

Grant nodded. "Noted. Here's what I have on him." He set his liquid quicksilver gaze on Anna. "He does come from New Mexico. And he is an expert plumber and gas fitter," he told Tate before he turned back to Anna. "Seems his buddies say he did date a woman back in the nineties in Albuquerque who was a looker. Dark brown hair, hazel eyes. Dynamite figure. Widow who had two daughters."

Anna shook her head. "If Alvarez knew my mother, why don't I remember?" She swiveled to face the harbor again, searching for a recurrence of that scene in the past in the fuchsia-adorned pool. Wanting to hear the woman's voice call to Jose. Was her mind playing desperate tricks on her?

"What I need to know," Tate interjected, "is how and why Alvarez got a job at our construction site. Our foreman told me yesterday that he hired Alvarez here in Tampico when he put out a call for workers. But it seems too coincidental that Alvarez would get a job here and then recognize Anna with me."

"Even more harebrained," Grant added, "for him to hire on here assuming he might one day see Anna."

Anna nodded. "True. Tate and I were never together until the other night when that goon rear-ended me."

"More weird a question is how would Alvarez even know Anna worked for me?" Tate asked.

Grant mulled that a minute, then said to Anna, "Unless a lot of people are working together to find you. Bring you down from any vantage point they find."

"That's expensive and time consuming." Anna lifted her shoulders. "Almost preposterous."

"Not if you want something very badly," Grant said.

"And not if you don't care how many bodies you pile up to find what you want," Tate continued.

Anna ran her fingers through her hair. She ached from thinking. "What else do you know about Alvarez? Where has he lived since New Mexico? When did he come here? Who has he worked for?"

"Came to Monterrey in 2002. Took a job with a real estate development company named Corona Construction as a plumber and gas fitter. Owner is an American. Clean record on him. Very wealthy man."

Anna had stilled at the mention of Corona Construction. An image of a golden crown with five points rose to her conscious mind. "The owner of Corona? What is his name?"

"Walsh," Grant replied.

She faced Grant. "Blake Walsh? Tall, lean, built like a long-distance runner. Fifty, maybe."

"From the picture I saw on the company's website," Grant replied, "I'd say bingo."

Tate stepped in front of her and took her by the wrists. "You know this man?"

"Blake Walsh," she responded with as steady a voice as she could muster for having forgotten the glorious afternoon she'd spent in his house as a fourteen-year-old. A spacious home on a hill sprang to her mind's eye. The memory was so vibrant, she could feel the searing afternoon sun bake into her skin and the warm water of the pool where she'd swum for a few glorious hours with her mother, her sister and others whom she could not recall. "Blake Walsh," she repeated his name to test the way it felt on her tongue, the way the sounds fell on her ears and into a portion of her heart where she had been warned never to look. Never to remember. "*Never utter his name. To us. To anyone*," her mother had warned her and her sister as they drove down the mountainside back to the border.

Anna squeezed her eyes shut and saw those hours in a dazzling spectrum of happiness. She remembered the name, the details as they flowed back into her like an infusion of joy—and fear. "Blake Walsh is a man my mother drove us to visit once for half a day one hot afternoon when I was fourteen. She told us as we left we were never to tell anyone we'd gone there. Never to tell anyone his name or any of the others who were there that day."

"My god, Anna." Tate looked floored. "Can you remember their names now? And why she took you there?"

"I don't know." Anna stared at Tate. Visions of the day swept through her like a strong tide that buffeted her with delight and despair. "To visit? To ask for help? I don't know."

Grant stepped forward. "Your mother must have known this man well."

"Oh, yes," she agreed readily, the connection between this man and her mother breaking into her conscious mind after years of blocking it out. "She knew him before we went into Witness Protection."

Grant cursed.

Tate ran a hand through his hair. "If your mother knew him before that, then none of you were supposed to be there!"

"Exactly," she replied with a coolness that came from the advent of the full memory of that afternoon.

"Your mother shouldn't have taken you there," Grant insisted.

"Still she deliberately broke the rule," Tate persisted. "Why? Why after all those years of being someone else, protecting the three of you for so long? Why would she violate the rule of no contact with those she knew in her old life?"

Anna nodded, awash in relived moments at the lavish hacienda on the mountain ridge. The tiles of tiny golden crowns with five points set into the base of the house, like a decoration. The pool surrounded by bougainvillea and the path to the bathhouse lined with roses and orchids of every size and shape and color.

Tate fixed Grant with a harsh gaze. "What do you know about Walsh?"

"Preliminary says he is legit. But now I have reason to poke around more."

"We need to go see him," Anna told them.

Tate froze. "Do you have reason to believe he could be involved in these attacks on you?"

"I don't know who the man was in the Rodeo the other night, or who the three men were on the boat today, but I do know that my mother never took us anywhere on any vacation. Except this one time. She could have. She earned enough money. But I also know that soon after we went to Walsh's house in Monterrey, my mother and sister were murdered. That's reason enough for me to go see him now." She tucked her hand in Tate's and glanced at him, then Grant. "So I assume this means that both of you are coming with me?"

\* \* \* \* \*

"The house is exactly as I remember it," Anna told them when Tate paused their rental on the winding driveway up the mountainside to Blake Walsh's hacienda. She could see the tiles of coronas at the base of the house. Down on the main road to town, Grant had stopped on the shoulder to await their return or their signal to join them.

Grant hadn't wanted to wait below Walsh's estate while Anna and Tate met the man, but Anna had insisted. What's more, she had insisted they not tell the Mexican police where they were going or why. "Every other Mexican law enforcement officer is in the payroll of the cartels. You both know this," she made her case to the two men. "According to you," she said to Grant, "Walsh has no record. But if he has any connections to criminal elements, I don't think we want to spook him by toting along a squad of police."

"Agreed. But our excuse for coming to visit is what?" Tate had challenged her. "Because to get Walsh to tell us anything useful, we have to have a reason."

She had one all right.

If her doubts about coming here had been few, now looking at the house, her precise memories of it, the déjà vu awareness that swelled inside her told her she knew exactly what she was doing.

"I'm almost sure we do, Tate." She threw him a small smile. "I have to meet Walsh first though to be sure."

### Cerise DeLand

They made their way up the carefully tended stone sidewalk to the veranda of the house. Overhanging the sharp precipice of the hillside, the veranda swirled around the house in gentle curves. Wind chimes hanging from the rafters of the porch tinkled in the breezes creating a musical welcome that sparked new memories in Anna. The sounds alternately refreshed her and terrified her. She knew the reasons for the refreshment. But any rationale for the terror eluded her, hiding in the warrens of her recollection of a past she had been told to forget. Told to never claim.

The heavily carved dark wooden door was huge, hinged in black ironwork. It was exactly as she recalled it. She lifted the knocker and let it drop.

A woman's voice called out a welcome to them in Spanish.

Tate took Anna's elbow. "Do you know who this is?"

She shook her head. "The maid, I presume."

*"Buenos dias,"* the short, dark-haired lady smiled as she pulled open the door and wiped her hands on her apron. *"How may I help you?"* she went on in Spanish.

"We're here to see Señor Walsh," Tate answered in her language. "Is he in?"

*"No, no,"* she replied with a conciliatory expression and then told them he was up in his study in a meeting. Were they here to join them?

"No, gracias, Señora," Anna told her. "We will wait."

"Ah. Americans, *si*? Come, sit." She led them into a parlor filled with massive brown leather sofas, crimson oriental rugs and bright Mexican artifacts of red and gold. "Lemonade?"

They refused and sat in two adjacent chairs, taking in the opulence of the house, the sound of the breezes through the chimes and the birds that from somewhere in the house seemed to sing with the wind.

Anna glanced at Tate, mutely praising him for his devotion to her. Through all this chaos, he had remained with her. Never flinching from the horrors of it. How many

men would do that for a woman? How many would have the courage? The stamina? The desire?

She twisted her fingers together. Was it unfair of her to involve him in her mysteries? Was she a fool to want to be free of her past? To live a normal life? She did want all that, but not at the price of hurting Tate. Or seeing someone else hurt him.

Her attention sprang to the sound of men's voices and multiple footsteps from above and outside. Tate nodded toward one corner of the house where a set of steps descended from an upstairs room. Three men emerged and two bid their farewells to climb down the stairs to their cars. The sounds of auto engines revving and then pulling away had Anna nodding at Tate. The two visitors had gone.

A minute or so later, they heard the maid tell Señor Walsh he had more visitors. A man and a woman.

Anna's gaze was glued to the circular staircase. She could hear him make his way down to meet them, his footfalls light but perceptible on the stones as little by little he was revealed to her. A tall man. Expensively dressed. Gray suit. Crisp shirt. Tie.

"My god," Walsh murmured as he got within twenty feet of them and halted to stare at her.

Anna's reaction was all physical. Her stomach ached. Her head pounded. But she inhaled, then rose to her feet in a graceful move, summoning all she knew from her years of yoga and tai chi to fill her body with calm.

Then she let her consciousness absorb the aura of Blake Walsh. It's what she'd come for the second she heard his name. She let her visions of the past consume her. Let her memories reach and meld. Let her heart pause. "Mr. Walsh," she acknowledged him and stretched out her hand to introduce herself, "Anna Stephens."

"Anna," he mouthed and a grin split his handsome mouth. "Anna *Stephens*, is it?" He strode forward.

## Cerise DeLand

She noted his eyes, the same cat's shape and hazel color as her mother's. And hers. His stature, too, was the same as she remembered from her visit here. Only his shock of gray hair had changed in the intervening years to go white at the temples.

He reached to enfold her in his arms.

She stepped backward.

Tate advanced between them, protective as ever. Anna didn't have to look at him to know Tate was at a loss as to what was happening here. She didn't blame him. She was riding with the current herself, piecing together ancient impressions with fresh insights each new second.

Walsh shook his head. "You won't let me embrace you?" he challenged her, insult and surprise in his sharp tone.

"Should I?" she responded, serene in her objectivity. Let him come to you. Explain himself.

"You know who I am," he declared in a baritone that resounded in her heart.

"I do," she confirmed. "You are my uncle. My mother's brother."

# **Chapter Ten**

Tate struggled for air, his lungs crushed as if he'd been tackled by ten linebackers.

*Her uncle!* Christ, he'd watched her put together pieces of this puzzle, but the fact that Walsh and Anna were related was the most astonishing. Who the man was, what he did here in Mexico, how and why he'd moved here were all questions that sprang to Tate's mind. But what the hell his relationship had been with his deceased sister was the biggest question Tate needed to drill down to. And they'd have to slog through some nasty shit before they could reach that point. More intriguing would be any indication that Walsh knew Alvarez, years ago or now. Tate figured he'd have to push to learn that.

"We'll talk." Walsh indicated that they should resume their seats. "Please. Sit down. We'll get reacquainted."

Tate watched this reunion between uncle and niece who acted as if they were two marionettes, only one of which wished to dance with the other. Walsh clearly wanted to resume old familiarities, hold her or at least sit near Anna. Anna withdrew from his advance, folding her hands together, keeping her physical and emotional distance. Meanwhile, Tate knew she was looking for clues to Walsh's true nature.

She was probably asking the same questions Tate did about the man. Was he all shrewd businessman? One of few Americans south of the border who earned a more than comfortable living on the up-and-up? Was he other things? A family man? With a wife and children? Tate sat and listened to the sounds of the house. All quiet. Meanwhile, he was bursting to get beyond the painful formalities and discuss something he could sink his teeth into. One thing for sure. He didn't trust Walsh. Hell, he didn't trust *anyone* near Anna. He had every reason to grab her up and get out of

here. But if he did, they wouldn't be any closer to resolving Walsh's involvement in yesterday's attack by Alvarez and his two pals.

Walsh was attempting to be a polite host and a favored relative. "Drinks?" he asked jovially, rubbing his hands together. "I think the occasion calls for it."

Anna stared at him. "Yes, thank you."

"Mr. Ryder?"

Tate agreed.

Walsh worked in awkward silence, only the clink of utensils and the swirl of liquids piercing the thin air. "The two of you are vacationing in Mexico?" he asked as he finished pouring his mixture into margarita glasses and topping them with wedges of lime.

"No," Anna told him. "We're here on business."

He offered her a glass and she took it. "What kind of business?" he asked her. "Do you work in Mexico?" He offered Tate his drink.

"I have interests here," Tate supplied, took a drink and placed his glass down on the nearby table.

Walsh thought a moment. "Ryder. I know your name."

Tate nodded, intrigued that Walsh would open a subject that could directly lead to implicating him easily, quickly in Alvarez's activities. "How so?"

"You and your brother are beginning a new venture here in Mexico. Along the Gulf coast, yes?"

"We are. A resort and spa."

"You bought the land?"

Tate smiled. *Son of a bitch.* Walsh had lived in Monterrey for at least two decades, according to what Anna told him, and he owned a development firm. This meant he knew that land in Mexico was subject to very strict purchase and sales laws. "No. My brother and I inherited the land from our grandfather."

"And you wisely decided to develop it. Good for you." His gaze darted back to Anna. "I'd like to hear where you've been, Anna. All these years, my god, so long. How have you survived?"

"That would take a long time to describe," she told him, cutting him from any explanation now.

Walsh scowled. "You come to me, surprising the hell out of me unannounced, but shut me out?"

"You must understand that I have been trained from childhood not to share anything about myself with anyone."

Walsh tipped his head toward Tate. "I bet you've broken that rule recently for one person."

"I have," she admitted. "For good reasons. Tate has been a huge help to me. But I am here because there are holes in my knowledge of the past. Big ones. It's clear to me that I have to discover everything so that I can finally be free."

Walsh's brows flew high. "How many people can do that?" he asked.

Tate noted the hint of regret and resentment in his tone. What the hell did that mean?

Anna narrowed her gaze at him, his response surprising her. "My freedom means being free of fear. Free from harm."

Walsh arched a brow. "What do you mean?"

She waved a hand. "You know how my mother and Christine died?"

His face went lax. "I do. I didn't find out until a year or more later. I looked for you but you were—"

Anna put up a palm. "We'll come back to that. Do you also know that the murderers were never caught?"

He nodded once. "I do."

"Then you can understand my need to stop running."

Walsh looked at Anna with sorrow written on his features.

Anna inhaled. "I've come today to learn what your relationship was with my mother."

"She was my kid sister. My only sibling."

"What else?"

He sighed, undoing a button of his suit coat. "I loved her dearly. We all did. She was bright, beautiful, could have had any man she wanted, could have gone to college. Instead, she married your father against our parents' wishes. Ran off with him. Created a living hell for us with his friends who were into every vice we could imagine and some we hadn't. My father – your grandfather – died of a heart attack after one of your father's associates hid from the police in Dad's construction office. Did you know that?"

"No," she whispered. "No one ever told me."

"And my mother? She lived with panic every time Kathleen came to visit with you two girls."

"And you?" Anna asked. "How did you feel?"

"Me?" Walsh asked with slow sarcasm. "How did I *feel*? How did I react? I was two years older than your mother. Twenty when she got pregnant with Christine and married your father. Oh, okay. I can see you didn't know that. Your father and his friends were persistent, ruthless, tainted everything they touched. Suddenly, because I was Kathleen's brother and Sergei's brother-in-law, I was labeled one of them. By the neighborhood. By the police. My reaction?" He huffed. "I'll just reply with one question. Why do you think I live in Mexico?"

"You came here to escape my father?" she asked.

Walsh seemed to look right through Anna. "I did. Living with him in the community was bad enough, but after he was arrested, I had to get out. There was no rest from the contempt of those whom I knew were straight, and no safe haven from the harassment of your father's cronies. After Kathleen and you girls were gone and our mother died two years later, I sold the family construction business. That was mid-nineties." He spread his arms wide. "And here I am."

"Safe from them?" Anna persisted.

He scoffed. "Who is ever safe from them?"

Tate sat forward. "Do they bother you here?"

Walsh slowly turned to rivet Tate with a fatalistic glare. "What do you think?"

Tate stared back at him. If Walsh was constantly pushing the cartels away, how did he survive so well without cooperating with them? And if he was cooperating with them, then Tate had to get Anna out of here fast. Before Walsh gave up his own niece.

"Don't worry," Walsh assured him in a clipped tone. "I buy their indifference for a hefty sum."

"Good for you." Tate glowered at him. "But there is one price I am not willing to pay."

"What is this?" Walsh searched Tate's face and then Anna's. "What are you talking about?"

"You don't know," Anna leaned forward, "that someone is stalking me? Has been for years?"

"No! Who would do that?"

"That's what we'd like to know," Tate shot back.

"How could they? How could anyone?" Walsh was incredulous. "Hell! I couldn't find you! The feds wouldn't tell me. Not when I went to them after I found out about Kathleen's and Christine's murders. I begged them to tell me where you were but they refused. Why aren't *they* protecting you?" He examined Anna. "Okay," he continued after a silent minute. "I see I need to do the talking here. I learned about the murders about a year after they occurred. I had a business deal going in Santa Fe and had an associate look Kathleen up in the Albuquerque phone book. She wasn't listed. I hired investigators. Nothing. It was as if you had dissolved in air. Then they found the reference to the murders in the papers. That's when I went to the Marshals Service and got turned out like yesterday's trash." Tate heard his despair.

"Kathleen was so adamant about not contacting her," Walsh offered flatly.

"My mother was trying to obey the rules of the Witness Protection program."

Walsh frowned as he twirled his glass. "She did. But she hated it, you know."

"I do," Anna said in a hush. "She said so often to Christine and me." Anna inhaled. "Tell me why the three of us came here that one time to visit you."

"You don't remember?" he seemed puzzled.

Anna lifted her chin, her gaze locked on her uncle's. "No. I get only glimpses. Impressions of that day here, swimming in the pool." Her head turned toward the veranda, the chimes and the pool in the front garden.

To Tate, Anna seemed to be sleepwalking through the past.

"Your mother came for a visit that turned out to be bittersweet. It had been years since we'd seen each other. Twelve almost thirteen to be exact. You were a teenager and the last time I'd seen you, you were a toddler. Your sister was a pretty girl, too. Funny and smart. You can't know but after I heard Kathleen and Christine were gone, I told the feds I would take you here to live with me. I have no children. No family. My wife and son died in an auto accident about two years after your mother and sister were killed." His voice trailed off to silence.

Anna leaned forward. "So my mother came to see you that time," Anna pursued the topic. "That's all?"

"No," Walsh said, and took a quick sip of his drink, "she came for my blessing."

Anna pressed a palm to her heart. "For her wedding?"

"So you do remember," he smiled, for the first time, like a doting uncle.

She tipped her head. "A little."

"Yes, she wanted to marry a man she'd met in New Mexico. She arranged for him to come here separately and stay in one of the hotels downtown. She hadn't introduced

him to you or your sister yet and she thought him coming here would be a safe way to bring him into your lives."

Anna swallowed. "Do you remember his name?"

"I do. Good man. Jose Alvarez."

Tate cursed.

Anna put her head in her hands.

"What's wrong?" Walsh's hazel gaze darted from one to the other.

Anna rose from her chair and walked toward the window. "Had you known Alvarez before she introduced you?"

"No."

Tate caught Walsh's gaze. "Have you been in contact with him since that day?"

"Yes, he came here to me about three years ago. Said he wanted to work in Mexico. Construction in the States was slow. He needed work. The economy here was booming. Why are we talking about Alvarez?"

"Did you ask him about Kathleen Sellers?" Tate went on. "What he knew about her death?"

"Of course. We consoled each other. He loved her then. I could tell. And she deserved a good man after all she'd been through with Sergei."

Anna faced her uncle. "Did you tell him about our father and the cartels? About us being in Witness Protection?"

"No! Absolutely not!"

"Why not?" Tate persisted. "Kathleen was dead."

Walsh peered at Tate like he was a crazy man. "But Anna was still under protection. I didn't want her hurt. Besides, why would I tell Alvarez about Witness Protection?"

"Why not?" Tate probed with a wave of his hand. "Didn't he ask about the youngest daughter? Where she was? What had happened to her?"

Walsh slapped a hand on the arm of his chair. "He did. I told him she went to live with relatives."

The three of them halted to absorb that.

Tate concluded that what Walsh had said sounded like the truth. "So you gave him a job?"

"Many jobs," Walsh corrected.

"Including referring him to Martinez construction in Tampico recently?"

"Yes."

"Out of the blue?"

"No, he came to me a few days ago, said he wanted to work there. Heard they were hiring."

Tate felt gutted. Alvarez asked to work at the Ryder construction site. It was no coincidence that he was there when Tate and Anna arrived. Which meant only someone who knew they were going there would try to ensure Alvarez was there, too. But the fact that Alvarez had gone to Tampico on purpose was now established. *Who sent him?* 

Walsh huffed. "I deserve to know. Why are we talking about Alvarez?" Walsh demanded.

"Because," Tate said, "he's dead."

Walsh's mouth dropped open. "When? How?"

Tate revealed the details of the attack and how he and Anna had repelled the three men. "Had you ever known Alvarez to be involved with drugs or guns or any kind of illegal trafficking?"

"No. But here in this country, you can never be sure. Clean today, not tomorrow."

Anna walked toward Walsh. "Thank you for seeing us."

Tate stood. "We'll be going."

Walsh got to his feet. The sight now of uncle and niece together was a stirring one. This picture was one of reconciliation and familial regard. Tate took Anna's arm.

Anna looked up at Walsh. "I appreciate your time and your interest."

"Will you come back? We have much to talk about. Years to make up for."

Tate saw tears line Anna's eyes.

"Thank you, Mr. Walsh," she said and put out her hand.

"Blake," he corrected her and grasped her hand. "Say you'll come back."

"I would love to," she managed in a voice rough with sorrow. "I don't know if I can."

"No one will hurt you here," Walsh assured her with desperation in his tone.

"I would hope not." She gave him a weak smile. "I have one more question before we go."

Walsh nodded. "Anything."

"Did my mother ever leave anything with you for Christine or me? Anything at all she valued?"

"No," Walsh said.

Anna's features fell. She swallowed hard. "Well, then. That's final."

"Your mother didn't give me anything for you. But my mother gave me gifts for you. In case, she said, I ever saw any of you again."

Anna's mouth parted and her eyes sparked.

Tate's heart pounded with elation.

"What did she give you?" Anna asked her uncle, her hand now on his forearm.

"A box. Wait here. It's in my safe upstairs."

# **Chapter Eleven**

Anna stared at the contents of the cardboard box her uncle had given her. She'd laid them out on the bed in the master cabin long minutes ago. Her examination of the items left her with acid eating away her stomach. Each item was so incongruous. So unrelated. A book. A jewelry box. An ancient paper photo album. Opening the box had begun in pure hope that had cascaded down to a pit so deep, so bleak, so ugly, she clamped a hand to her mouth to catch the sob.

She rose up on her knees and threw the book across the room. What did she care for her mother's faded copy of romantic love poems? What love was there in the world for *her*? What love could she save with a *book*? Or a blue velvet box with two gold lockets inside? Baby lockets, probably Christine's and hers. Both with ringlets of hair. And what in hell could she do with a photo album? Disintegrating, dog-eared pages flopped this way and that dropping out of the covers. Even the black corners holding in the pictures had lost their glue and the photos had spilled out all over the bed when she picked the album from the musty box.

Oh, god! What *good* was all this? Mementoes of a life she had forgotten. Pieces of her mother's life, irrelevant and dead. No list, anywhere.

No hope, anywhere.

Tate rapped on the door. "Honey, let me in."

She'd shut him out physically here as soon as they'd come aboard earlier tonight. She'd shut him out emotionally, too, on the ride back from Monterrey to Tampico. She hadn't opened the box there in front of the two men, but begged off, wanting to be alone when she did view the contents. Now she knew she'd made them speculate about the contents for nothing. Blake wanted to see what was inside, not knowing she hoped for some list of cartel members that might set her free. Tate had argued that she should

open it immediately so that they could show the contents to Blake and see if he knew anything about them. Turns out, neither Blake nor Tate would have gotten what they wanted.

She certainly hadn't.

She'd gotten a few minutes of nervous expectation while Tate talked with the Mexican coast guard guarding his yacht. A few seconds to tear the old tape from the cardboard. A few more to pause, listen to Tate talk to the Mexicans, thank them for finishing the forensics on the murders, and notify them they were staying in port tonight and that they would head north to Houston tomorrow morning. Houston and home were words that propelled her to flip open the lid of the box and peer down into items that might allow her freedom and a life with Tate.

But they didn't.

*Didn't!* She grabbed up a handful of photos and flipped them in the air.

"Anna. Come on, sweetie, show me what's in there," Tate beseeched her. "Whatever it is, we will do what we have to with it. Go to the authorities and -"

She sprang to the door and flung it open. "And do what with it, Tate? Give it to the Mexican government so they can give it to the cartels? Give it to the U.S. Marshals or the FBI so that they can botch it all up again?"

He advanced on her.

But she lashed out at him, her hands pummeling him. "What'll they do for me? Huh? Make a list out of nothing? Ruin my life?"

He caught her wrists. "Stop, honey."

She yanked backward. "Let their guard down so that I have to run? Again? And again and *again*?"

Tate hauled her into his arms. "You're not going to run."

"Of course I am!" she shouted at him.

He shook her gently. "Tell me what's here."

"Nothing!" she screamed, tears rolling down her cheeks.

He crushed her close and she felt the enormous strength of his body. He'd been a football pro, a man who'd won fame and fortune by his physical prowess and skillful playing on a wildly competitive field. She sank into him, wishing to god he could defeat what she was up against. Curling her arms around his wonderful shoulders, she pressed her face to his massive chest and sobbed.

He picked her up and lay down with her on the bed, pushing aside old photos strewn over the linens. Cradling her close, he kissed her forehead and rubbed her arms until she quieted. He brushed her hair back from her cheeks and lifted her face so that she looked at him. "Whatever you've got here, we'll go through it. Examine it. We'll make certain that whatever is here we know its value."

"There is none," she whispered and clutched him close. "After all this trauma and violence these past few days, after all these years of wondering if there really was a list, it's a nightmare that there is just *nothing*!"

"I know, honey." He hugged her and traced her lips with a gentle finger. "But we'll march on. Find a way."

She shook her head. He was an optimist. Whatever positive attitude she'd had toward her situation had just hit a dead end. She thrust her hand up into his satin hair. "Make love to me. No talking. Just love me," she whispered.

He captured her gaze. "I do."

"I know you do," she whispered. "Let me show you how well I love you." She kissed him then with a desire for oblivion. Safe, passionate nirvana. She took his lips, his sculpted lips, with her mouth and tongue and breath.

He gasped. "Honey," he murmured as she rose up on her knees and unhooked his belt, unbuttoned his slacks, slipped his tee shirt off his beautiful torso. Then she sank, her lips trailing over the contours of his body, the valleys and peaks that rippled when he moved and made her crazy to have him inside her. She licked his brown nipples, peaks that hardened for her attention and made her pussy cream. "I love your body." He grunted. "I'm happy to say I'm pleased."

She let her tongue slide down his torso to his abs where she bit each swell over his ribs. Then she dived for his bellybutton, an outtie that made her smile. "Love your navel," she cooed. "The only cute thing on you, big man."

He let out half a laugh. "Yeah, well. Never been called cute before."

"No?" She unzipped his pants, then brushed aside the plackets. "You merit so many names, Tate Ryder." She reached down and led out his huge cock, up and loaded for her. "Big Red," she said grinning and stroked her hand along his beautiful blunt length to cup his helmet and squeeze.

"Careful, baby. We don't want me coming in your hand when I haven't even tasted your pussy yet."

She purred, reaching for a condom from the bedside table. "My pussy is just fine, honey. Wet—" She bent to swirl her tongue over his slit. "Like you." She buried her fingers in the short curls at the base of his thick penis. "Hot." She leaned over again and took as much as she could of his impossibly hard shaft down her throat. "And just like you, pounding for you to fuck me."

He pushed her to her back, one hand on her shoulder and one under her knees. He laid her out for him, his fingers circling her wrists, his legs between her thighs, his cock nudging her cunt. "You belong to me."

She didn't argue. It wasn't the time, the place. There wasn't a need. Instead, she smiled at him and titled her hips. "Put that on," she instructed him and put the latex ring in his hand. Once he did, she snuggled closer and took him deep, deep inside her where she'd have a memory of his possession imprinted on her body and her mind.

He groaned with the union.

"I want you this way long and slow," she whispered to his ear, undulating to show him the rhythm she suggested.

### Cerise DeLand

An hour or more later, she grabbed another packet, slid down his honed body, sleeping as he was, and took his penis in her mouth to suck him awake and incite him to have her again. Plunging into her pussy, he rocked above her, pumping her to an aching climax.

"More?" he asked, holding her chin firmly so that she had to meet his gaze.

"Yes," she told him without a second thought. "Take me in the ass. I want you in every way you want me."

"But you're not ready. It takes a while to accustom you to the size of a man's – "

She put a hand to his mouth. "I don't care. I want this. Now. Tonight. With you. Tell me what to do."

For hours, he prepped her. With repeated applications of gel, he caressed her dark little hole and kissed her labia. He licked and sucked her frilly folds that had always thrilled him while he sent his thumb inside her to stretch her ass. He tended her gently for hours until finally, he snapped on a condom and got the tip of his cock inside her.

She was so sore, but so needy that she arched her body, then let her head sink to the linens. "Oh, that is wonderful, darling."

"Shall I fuck you here, honey?"

"Please." She wanted all of this to carry away with her. His love, his tenderness, his ingenuity.

Because she was going away.

As he plunged into her, she gasped. This possession was what she wanted. This total electric shock of his cock buried in her ass. Filling her, pumping her while he bent over and stroked her clit to a crazy tension. This wild love she had for him made her groan for more, reach between her legs to try to cup his balls and give him something in return for the favor of his cock. But she couldn't reach him and she gave up and gave in to the fact that what she was asking for, she was receiving in spades. She grounded herself, dug into the linens, bit her lower lip and tried like hell not to move lest she lose

every thrilling second of his rod deep inside her. He dripped perspiration on her, hot drop by drop. She could hear their hips slap together, heard him curse in his joy, felt him ram into her with more power in each thrust. *Christ*, he was big. Huge in her cunt, but here? She pushed backward, inviting him in further, harder. She saw herself as a cat, wild, in heat. Insatiable.

He accepted the wordless invitation and gave it to her. In a different portion of her brain, she wondered that he had the energy, that she had the strength. But he kept moving inside her, telling her with every thrust of his hips that he wanted her, needed her and he was hers. With a roar, he came inside her ass and like a machine that could alter its rhythmic pace, his tempo slowed. He caressed her clit with teasing fingers.

"Not enough," he told her, rasping. Then he caught her around the hips and rolled her over to bury his mouth in her pussy. With the dexterity of a man who loved to eat, he licked her and sucked her, pinched her clit and laved her G-spot until she pumped her hips up off the bed. He pulled her down, back to his mouth and his talented, titillating tongue. She creamed until she thought she had no more to give, ever. Then she vibrated all over, every hair, every cell, every muscle in the wildest orgasm she'd ever known. He held her like a man holds on to a life preserver, his arms clasped around her hips, his mouth on her pussy.

Minutes later, she opened her eyes to watch him rise and remove the condom. She brushed her hand over his arm as he tied off the condom. Then she rejoiced that she'd had every kind of loving with him that she could think of.

Every kind of loving with him that she'd never allowed herself to want or need. Until the other night when he couldn't see her threatened or hurt without coming to help her.

She caught back a cry.

He rolled her into his arms. "God, baby, I didn't want to hurt you."

"You didn't." She smiled through her tears as she brushed his warm cheek and admired how very handsome her lover was. Could she remember him always this way?

### Cerise DeLand

With pale light from the moon streaming in through the portholes and dusting his amber hair with gold?

"I love you," she told him, the words escaping her lips, quite unbidden, very unplanned. She scolded herself but the words were gone. The match set to flame. She hadn't wanted to say such a thing and leave him hoping for what they could never have despite all that love and devotion.

He peered down at her then, his strong masculine features soft with joy. "I know," he whispered. "I won't let anyone hurt you."

Exhaustion claimed Tate a minute or so afterward because he thought they were safe for the night with the Mexican guards patrolling the waters and Anna secure in his arms. Anna admired him in his repose. Hands flung above his head, Tate looked like a little boy who'd played so hard the day before.

He had. Fought hard. Days and nights before. All because he wanted her.

But just as he had vowed to stop anyone from hurting her, she would not allow him to be hurt because of her.

Tate Ryder deserved a long and prosperous life. Tied to her, he'd never have it.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tate rubbed his bleary eyes one more time and shook his head. "How can these make any sense?" he asked his brother Cord and Grant who stood in his dining room with him. The book of poetry, the lockets and the faded photos spread out before them on Tate's dining room table meant so little to him. He hated that they did. Loathed that they did.

"Looking at these pictures won't make them real to you," Cord told him as he stood on the other side of the long teak table and surveyed the hundred or so photos. "These people are going to remain a mystery to you. Only Anna would know. *If* she would know."

Tate swiveled a photo around toward himself. This one of a man with his arm around a woman who looked remarkably like Anna, circa 1980. Tate had figured out just by repeated examination which of the men was Sergei, Anna's father. Tall, dark. With a broad smile, snake's eyes and a wide mouth. Gruff, mean. What did Anna's mother see in this guy? Whatever it had been, none of them had done well to know him. "Anything else on Sergei Sukov and his cronies, Grant?"

"The feds have closed the lid on me. No more info on this. The fact that we haven't found Anna yet makes it doubly worse."

Tate walked over to the window that looked out on the Houston skyline. It wasn't worse for him. It was hell. He'd awakened that next morning after they'd gone back to the yacht, alone in his bed. The meager possessions and the small luggage she'd brought with her gone. Not a note of goodbye. Just the items her grandmother had wanted her to have. Immediately, he'd called Blake Walsh who claimed she never contacted him, never went to him. It sounded true to Tate. Anna hadn't ever sought out Walsh before. Why should she now?

Tate growled. She had what she needed. Her wallet, her credit cards, her gun, her fake driver's license and her fake passport. With a good command of Spanish, she could be anywhere in Mexico or south of it by now. Meanwhile, he had drowned in four days of interviews with an endless stream of federal agents — and he'd endured four howling nights of loneliness without her. That he had also drowned his sorrows in straight double malt scotch only made it worse when she crawled into bed with him, tender and naked, in his dreams.

"We know she rented a car in Tampico and that in Monterrey she turned it in," Grant said, going over old territory. "But then we lose her."

Cord snorted. "She's good at this disappearing act."

*She's had years of practice.* "I guess we should box these up," Tate said, lifting his chin at the pictures.

"What'll you do with them?" Grant asked. "You know you'd better – "

"Keep them for her?" Tate asked. "I will. I know eventually she'll want these. She's had no family for so long."

Cord came over. "Come on, let me help you." He began to pile photos in one hand.

Tate caught a glimpse of one picture at a different angle. "Hey, Cord." He clamped a hand on his brother's forearm. "Look at this." He pointed a blunt finger at the person who stood between Anna's father and another man, the three of them hoisting shot glasses of clear liquid.

"Vodka toasts?" Cord passed it off.

"Right, but the shape of the face?" Suddenly struck, Tate drove a hand through his hair. With Anna's desertion, he had forgotten the one loose end in their interview with Walsh that remained to be solved. Who had informed Alvarez that Tate was coming to Mexico to look at the construction site? That could only be one person. "Who does that remind you of?"

# **Chapter Twelve**

Anna drove her rental off the access road up Mona's driveway toward her Texas Hill Country home. In the star-studded night, Anna squinted to see the spare lines of the ranch house that seemed to teeter on the sharp ridge. She'd wondered if she would remember her way there—let alone actually find the place. It had been four years since she'd visited. But she recognized immediately the one-story white stone structure in the remote hills where outlaws had once easily hidden from the law.

"Finally," she whispered to herself as she twirled the steering wheel to climb the road. Being on the run this time had taken more out of her than ever before. She was too old to live this way. Too heartbroken over what might have been if she'd found a list in that box. If she'd been able to stay with Tate.

A tall slim figure stepped out on the wide front porch. Landscape lights flashed on, illuminating the whole side of the hill, a grimy black Range Rover in the driveway and the white-haired woman in form-fitting jeans and a white shirt. "Who's there?" called Mona, who obviously could not see beyond the glare of the floods.

Anna climbed out of the tiny Honda and smiled up at the woman who peered into the driveway as if she'd been expecting the devil himself. "Don't worry, Mona. I'm not a burglar. It's Anna. I need to come talk to you."

Mona leaned farther over the railing. "Good lord. Anna! Where... What the hell are you doing here?" She shot a glance at the dirty Range Rover and returned to gape at her guest.

Anna grabbed her purse and suitcase from the front seat and closed the car door. "Looking for help. Got any, I might have?" she asked wistfully of the woman who had aided her often before.

"Come on up here, girl!"

At the top of the steps, Anna hugged her friend. "Thanks for this."

"Anytime." Mona led her into the living area, a high-ceilinged expanse crossed with wooden beams, warmed by earth-toned leather sofas and chairs and a huge gray rock fireplace. "Leave your bag and purse here. Can I get you wine? Beer? Dinner? You look like hell, if I say so myself." She ran her fingers through Anna's hair. "What's going on?"

Anna put her purse on top of her luggage and sighed. "I'll take that offer of wine and something to eat. Sandwich, maybe?"

"You got it," Mona said, her eyes moving over Anna's shoulder for a second, then back to Anna as she motioned her into her kitchen. "Have a seat." She pointed toward the bar. "Red okay?"

"Wonderful." Anna sank onto one of the bar stools and reached back to reassemble her straggly ponytail. "I've been driving for two days. Got across the border at Del Rio earlier today and came straight here. I just didn't have any other idea of what to do."

Mona worked the cork in a bottle of wine. "Why? What's going on?"

Anna looked around and this time, she noted used glasses on the countertop and empty beer bottles. "I'm sorry. Have I interrupted something?" She glanced around the living area and kitchen, remembered the Range Rover in the drive that was not Mona's and tipped her head toward the dirty dishes. "I can go."

Mona straightened, alarm in her eyes for a second. "You will not. Sit down and drink this." She poured and put the long-stemmed goblet in front of Anna.

Anna took a sip and then another, savoring the refreshment. Her eyes closing as, after her long trip and the tears she shed as she traveled farther away from Tate, she felt the first relief. Slight, though it was. "I wonder if you will let me stay with you for a day or two. I need to sleep, figure out what I am going to do."

Mona walked toward Anna, facing her across the granite counter. "Yes, you can stay. Yes, for as long as you like. Now tell me why."

Anna traced invisible lines on the base of her glass. "After the other night at Tate and Cord's party, someone rammed my car."

Mona frowned. "Were you hurt? Did you get the guy's plate?"

"No." She spread her arms. "See? Not hurt. We did get part of the plate."

"We?"

"Tate. Tate followed me out of his condo and saw the accident. He saw the guy drive away, too. We have a partial on the license, but haven't been able to find the driver or the car."

Mona scowled, her eyes examining Anna. "Tate's been helping you, then?"

Anna nodded. "And Grant Warwick, too."

Mona inhaled. "Really? Warwick. Mister Security for the Greater Southwest. Well. That's good." She drummed her fingers on the counter a second and then turned toward her refrigerator. "Tate hired him, I guess. Turkey sandwich, okay with you?"

"Turkey is good. Yes, you know Grant works for Tate. And so after the accident, Tate was very insistent that night that I get away."

Mona concentrated on toasting bread, removing a plate from her cabinet. "Why?"

Anna blinked. *Why?* "Because he was afraid for me."

Mona snorted. "Because he cares for you."

"You knew?" she was surprised.

"Anna." Mona put a hand on her hip. "Who didn't?"

She swallowed back her remorse that she adored him and had to leave him. "He told me he loves me."

Mona paused, skewered Anna with feral gaze and grim lips, serrated knife poised in midair. "Is that right?"

Anna shifted in her chair. "What's wrong, Mona? You don't seem to like that Tate is interested in me."

"Took him a damn long time to admit, don't you think?"

"He was being the ethical boss."

Mona arranged turkey, lettuce and tomato on toast. "He has a reputation as a man who loves women, no matter what their circumstances."

"I know that." Was Mona jealous? "Did he come on to you?"

"No. His self-imposed ethics wouldn't let him."

"I see." Anna was thrilled to hear that about Tate, but saw the resentment harden Mona's blue eyes. "I'm sorry you were hurt."

Mona waved a hand. The one with the knife in it.

Anna suddenly sat back in her chair. She felt vulnerable and could find only one reason why her long-time friend wasn't completely acting like one.

"It was what it was, Anna." Mona finished the sandwich by slicing it in two halves. "Here you go. Tell me what else happened that night."

"I sailed to Mexico with him. To the site."

Mona gathered up the remaining turkey, lettuce and tomato, yanked open the refrigerator door and plunked the items inside. All askew. She whirled to face Anna. "How was that for you?"

Anna pushed her wine away. Instinct had her gaze tracking across the Saltillo floor to her suitcase and purse where her Sig Sauer lay inside. More than twenty feet away. "It was wonderful. And terrible." Wary of Mona now, she skipped over the Alvarez issue and went right to the core of the problem. "I've left Tate in Mexico. Left him permanently. His life. My job. I need to become another person. Once again."

Mona crossed her arms. "And you need my help to do that?"

Anna nodded. "Once again."

The expressions that flowed over Mona's face were ones Anna had never seen before. Anger. Despair. Detachment. A fake smile. "You want a reference to another forger?"

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Anna forced herself to look grateful and delighted, even while her gut was churning with nausea over Mona's new attitude. "Please. I need to start again. Away from Tate. Away from Houston."

"What do you need a new ID for? You must've gotten across the border okay otherwise you wouldn't be here."

"I went through Del Rio instead of coming across at Laredo. They're more lax at that bridge. But when I was in Mexico with Tate these past few days, things happened, Mona, that make it impossible for me to remain Anna Stephens."

Mona strolled forward. "What things?"

Anna pressed her lips together. What could she tell Mona? *Nothing*, came a warning voice. "I told you about my need to change names, the Witness Protection that failed my mother and sister and me. I learned in Mexico that I need to keep on changing my name. The reason I had to run in the first place, the reason my father's associates wanted my mother dead and now me? Well, I still have no closure on that."

"And so you'll run because you don't want Tate hurt?"

"Right. I can't take the chance that they'd try to get something from Tate that he doesn't know. That I don't have."

"What is it you're supposed to have, Anna?" Mona asked in a tender tone.

Anna looked into Mona's blue eyes, which at the moment looked soft and friendly. Yet telling Mona what she wanted might clarify why her friend was now so odd, so distant. "A list of names of my father's associates. A list my mother made, he said. But there is no list. Maybe never was."

"You're certain?"

Mona's question had an edge to it that made the hair on Anna's arms stand up. "I am. I found a relative in Monterrey."

Mona tipped her head in question.

"He had a box of items that my grandmother gave him to give to my mother or my sister or me if he ever heard from us again."

"A box?" Mona straightened. "Did you bring it with you?"

"No. There's nothing in it," Anna admitted and saw how that deflated Mona like the prick into a balloon. "No list."

"What was in it?" Mona persisted.

Anna gave a short laugh. "A book of poetry. Two baby lockets. An old photo album."

"Did you look through them thoroughly? Look at the pictures? Maybe anything written on the backs of them? What about the book? Did you rip it apart? The backing?"

Anna kept shaking her head at every question. And at every one, she began to flex sparring muscles she hadn't used in days. Fighting muscles she hadn't used in weeks.

"What about notes in the margins of the book?"

Anna got to her feet. "I didn't do any of that, Mona. Didn't see the need."

Mona stepped forward quickly. "Sit down. Eat."

"No. Thanks. I think I'm done." Done with you.

"You can't leave. You need my help," Mona insisted.

Anna stepped around her. "I think I should go."

"That forger you need? Where do you think you will find one who's as good as the one I sent you to in Nuevo Laredo years ago?"

"I'll go back across the border. I'll find one. They are so numerous."

"One who isn't connected to Sinaloa? Or the *mafiya*?" Mona's questions sounded now like taunts.

Anna kept walking toward her purse.

Mona grabbed her by the arm and tried to spin her around. "You need me!"

Anna shook off her grip. "I don't." She took another step and slid her hand into her purse, her fingers grasping cool steel. "Take your hand off my arm." She whirled to point the gun in Mona's stomach. "Now."

Mona backed away. "I don't understand. Why pull a gun on me?"

"I'm getting bad vibes. Why so much interest in these things from my grandmother?" When the woman had no quick answer, Anna shrugged. "Thanks for the discussion. Back away."

"You don't have to go," Mona pleaded.

"In fact," boomed a big bass voice, "Anna is definitely not leaving."

Anna spun to her left. Two large men rushed her as they charged out of one of the doorways. She aimed for the knees of the first one and brought him down howling like an animal. The second one dodged in the other direction. Anna got off another shot.

"Winged me! You bitch!" shouted that man.

Mona lunged for Anna's back.

Anna went down on one knee, throwing Mona off balance so that she slid to the tile. The other thug grabbed Anna's wrist with one hand and with the other, finally pushed her down and kept her there with a foot to her throat.

Anna swiveled, caught an arm around his leg and twisted. But Mona grabbed her legs and pinned her down.

"Jesus Christ!" Mona yelled. "Get the damn gun from her!"

"Trying!" snarled the man.

"There." Mona sat on Anna's thighs. "Stop bucking!"

Anna relaxed her jaw, let her other muscles renew their energy, waiting for a new opening as the two sought some stability in their hold over her.

A third man strolled into view and Anna looked up beyond his baggy trousers, his bulging belly, his leather bomber jacket, and into his pudgy ugly baby face. "Anna Karina Sukova. How nice to finally meet you."

Anna stared at him, her arms now tied by leather straps, Mona still sitting on her legs. "And you are?"

"A friend of your father's."

# **Chapter Thirteen**

"How far up the drive is the house?" Grant whispered to Tate and Cord as the three of them stood off the shoulder of the two-lane road and gazed up the ridge.

"Half a mile," Tate told him. "We'd better go in on foot."

"Fine by me," Cord added, tucking his rifle under his arm and silently closing the trunk on his SUV.

Tate glanced around the tangle of cedar and live oak trees surrounded by prickly cactus. "You sure, Grant, there is no electric trip in this scrub?"

"My men walked it off," Grant replied. "Nothing here except bobcats and javalinas."

Cord loaded his rifle. "Lucky us."

Tate fingered his Smith & Wesson in his chest holster. "Let's go. Anna's got to be up there by now, judging from her credit card purchase this morning."

"Buying gas outside Del Rio doesn't prove she's visiting Mona," Grant warned.

"Where else would she be going?" Tate argued. "She needs money and a place to lay low 'til she finds a good forger. Logic says she'd go to the one person who didn't care what her name was years ago and who hired her anyway."

"Still," Grant cautioned, "take it easy when we approach. We now know Mona's got bad friends. Let's not make it easy for her to call them for help. First, let's get my four men to surround the house. You copy?" he said into his audio remote to his men. "Any wide windows, Tate?"

Tate recalled the lay of the house from the one time he'd come here for a party Mona had given. "Yeah, off the front porch into the living room she's got big picture windows. Smaller ones, waist to head high in the kitchen. But we've got to be careful everywhere. She's got motion detector lights."

"Any idea what the trip range is?" Grant asked him after he relayed the info to his men.

Tate shrugged. "No idea. The usual here is to detect deer and raccoons that raid the trash cans. So maybe ten feet?"

"Okay." Grant told his four men that bit of info, then put a finger to his earpiece. "They're in position. Let's go."

Tate watched as his brother and his friend pushed into place their night goggles, then donned his own. They fanned out and began to climb through the jungle growth of tangled grasses, mesquite and giant cacti.

A hundred feet from the steps up to the porch, Tate thrust up a hand to make them stop. He pointed to the Honda and the Range Rover, then frowned.

The Range Rover was filthy. Not Mona's style. Nor up to her spic-and-span standards. Was someone visiting her? Someone with coarser sensibilities who didn't give a damn if they sported muck from the last century?

But the Honda was white, this year's model and fit the description of the car Anna had rented in Del Rio.

Tate felt a rush of adrenaline. Anna *was* here. He'd been right about what she'd do. And why. Was he also right about how desperate Mona was to hurt Anna? The picture of Mona's mother or aunt who so resembled her had established some kind of tie to Anna's father. Just when Mona had joined in the *mafiya* Grant hadn't yet learned. But he had confirmed that Mona Travis had changed her name in 1980. She'd been born twenty years earlier in Bayonne, New Jersey to Boris and Maria Mendevsky. Both Mona's parents had been killed in a gangland style murder in the late seventies. Soon after, their daughter Magda Mendevsky had moved to San Antonio, Texas changed her name to Mona Travis. Grant had also learned that five years ago, Mona Travis had been arrested for DWI in San Antonio along with a male companion, Jose Alvarez.

Tate bent, scurrying up to the far side of the base of the steps. Above, he heard a door open and Mona say, "Ditch the car. Drive it back into the property. We'll worry about how to make it disappear later."

"Right," a man barked and slammed the door, then bounded down the steps.

On the other side of the car, hidden in the line of trees, Grant lifted his chin at Tate and tipped his head toward the guy who now was pulling open the Honda's front door.

Tate rushed him. The guy never had a chance. Fat and weak, he flailed like a fish as Tate put a chokehold on him and Cord came up to stuff a gag in his mouth. The two of them carried him into the woods like a sack of grain. There they tied him up with rope Grant had brought with them for just such a purpose.

Grant was muttering something into his audio, then to Tate and Cord said, "Got the car keys? Here comes Matthews." The three turned to see a sleek black shadow creep toward them, balaclava displaying only the stark facial features of a big cat. "He'll move the car like she said. We have ten, twenty minutes max before they'll expect old lard ass here back again. Move it, Matthews."

The shadow nodded. "No worries." He slithered into the driver's seat, turned the ignition and headed down the dirt lane into the dense woods.

"Let's go," Tate ordered.

In a line, the three of them slithered up the steps to the porch. Tate noted the lights were still on, which meant either Lard Ass had turned the timer on or they had been switched on manually. At the top step, Tate paused and pointed toward one of the lamps. Cord nodded and shrugged. Next to Cord, Grant made a motion to push on. Like crabs, the three of them crawled to the edge of the large window and from different vantage points, peeked over the frame.

Tate's heart pounded at what he saw inside. Mona and a porky-looking thug in a scarred bomber jacket bent over Anna who sat tied to a kitchen chair like a trussed chicken.

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Cord rapped him on the arm. Lifted a chin toward the other side of the kitchen where another man was extracting a knife from a kitchen drawer.

Tate's blood pounded in his ears. No time like the present to barge in there. Tate began to stand. But Grant tugged at his sleeve and put two fingers in front of his eyes and the same out toward the side of the kitchen.

Tate glanced back inside. One more man lay on the floor, clutching his thigh and rolling in agony, his knee blown away. Had Anna done that? His gaze scanned the floor for the Sig Sauer he'd seen her brandish on the yacht. She'd been a damn good shot then. She must've been rushed today not to zero in on his guts and kill the bastard. So where was her gun?

He scoured the room.

On the kitchen table.

He nudged Cord, then kicked Grant, making a motion of shooting a gun and indicating the table. Near Mona.

Both Cord and Grant followed his line of vision and nodded.

Tate put out two fingers to them.

Plan Two.

All three nodded once.

Grant placed a hand to his chest and motioned he was going round the side nearer the kitchen door.

Tate gave him the thumbs-up, then glanced at Cord. "*Execute the play*," echoed in his head from years of working in a team. A team that won. A team that worked out all the angles and coordinated a great strategy.

From deep in the woods came the sounds of two gunshots.

Tate saw Bomber Jacket swivel his bobble head around, ear cocked listening for more.

"What was that?" Mona asked him.

Another shot fired.

Bomber Jacket pulled out a mean looking Luger from inside his jacket and headed for the door. "Move her to the storage room!" he yelled and bounded for the back door.

Tate was already putting a shoulder to the front door, Cord right behind him. They crashed through.

Sliding on the wooden floor behind the sofa, they missed the two rounds Mona got off.

Out on the back porch howls met their ears. Bomber Jacket had met Grant then and from the sounds Grant met a stronger man than he expected.

"Come out," Mona screamed at them. "Come out or I shoot her. Now!"

Tate peered around the edge of the sofa and saw Mona pointing Anna's gun at her head. Anna's terrified gaze locked on his and in that moment, he knew all over again he mustn't let her go anywhere without him ever again.

"Cord, too!" Mona demanded as she backed herself up to the chair Anna sat in and began to pull her toward the nearest wall. But Anna, bound as she was, dragged her feet in the throw rug, making the task harder for Mona.

"Mona," Tate urged in as soothing a voice as he could muster, "you don't want to hurt Anna. Let her go."

"Not on your life," she replied, venom in her tone.

"What good will she be to you dead?" Tate rationalized. He rose from behind the couch at the same time as his brother.

Mona blinked, flustered. "Perhaps I can persuade her to talk. What do you think? A knife to cut up her lovely face? Or I take a few fingers until she tells me where the list is."

Tate wondered how much more Mona knew about the contents and location of the box. He could try to call her bluff, but if he failed, Anna's life might end. He couldn't chance it. "You could threaten her and still not have a list."

"Words. Christ!" The woman groaned. "I need that box!" she screamed at Anna who seemed to shrink inside her own skin.

"She says she doesn't have it," Tate declared.

He took a step forward. His brother walked in tandem with him.

"Guns down!" she ordered. "Now. There. On the floor."

"But she doesn't have it, Mona." Tate caught the older woman's gaze. "I do."

"What? Why do you have it?"

"She left it with me," Tate said, taking small steps toward the woman. In his peripheral vision, he saw Anna swallowing hard and trying not to cry. *Hang on, baby.* "So if you want what's in the box, you have to persuade me."

"Don't be ridiculous," she threw back at him.

"Ah, ah, gotta be nice to me," he played her.

"Go to hell."

"That," said Grant Warwick as he stepped through the kitchen door looking a bit the worse for wear, "isn't gonna happen."

Mona suddenly didn't know where to point her gun. The damn thing wavered from Anna's skull to Grant, back to Tate and Cord.

"Untie her!" Tate ordered Mona.

The woman's blue eyes made a quick circumference of the room.

"Put the gun down," Cord ordered.

Mona leaned over and plucked at the ropes.

Tate saw Anna tug at the remaining ties around her wrists and fling them off. But just as she took one step toward Tate, two men burst through the hallway from the belly of the house. One ran out first, handgun blazing. A bullet hit Grant and had him falling to one knee while his own gun went off.

Cord braced his rifle to his shoulder and fired. A hole as big as a basketball blossomed in the second man's stomach and a gush of red and gray had him staring at his insides, muttering and dropping to his knees.

Mona's arms wrapped around Anna's neck like a vise. Tate fired at the first man and watched Anna shrug, step to one side, elbow the woman and turn to punch her up and under her rib cage. Mona buckled, gasping for air. Anna fell over her, tugging her behind a sideboard out of firing range.

Pride gripped him.

But the sight of another man emerging from the same doorway made him curse. Wince. Raise his Smith & Wesson once more and fire. The man whiplashed, but still stood. He snarled, faced him and fired off another round.

Tate had to pause. His head felt like gauze, his body floating. One hand hung limp. His other hand clenched his guts. A warm liquid seeped through his fingers, his gaze burning as he realized this must be blood. *My blood*.

# **Chapter Fourteen**

Six weeks later, he sat up in a recliner in his living room, his left arm in a sling as he took another Vicodin from Cord's outstretched hand. "Never thought of you as a nurse, Bro. But I gotta say if you ever need another profession, you're trainable."

Cord shot him a dirty look. "Never thought of you as a bitchy cripple, either. Take the damn pill."

Tate swallowed the med like a good little boy. "Fluff my pillow now, will you?"

"I'm gonna fluff your ass for you if you keep up this crap. Just cuz you've had a few little bullet wounds does not give you the right to be demanding."

"You give me the keys to my car, I won't demand a thing of you for fifty more years."

Cord leaned over and put his face in Tate's. "You are not driving anywhere, buddy boy. You have a snoot full of happy pills, a gimpy left arm with a bullet wound and a rearranged set of guts. You can't even stand without an assist. You'll drive again after I see you hoist a twenty yard pass. Clear?"

Tate sank into his familiar funk recalling a murderous night when Anna had almost died and so had he. "I've got to get out of here, Cord, talk to the feds. Be with Anna."

"No. No." Cord told him as he cleared away the foldaway desktop where Tate had reviewed business reports Cord had brought to him. "And hell no. She's safe. She's sound. She's being debriefed. She is not home. And the authorities have no need to talk to you again for a while."

"Until they get all the names and faces put together, yeah. I know. How long does that take?"

"Beats me, buddy. But I'm telling you for the hundredth time! The FBI thought it best for her to go into seclusion until she could look at all those pictures in the album. And you will accept that and not give me more bullshit about it."

"You're a pain in the ass," Tate complained and threw off the red wool afghan over his legs.

"Never doubt it," Cord responded. "She'll come to you when she can."

"How do you know?" Tate prodded. She left me once before.

Cord rolled his eyes, exasperated. "One more time! She promised me in the hospital! Told me she'd promised you she'd return when you were hopped up on morphine in ICU. Now are you gonna believe me?"

Tate grumbled.

"I hope you'll believe me," a female voice floated across the room.

Tate couldn't believe how good she looked to him. So tall and lithe. Wearing only a dash of lipstick and maybe mascara, she seemed pale. A wisp that could blow away on the next gust of air. It had been so long since he'd seen her. He couldn't even remember what had happened at Mona's house, he'd been so foggy with operations and pills and pain. Still, Anna looked scrumptious in a summery white cotton dress that flowed over her body like a hot breeze. Her nipples peaked beneath the fabric and standing in the light where she was, Tate could see the outline of her long supple thighs.

He shifted in the damn confining chair. *That* part of his anatomy always worked when she was near. He told her to come in. "Cord is just leaving."

Hands on his hips, Cord glanced at Anna. "Should I?"

"You'd better," she warned him with a twinkle in her hazel eyes.

"Yes, ma'am." Cord made his way to the door very quickly then grinned at Tate with big round eyes. "Call me tomorrow morning."

"If I live that long!" Tate rang out. "Get out of here!" he said as his brother let the door slam shut behind him. "Glad he's gone. Come here."

She smiled, the curve to her lower lip bringing a joy to her features he had seen so rarely the few days they had been lovers. Then she strolled forward, dropping her sunglasses and her straw purse to a table top. "You look terrible."

"Thanks," he said and reached out to take her offered hands, pressing them to his lips to kiss the palms. "You look delicious. Taste that way, too." He pulled her forward so her face was only a breath away. "You gonna kiss me, babe, or do I have get up out of my chair to get that?"

"No prodding required," she said against his lips and took them in a sweet long hello. "How's that?" she murmured. "Need more?"

"Bet your life." He ran one hand up into her long silken hair. "Missed you," he said between kisses. "Worried about you."

"You didn't have to," she objected and pulled away to smile once more at him. "They took good care of me."

He glanced at her askance. "To quote someone near and dear to me, they failed before so why should I trust them now?"

"That was then, this is now."

Tate tugged her wrist, putting all the strength he could summon in to it. "Listen to yourself!"

"I do, Tate. They explained how it happened last time. A man who leaked the location to a reporter who was sadly in the pay of the gangs."

"Terrific. And because the Marshals and the FBI wave their magic wand and he's gone, everything else is fine?"

"Believe it."

He smoothed hair behind her ear. "I want to. Tell me why this time is different and you're safe."

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"Now with those pictures from my mother's album—the album you saved and examined I might add—they've got names and dates, details of different nights when they can put people in certain spots."

"Why is that good?"

"Ah," she scanned the room like a woman with a famous secret, "because two of the most famous hits in the *mafiya* warfare occurred on nights when the album showed where the murderers were. In one picture, there is a clock in the background and we know what time they were there. In another, there are signs of where they are. Notes on the back are in my father's handwriting. Couple that with a list that we found -"

"A list?" Tate nearly jumped out of his skin. "Where'd you find that?"

She grinned, straightened and strolled toward the window, saucy as a witch. "In the lining of the photo album. I saw the paper peeking out when they opened up the album for me and told me how you had pieced together the fact that Mona was really a *mafiya's* daughter." Her face fell. "Just like I am."

"Did she talk to the FBI?"

Anna nodded. "Seems that she did want to get away from them all. Just like I did. And just like me, she couldn't. About ten years ago, a member of the Sinaloa gang saw her in San Antonio one night at a restaurant. He'd known her mother and father. He found where she lived and blackmailed her into working with them. Shipping contraband in her spa products across the border. She couldn't say no."

"And you? When did she turn on you?"

"Soon after she met me in Monterrey. She was the one who referred me to the forger in Nuevo Laredo. I went back again to her after I left you in Tampico hoping she'd give me another referral."

Tate nodded. "Makes sense."

Anna gave him a wan smile. "She was the one who put Alvarez up to being at the construction site. She was at your party and she saw the accident. She knew all along because she helped plan that attack."

"It's what I figured after I saw the picture of her mother with your father. No one was at that party who paid much attention to you leaving."

"Except you," she murmured and walked toward him to sit facing him on a nearby hassock.

"Except me," he agreed and analyzed her features. She had gone suddenly still and pensive. "So what are your plans now?"

"Oh. Well." She bit her lower lip. Looked him in the eye. And sounded hopeful. "I thought I'd take a vacation."

His heart crashed to a halt. "Really? As your boss, I gotta say you've been on extended leave for more than a month."

"True. But as my boss, you must agree that federal business is not something I could negotiate. And I really did work hard. Night and day with these guys."

Tate's jealousy sparked in his damaged gut. "Is that so?" He grabbed his ribs. "And how long did you have in mind for this vacation?"

She pursed her lips. "Two months?"

He tipped his head. "Long time." Why go anywhere without me? I want you here.

"But I already booked the resort."

He wanted to grab her and shake her. "Where?" Where the hell are you going without *me*?

"Tahiti."

"Ta..." He pulled back. Narrowed his eyes at her. Her mouth quivered. Upward. "Are you yanking my chain?"

She stood up, walked around the room. "Is anyone else here?" "What?" "Your housekeeper? Your mother?" She circled round and peeked into the adjoining hallways. "Anyone?"

"No one." Now he was pissed. Petrified. She was going to dump him. "Why?"

"Why?" she repeated like a sleepwalker, then whirled to face him. Strolling forward, rolling her hips, she began to unbutton the tiny pearl buttons down the front of her dainty white dress. While the fingers of one hand worked at the buttons, the fingers of her other hand parted inch by inch the thin cloth to reveal taut pale flawless skin.

"Jesus, honey." He tried to breathe. "If you're trying to inspire me to get better, I think I'm cured already."

"Is that so?" She pulled aside the bodice to reveal one puckered begging nipple. "You'll have to prove it to me."

"Come here," he whispered, beckoning with one hand. "I'll let you touch my proof."

"Oh," she purred like a kitten, then flung the other side of the dress open so that all of it drifted slowly down her long arms to the floor. "I'd be delighted to do more than touch your proof." She batted her lashes at him like a silent screen vamp. "May I?"

"Depends." Christ, she was the most gorgeous woman he'd ever seen. All pink aroused nipples, long lean ribs, a slinky waist and hips that curved down to a gleaming plump shaved pussy. "Open your legs, baby. I want to see if you've got proof you're truly interested."

And she did. One long leg, bare and muscular, stretched to one side. The hollow of her thigh made him lick his lips for the spot on her as appealing as ever. In her pair of white sling-back stilettos, she looked like a fantasy nymph made for him alone. She put her hands on her hips and arched in a movie star pose, head thrown back. "What do you think? Good?"

"Great. But you'd better come closer, honey, because I need more."

She took two steps forward. "This better?"

He put his fingers to her long seam and gently parted her. The fragrance of her cream met his nostrils with a jolt. The satin wetness of her juices flowing over her labia coated his skin. The heat of her need for him swept through him like wildfire. "Anna." He lifted his fingers to his mouth. "You are killing me, baby."

"Mmmm," she crooned and braced one hand on his good shoulder. "Want to taste me up close and personal?"

He pulled her hips closer with one arm around her middle. And in a slow rediscovery of her tummy, he kissed his way from her navel to her smooth mound and parted her with two fingers to get a good long lick of her pussy.

"How was that?" she asked, in a voice with a hitch in it.

"Best damn thing I've had in weeks," he rasped, against her lower abdomen and clutched her closer.

She sank to her knees in front of him and stretched down the elastic to his sweat pants. "I need my proof," she demanded.

He put his hand over hers. "When are you going to Tahiti?" He had to know when she was going to be gone from him. Had to prepare for the loneliness.

"Two weeks from now. Maybe later. Not sure yet." She pulled the band wider and reached inside to push down his boxers and lift out his penis. Big Red was already up and interested, weeping for joy at Anna's hands around him. Tight and warm.

"Christ, baby. You're gonna make me explode."

"Don't yet, honey. I want to show you how grateful I am for helping me." She wrapped her hand around his shaft and began to stroke him. "You are so generous and kind." She rubbed the ball of her thumb over his slit. "I won't ever have enough of you." She took him into the delicious luxury of her mouth and sucked him, over and over in lazy waves of pleasure.

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He lifted his hips, trying to get closer, trying to get her sweet mouth to sink down over his cock. Pain zinged through his arm and his belly and his brain. He moaned. "Why go then?"

"Cuz," she said between down strokes.

"I need you," he told her.

"I need you, too, Tate." She stared at him, her body stilled now.

He ran his fingers through her hair. He'd never begged a woman before. This was different. Anna was everything to him. "I want you to stay with me." He was losing his mind. The woman he wanted more than water or air was sailing away from him. He wanted her permanently all the days of his life. If he was going to make her his, he had to start now and with the right words. "I love you, Anna."

She beamed at him. "Oh, Tate, I love you, too. More than anyone in this world." She stared at him, and her face fell into lines of tension and fear. "You know why I left you in Tampico?"

"You thought the running would never end."

"And you forgive me?"

He nodded. "I do."

"I didn't want you involved. Didn't want you to be hurt."

He squeezed her hand. "I am involved. The minute I saw you in trouble the night of the party, I couldn't stay away."

She inhaled, looked at the ceiling. "I couldn't resist having you for even a little while." She paused, gazed at him, desire for him alive in her lovely eyes. "I need you to do me a favor."

He pulled back, not knowing what to make of this turn in conversation. "Anything. Name it."

"I want to change my name again."

He scowled. "You're asking me if I know a forger?" He was outraged, crazy. He ran a shaking hand through his hair.

"I'm asking you if I can be Anna Ryder," she said with a supplicant's plea in her voice. "I'm asking you to marry me. Change my name. Once and for all. With no one to come after us, ever." She leaned forward and traced his mouth with one finger. "I love you so much, Tate Ryder. Marry me, please. Let me change my name one last time."

He caught her up to him then and pressed his lips to hers. "Forever," he promised, "you'll always be Mrs. Tate Ryder." He brushed her hair back from her cheeks and smiled at her. "All mine," he whispered. Then realizing he had a cock with more imagination than stamina, he knew he had to seal this proposal with more than words.

He patted his knees. "Come sit here."

Her eyes danced. "How's this?" she purred, her legs open to him, the beautiful sculpted hollow of her thighs near her pussy bare to him. He petted her there, soft strokes that made her moan while he stared into her dreamy eyes. With one finger, he traced her seam. Felt her moist heat. Inhaled her musky fragrance. He spread her labia with his thumbs. She let her eyes drift closed, her head fell back. He dipped one finger inside her tight little cunt and she bit her lower lip. He sent another finger between her swollen lips and she arched her hips. One hand to her back, he scooted her forward on his legs. Her forehead fell to his shoulder and she groaned his name against his throat. He pushed her back and raised one of her pretty breasts to his mouth and he laved her nipple until she bucked. He took the other breast and nipped her while he sent the fingers of his other hand up inside her pussy. But his wounded arm hurt, so he had to shift and use his good hand. He found her clit, all slick and round and hot, ready for his touch. "I love you," he told her as he flicked her nub and massaged it until she panted and smiled in a slow, rocking orgasm.

She kissed his throat. "I missed you." She slid off his legs and went to her knees. "Let me see if I can finish what I started when I told you that before." Still erect, his penis was now even more interested in what she was going to do for him. Once before,

she had made love to him this way and she'd given it her all. He'd come like a house on fire then. But this – damn, *this* – was twice as good. She held him with a proprietary grip, no hesitation as her mouth sank over him and took him down her throat. No hurry as her tongue tantalizingly licked at his slit, sucked on his tip and then stroked him over and over with a precision he hadn't known she possessed. His head dropped back to the chair. He belonged to her now and as he shot his cum down her throat, he knew that this was what he'd fought to have with her. Total love. Total acceptance. And soon, they'd give that to each other every day. Every night.

"You'll never miss me again, sweetheart," he promised her, their arms wrapped around each other as they sat together in the chair. "We're going to be together for a lot of years."

As the sun set to a golden red glow on the horizon, they watched from his living room. She sat on the floor at his feet. He ran his fingers through her hair. He spoke of little things that people about to marry discuss. Ordinary issues. He promised to heal quickly so they could take advantage of her reservations in the South Pacific. She told him she'd like an intimate wedding for twenty or so. A gown. His tuxedo. How to plan a honeymoon trip to Tahiti around work and the need to go to Tampico to supervise the construction afterward. They shared ideas for many decades they would spend together, laughing, free from the danger that had brought them together and forged a love they knew would never die.

# About the Author

An award-winning author of more than two dozen romances and mysteries, Cerise DeLand creates heroes readers crave. Cerise has met many men in her worldwide travels and created the best of the best from all the wonderful places she's lived and visited. Today, she lives – and writes – in wild west Texas, where a never-ending stream of cowboys, vaqueros, para-military types and diplomats stroll into town and fuel her imagination for red hot affairs.

The author welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her <u>author bio page</u> at <u>www.ellorascave.com</u>.

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