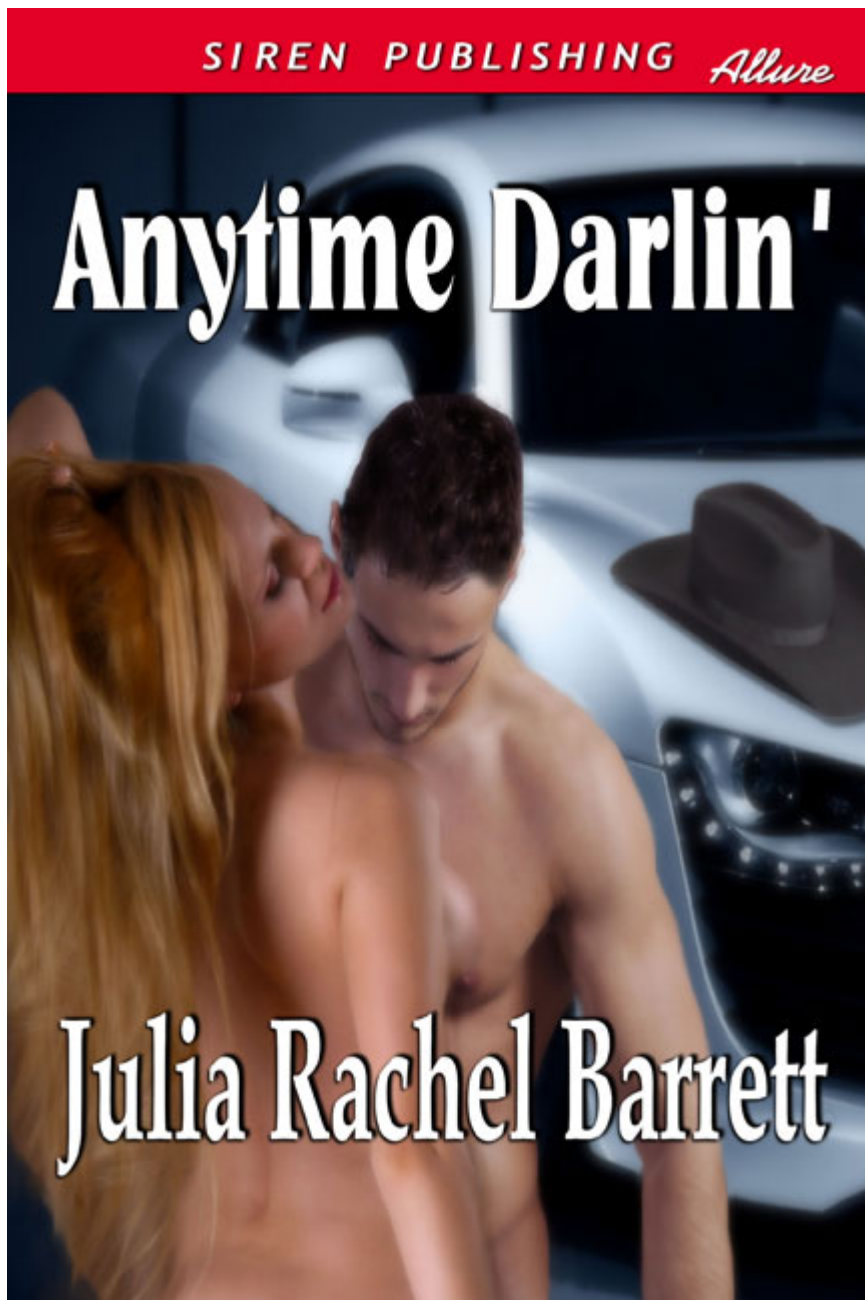


SIREN PUBLISHING *Allure*

Anytime Darlin'

Julia Rachel Barrett



Anytime Darlin'

Paramedic Jake McKenna drops to his knees beside the young woman. Beaten, starved, she's barely breathing, burning with fever. He stabilizes her, but when she opens her green eyes and stares, panic-stricken, into his, he realizes this is only the beginning of their relationship.

Devlin Barre has been through hell. If her uncle finds her, she's dead. When she looks into the warm brown eyes of the paramedic, she knows deep in her bones she can trust this man with her life. Devlin and Jake grow close, but, fearful of commitment, Devlin runs off to rebuild her life, leaving Jake heartbroken.

Five years later, Jake and Devlin meet again. Neither has forgotten a single detail of their time together. Both harbor the secret hope that they can begin again--this time, for keeps. But Devlin isn't the only person who ran off. Her uncle still waits for the right opportunity to get the one person who got away.

Note: This book contains rape of the heroine.

Genre: Contemporary/Romantic Suspense/Western/Cowboys

Length: 80,570 words

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EROTIC ROMANCE



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A SIREN PUBLISHING BOOK

IMPRINT: Erotic Romance

ANYTIME DARLIN'

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Regarding Ebook Piracy

Dear Readers,

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With deep gratitude,

Julia Rachel Barrett

DEDICATION

Anytime Darlin' is the first romance I wrote. The story of Devlin and Jake holds a special place in my heart. My thanks to Siren for taking a chance on a farm girl and her cowboy.

ANYTIME DARLIN'

JULIA RACHEL BARRETT

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Chapter One

January 29, 1980

Devlin shivered behind the dumpster. She hugged her legs tighter as the wind howled down the alley, blowing grit into her eyes and sending trash flying. Every bone, every muscle, every joint in her body ached. She needed food, she needed warm clothes, and she needed shelter. She toyed with the idea of simply falling asleep. It would be so much easier to give up, but as her mother used to say, *"Everything wants to live."*

Groaning, Devlin pushed herself to her feet and considered her plan. If it worked, she'd have a coat, a pair of gloves, and maybe a warmer hat. Then she could think about stealing some food. If it didn't work, she'd end up in a warm detention facility where they'd feed her. Devlin figured it was a win-win situation.

She'd used a rock to break the single bulb above the back entrance, and when the cleaning crew pulled up half an hour later, Devlin had been hiding in the shadows. The crew consisted of three men and a woman. The woman complained that she was afraid to walk back and forth to the van in the dark, so they'd propped the access door open with a stool. A square of light spilled out of the door, illuminating the side of the van.

Devlin edged around the vehicle and peered cautiously into the doorway, searching for any sign of movement. Though she could hear the

dim sound of a floor polisher, she didn't see anyone near the open door. Hugging the wall, she slid into the store, treading softly in her ragged tennis shoes, keeping to the shadows. Suddenly, Devlin was enveloped by warmth, and she lingered in a dark corner beneath a heating vent. Closing her eyes for just a moment, Devlin surrendered to her fatigue. She'd been in the alley for two days, with only newspapers and cardboard boxes for cover. The warm air felt so good.

The corner where Devlin crouched was screened by stacks of merchandise waiting to be shelved. Since she was unlikely to be spotted by the cleaning crew, Devlin decided that a nap wouldn't hurt. If she got locked in the store, it would be okay. She could sneak out the back tomorrow when they opened up. And once the cleaning crew left, she'd have the store to herself. She wondered briefly if the store had security cameras, but then decided it wouldn't matter because she'd be gone before anyone looked at the tapes. Studying the merchandise nearby, Devlin chose an oversized stuffed bear from a storage shelf and sprawled across it on the linoleum floor. Within minutes, she fell asleep.

* * * *

"Angie! Angie, get over here!"

Devlin heard it in her dreams. The voice was harsh.

"AAAAAnnnnnnggggiiieee!"

Somebody in her dream was yelling in a very unpleasant manner. Devlin wished she would hurry and wake up, but for some reason she couldn't seem to move.

A woman's voice interrupted the screeching. "What?" it demanded, sounding quite irritated. "What is it, Brad?"

"Look," said the first voice.

With that word, Devlin felt a painful poke in her ribs. The toe of a boot had definitely poked her in the ribs. She must be dreaming, because she couldn't get away from the poking.

"What the heck?" came the woman's voice. "How the heck did he get in here?"

I'm not a he, Devlin tried to say, but nothing came out. *Get in where*, she wondered. A hand shook her, hard.

“Hey, get up,” demanded the woman’s voice. “Get up, kid, and get outta here before I call the cops. C’mon, wake up.”

Devlin heard someone moan. Who was moaning in her dream?

“I can’t wake him up,” the woman’s voice said.

“Jesus! He’s not dead, is he?” asked the other voice, the annoying voice.

“No, but I can’t wake him up. Maybe he’s on drugs or something. Go get the manager, Brad, now. Get the manager now.” The woman, whoever she was, sounded upset.

In the midst of the dream, Devlin felt someone remove her baseball cap. She tried to muster the energy to tug it back down, but her arms were as heavy as lead, and nothing seemed to move. Her long hair spilled around her face. If she’d been awake, Devlin might have cried, but instead she thought she heard herself mumble something that sounded vaguely like the word “no.” She wasn’t sure she’d actually said it aloud.

A cool hand touched her forehead, and Devlin heard a hiss and a muttered “She’s burning up.” After hearing those words and wondering briefly who was burning up, the cacophony of voices suddenly became louder. Devlin decided it was simply too much trouble to figure out exactly who was who in her very peculiar dream, so she stopped listening and drifted back the way she had come.

* * * *

Jake McKenna was in the midst of stuffing his clothes into an overnight bag when the call came in for the ALS unit. Shit. Wouldn’t you know it? Nothing for four hours, then thirty minutes left in his shift and a call comes in about an unresponsive kid in a Kmart. Probably another OD. Methamphetamine or heroin. There was a lot of bad stuff on the street right now. He and Lou scrambled toward the back of the ambulance while Kyle and Leanne hit the front.

“You guys got everything?” Kyle called back from the driver’s seat.

“Yeah, she’s all ready,” replied Jake, “just stocked her up.” He turned to Lou. “Hand me the IV kit and a thousand-cc bag of normal saline.”

“Need the O₂, I’m assuming,” replied Lou, handing Jake a large black bag. “Hey, you want the cardiac kit? If it’s heroin, we might need the cardiac kit.”

"Yeah, grab it just in case," Jake responded. He felt his heartbeat speed up, like it always did on these runs. "Anybody know anything about this kid?"

Leanne responded, "Teenager. Found down in the back room of a Kmart. No history. No witnesses. No ID."

"Male? Female?"

"Don't know yet. Guess we'll find out soon enough. Mike's already on the scene."

The South Broadway crew was proud of their response time, under five minutes in most cases. Kmart was only a couple of miles down the road, and Kyle drove an ambulance like some high-speed concept car on the Indy 500 track. Jake rolled his eyes at Lou. They both wondered how Kyle could be so damn good and so damn reckless at the same time. But a minute or two could make a huge difference when it came to saving lives, so nobody ever complained. They edged around the cop car and pulled up to the back entrance in just under two minutes.

Jake and Lou swung the doors open and hopped out the back as Kyle and Leanne exited the front. Mike Jones met them at the door.

"What ya got for us, Mike?" asked Kyle, grabbing the portable oxygen canister.

Mike shrugged. "Young girl. No ID. Can't wake her up. The manager's a pain in the ass, wanted me to drag the kid out to my patrol car, but the stockroom supervisor claims the kid's feverish. Looks starved too."

"Any chance it's a drug overdose?" asked Lou as he and Jake followed the police officer into the stockroom.

"Can't tell, maybe. Runaway probably. No recent missing persons report that match her description. I already checked it out."

Using the long stride that he reserved for calls, Jake outpaced Mike and with an unerring sixth sense skirted a pallet stacked to the ceiling with merchandise. He somehow knew the girl would be behind it. Jake dropped to his knees at her side, slipping the bag from his shoulder. He flipped the lid open with a click, taking in the scene with a quick glance. A young girl, pale. Her respirations were shallow, rapid. Mike was right. She was very thin. Jake wondered if she bought drugs instead of food, and he hoped not. An older woman cradled the girl's head in her lap.

"She's hot," she said, concern evident in her voice. "Feel her. She's burning up."

Jake glanced up. "I will, ma'am, thank you, but I need you to move back a little."

Lou was already putting an oxygen mask over the girl's mouth and nose. He cranked it up to four liters. Lou tried waking her, but got no response. Jake could hear Kyle and Mike in the background, keeping the irate manager occupied.

"Jake, help me cut off the sweatshirt. I need a better vein. Skin turgor's really bad," commented Leanne, grabbing a pair of scissors out of her bag.

Jake lifted the girl slightly off the floor, and he and Leanne began to cut through her Denver Broncos sweatshirt and then her threadbare tee shirt. She moaned softly. The older woman, still sitting near the girl's head, sucked in her breath.

"Jeez, it looks like she's been dragged down the street!" she exclaimed.

"Shit," said Jake, "shit, shit. Mike, Kyle, get over here now."

"I gotta find a vein," interjected Leanne. "She's real dry."

Kyle reached them first. "Shit."

Mike whistled. "Goddamn." "How bad is she?"

"Let you know in a minute. Lou," said Jake. "Hand me those electrodes, and look on that other arm for a vein."

Jake applied the electrodes to her chest and flipped on the portable EKG machine. After a quick glance at her heart rhythm, he began a systematic head-to-toe assessment while Kyle radioed each finding back to the ER. Jake felt sick as he stripped her and ran his hand over every single bruise and abrasion, checking for broken bones and possible internal injuries, anything they might make worse by moving her carelessly. The girl had been badly beaten. Her back was scraped raw, and there were thick purple wheals around both wrists. Her left side was swollen and covered with bruises. From the feel of things, Jake suspected at least a couple of broken ribs. He didn't find needle marks—her arms and legs were clean. This wasn't likely to be a drug overdose. Leanne and Lou got the IV started, and Jake sighed with relief as fluids began flowing. The EKG showed a normal sinus rhythm, but she was tachycardic, and the woman was right. She was hot. Her axillary temp was 103.4. Her lungs sounded congested. Probably pneumonia. Jake suspected she'd been outdoors for several days, probably

guarding her respirations because of the rib pain, which meant she was a sitting duck for pneumonia.

Mike cleared his throat. "He was wearing wafflestompers. Look at the marks on her thigh."

They stared in silence.

Then Jake broke it. "Let's move it, people."

Kyle and Lou wheeled in the gurney, and the four of them lifted the girl. As they laid her down, her eyes flew open. Jake was by her head, looking right at her. He started. Her eyes were unexpected, aquamarine with flecks of gold, wide and slightly almond-shaped, and when she lowered her lids, he noticed the long lashes that cast faint shadows on her pale cheeks. Her eyes opened again and sought his. Jake was surprised by the intensity in her gaze. He saw confusion mingled with pain and a flat-out panic, the kind of panic one would find in a cornered animal.

Jake felt a hand wrap around his as he pushed the gurney.

"It's okay, darlin'. It's okay. We'll take care of you. We're taking you to the hospital."

He thought her panic increased for a moment, but then she nodded, and he could tell she understood him.

"You got a name, sweetheart?"

She closed her eyes again and shook her head.

"C'mon, everybody's got a name. It's all right. You can tell me, sweetheart. Nobody's going to hurt you."

"Dev," she said after a moment, her voice so soft beneath the mask that he almost missed it. "Devlin."

"Devlin, I'm Jake, and I won't let anything happen to you."

Suddenly the hand in his went rigid and the rapid respirations turned to gasps.

"Heart rate increasing!" called Leanne, "One-sixty a minute!"

"Lou." Jake spoke with deliberate calm. "Give me an ET tube now, and get the Ambu bag."

Jake and Lou worked fast and had the girl intubated before Kyle could even put the vehicle in gear. Mike slammed the ambulance doors shut.

"I'm right behind you," he called.

* * * *

Nervous, Janice paced at the ER entrance. It had been a quiet night before they'd gotten the call from Kyle just at the change of shift. She agreed to stay over and lend a hand, as the usual daytime ER inflow of sore throats, headaches, and chest pain had already begun. Besides, if Kyle called in, then Jake would be with him. She hadn't spoken with Jake in a month. Since their breakup, he'd gone out of his way to avoid her, leaving the ER as soon as he'd reported off on a case. The breakup was her fault, she knew that, but she wanted to talk to him anyway. To ask how he was doing. Find out if he missed her. To see if there would be any hint in his voice or manner that might indicate he'd take her back. To see if, by any chance, he would look at her the way he used to, in the beginning. Janice missed that look.

She'd miscalculated badly. Jake planned to interview for a job in Missoula with the Bureau of Land Management. He'd gone off to visit his folks at their ranch near Big Timber and check in with his old search and rescue unit near the Bob Marshall Wilderness before the interview. He hadn't asked her to go with him.

Janice knew she should have understood. Jake had ended up with a couple of extra days off, and it was a last-minute decision. The ER was short-staffed, and she couldn't get away. He knew that. She knew that. But she wanted him to ask anyway. At least ask and let her decide, even if her decision was already obvious. So they'd fought, and he'd left in a rush. Just as quickly, she'd fallen into bed with the new ER doc. It was stupid and rash, and Janice didn't mean it to go that far.

But, she was pissed off, and she wanted to hurt Jake. It had worked. Quite well, actually. Jake had been hurt and felt betrayed. It didn't take long for the news to spread. Hospitals were not only a good place to breed germs, they were a hotbed of gossip. By the time Jake got home, everyone in the ER knew, and so did Jake's paramedic team.

Janice didn't know who actually spilled the beans, though she suspected Lou. It didn't really matter. Jake would have found out anyway. A secret like that has a way of coming out. That was why she did it in the first place, wasn't it? So he'd find out and feel some pain? The kind of pain she felt whenever she realized that no matter how close she and Jake got, there was a part of him he held back. A part of him he kept entirely to himself. It was

like he was waiting, waiting for something else, or someone else. Oh, he was there in bed all right. Always attentive, always putting her pleasure before his, never selfish. The best lover she'd ever had. But somehow, no matter how wild things got, he seemed distant. As if he wasn't quite there, but watching, separate. Janice didn't think she'd ever seen him lose control. Ever. Like he always remembered to put on a damn condom. Always. That was why she paced outside in the cold, her breath a wreath of smoke over her head. He wouldn't believe the kid was his. But then, neither did she.

* * * *

Jake threw open the doors and was out the back before Kyle had even come to a complete stop. He saw Janice waiting for them and ignored the familiar jolt of anger that shot through him. The girl was what mattered right now. She clung to his hand, her eyes closed. He and Lou had gotten her stabilized, but Jake wasn't sure how long that would last. As he and Lou burst through the ER doors, he could hear Kyle and Leanne filling Janice in on the girl's condition. Mike trailed behind them, talking on his radio.

Nurses and the ER doc moved out of their way as they wheeled the gurney into the nearest cubicle. It was Dr. Workman. Good. Mary was all business. The last person Jake wanted to run into was that asshole Peters.

"Pressure's ninety over forty," Jake began. "She's been in sinus tach, one-thirty to one-sixty a minute. Just as we were bringing her out of the Kmart, she looked like she was going into respiratory arrest, so I intubated her. The tube slid in easily. Last temp was 103.4 axillary, and she's got rhonchi bilaterally. Leanne inserted a twenty-three gauge, and she's on her first bag of normal saline. Her name's Devlin. Somebody also beat the crap out of her. You'll see when you pull the blanket off. And Mary," he added quietly in Dr. Workman's ear, "you better get a rape kit."

Dr. Workman glanced up at him and then in Mike's direction. She stuck her stethoscope in her ears, took a breath, and pulled the blanket away. The girl's hands suddenly fluttered to life as she clutched at the blanket and attempted to cover herself. Jake lowered his head and put his mouth close to the girl's ear.

"Devlin," he said, his voice soft. "Devlin, it's okay. This is Dr. Workman. She's going to help you. Let her help you."

Jake could see the tears in her eyes as the girl fought for control.

“Look at me, Devlin,” he commanded. “Look at me. It’s okay. These people are going to help you. Nobody is going to hurt you.”

Devlin did look at him then. His heart clenched. She was helpless. Her eyes bored into his, stark, desperate, and pleading. There was something about this kid. Jake couldn’t quite put his finger on it, but it was something deep and silent and brave. Suddenly he knew he wanted to be there for her. Jake found he wanted that more than anything. And he wanted to kill the bastard who did this to her.

She felt for his hand, and Jake reached out.

“I’m right here,” Jake responded firmly, finding her roving hand with his own and holding it still with gentle pressure, “and I’m not going anywhere.”

“Kyle,” he called, “I’m off duty, and I’m staying here.”

Chapter Two

Jake sat on a stool in the curtained cubicle. He did his best to stay out of the way, but the girl wouldn't release his hand, and Dr. Workman, Mary, didn't have a problem with it. They'd been friends for two years. They'd had a brief affair when he arrived in Denver. She was fresh out of her residency, and he was the newest member of the paramedic team. He'd majored in geology at Idaho State in Pocatello, and then trained for a year with the sheriff's department mountain search and rescue team in the Mission Mountains in Montana. When his college roommate and best friend, Mike Jones, moved to Denver to take a job with the police department, Jake followed. It was a whim. Jake wanted to give city life a try.

Mary Workman was a down-to-earth, no-nonsense, farm girl from Iowa, a few years older than Jake. They had a lot in common and hit it off right away, but mostly, they were just good friends. The sex had been an experiment, to see if they could take that next step. They discovered pretty quickly they couldn't. They were too similar. But their friendship remained. Jake trusted her medical skills and her judgment implicitly.

Mary was confident and very competent. She'd already ordered a stat chest X-ray, drawn blood gases and labs, and started IV antibiotics and pain medication. The respiratory therapist had given the girl a breathing treatment, and Mary had ordered the ET tube pulled. She seemed to be holding her own. Jake would have thought the girl was asleep but for the way she curled her fingers around his, like a little kid clutching a security blanket. The rape exam had been especially brutal. Despite Devlin's closed eyes, Mary explained to her what she was going to do clearly, step by step, and she was as gentle as possible. Jake didn't watch. He kept his eyes on the girl's face. He saw how she bit her lip to keep from crying out, but the tears

squeezed from between her eyelids anyway. Jake stroked her wet cheeks softly with his fingertips, murmuring in her ear.

She reminded him of a half-tamed young filly, shy, sensitive, all legs, ready to bolt at the slightest provocation. Mike had stayed nearby too, holding her other hand, talking softly with the female officer he'd called from Vice. Though his shift had ended, it was his case until he officially handed it off.

"I'd like to kill the son of a bitch," Mike said leaning close to Jake, keeping his voice low.

Jake looked back at him. He pitched his voice for Mike's ears alone. "I think everyone in this room wants to do that right now." Jake paused, considering. "When you find out who did this, let me know. I'd like first crack at him."

"Get in line, buddy. Get in line," whispered Mike hoarsely.

"Okay," interrupted Dr. Workman, "we got a room in ICU?"

Janice answered, "Yes, they just called down, and they're ready for her. They want to know if we have a full name yet." She looked at Jake, her cheeks pink with what Jake assumed was embarrassment.

"No," Jake answered in her general direction, "no name yet, just Devlin."

Jake didn't feel like giving Janice any more information about the girl than he had to. For some reason, he felt protective of her around Janice. He knew he was being irrational. Janice had a lot of qualities, not all of them good, but she was an excellent nurse, and she wouldn't hurt a kid. He almost smiled. That was the most he'd said to her in a long time. Looking at her, Jake realized he wasn't angry anymore. He simply didn't care. After he got over the initial insult to his pride, the truth was, he didn't actually mind at all. He'd been trying to figure out how to let Janice down gently for almost a month when she finally brought things to a head. She was beautiful, she was amusing, she had a killer body, she looked good on his arm, and the minute they met, Jake was determined to feel those lovely legs clenched tight around his hips while he pumped into her.

Much as he wished it had been different, he discovered that the wanting was a lot better than the having. Once she got in his bed, she wanted to be in his head too. She tried hard to make it a permanent arrangement, to spruce him up, make him fit in with her country club crowd. Janice was the spoiled

only child of a well-known cardiac surgeon and his social climbing mortgage broker wife. Jake knew she felt like a disappointment because she'd dropped out of pre-med classes and taken what her father considered the easy way out. She'd become a nurse, a career path that ranked about as high in her father's estimation as a housemaid.

It became obvious pretty fast that Janice wanted to be back in her father's good graces. Jake figured, from her perspective, he had the right amount of machismo to hold his own against her parents. He could probably hold his own against just about anybody. It didn't hurt that his family owned one of the most profitable cattle spreads west of the Missouri. But Janice had an image to maintain, and she had an agenda, a marriage agenda. He didn't. Wearing a suit and tie and butting heads with Janice's father for the rest of his life were about as far from Jake's agenda as you could get. He thought he'd made that clear up front.

"Ask Shauna over there how to handle this," interrupted Mike, reading Jake's expression. "She's already put in a call to Social Services."

Janice looked like she was about to hurl the clipboard at both of them, but instead she stomped out of the cubicle. Jake shrugged. If she was angry, it was her own problem.

* * * *

The gurney jolted slightly as the brakes were released, rousing Devlin. Thanks to the pain medication Dr. Workman had given her, she'd relaxed enough to doze. The examination had been humiliating, especially with all those people watching. She hated the fact that they all knew. They knew. They just didn't know who had done it. If they'd known, Devlin thought, it would have been even worse. She'd have felt more ashamed, though Devlin wasn't sure that was possible. If Jake hadn't been with her, if he hadn't kept talking to her, his voice calm and low and soothing, she couldn't have stood it. She would have attempted to roll off the table and crawl away.

Devlin tried to concentrate, but her brain felt slow, and her thoughts were fuzzy. Was Jake still holding her hand? She cracked open her eyes, catching a glimpse of the ceiling as it swam by. Nausea threatened to overwhelm her. Then she felt a gentle squeeze on her right hand. She knew Jake was still there. She squeezed back, grateful for the pressure of his

strong hand around hers. Devlin assumed they were taking her to a room. She vaguely remembered Dr. Workman mentioning intensive care. That was good, she thought as she let herself drift off to sleep. She'd be safe from him in Intensive Care.

* * * *

Janice paced in the ICU waiting room. She was irritated and exhausted after having spent a sleepless night in the ER. She felt the same nausea she'd felt every morning for a month. Her anger with Jake was growing exponentially. He was still in there with the girl, he, Dr. Workman, Mike Jones, and that annoying Social Services officer. She'd arrived as Janice was reporting off to the ICU manager. When Janice approached the room and tried to get Jake's attention, the Social Services officer slid the glass door closed in her face.

"Oh," she said, "Excuse me," but she closed it all the same and turned her back on Janice. Why did they need Jake, she wondered, her irritability increasing.

More than anything, Janice just wanted to go home and sleep, but she couldn't keep putting off this conversation. If there was any chance, any chance at all that he'd come back to her, she had to do this now. She didn't care that the father of the baby she carried was Jim Peters. Janice didn't want Jim Peters. She wanted Jake. And if she waited too much longer, she'd start to show, and there would be no way to pretend the baby was Jake's. All she needed was one more time in bed with him, without a condom between them.

With a little luck, she could convince him he was the father. He knew her family. He knew what she'd face. He'd do the right thing, because that was Jake. He always did the right thing. And when the baby arrived early? Well, babies arrived early all the time, didn't they? Jake was too responsible to abandon a baby. Janice was counting on that.

Janice snuck a glance into the unit. Dr. Workman was deep in conversation with the nurse assigned, while Mike and the other officer stood off to the side, listening but keeping out of the way. Jake leaned over the girl protectively. It looked like he might be talking to her, Janice couldn't tell.

Since the girl seemed to trust Jake, maybe they wanted him to ask the questions.

Janice sighed. Suddenly, hanging around the door to the ICU, as ancillary staff came and went, didn't seem like the best idea. Janice was starting to feel not only conspicuous but pathetic. Besides, she needed a Coke, and her bladder was growing distinctly uncomfortable. It didn't appear as if anyone would be leaving the room soon, so Janice decided to risk a trip to the bathroom and then to the cafeteria. She could always wait for Jake by the ER.

His crew had gone home long ago. Chances were Mike was giving him a lift back to the station. Mike's patrol car sat in the ER parking lot. She could steal Jake away, offer him a ride to his car, and maybe get him to stop for some breakfast on the way.

He knew they needed to talk. If nothing else, he'd want to clear the air. That's how she'd handle it—they needed to clear the air. After all, they were going to have to see each other at the hospital. If she was lucky and one thing led to another, they'd be in bed together before Jake knew what hit him.

A little luck, Janice thought, and this would work out just fine.

* * * *

Jake watched the girl sleep. Despite her worrisome pallor and the dark circles beneath her eyes, she appeared relaxed. Her hands lay loosely at her sides, IVs flowing into veins showing very blue through her delicate skin. Mike was right, she hadn't only been beaten and raped, Mike was right, she looked as if she'd been starved. Running his fingers along her too prominent collarbone made him want to hit someone. He didn't know why, but he felt protective of this girl.

In two years, he'd treated a lot of kids—runaways, ODs, gunshot wounds, motor vehicle accidents, bike wrecks, drownings. You name it, the paramedics had seen it. They and the cops were the first-line responders. Devlin touched him. When he'd looked into her eyes, those wide, panic-stricken eyes, he'd felt an instant connection, and he wanted to be there for her to make sure that the bastard who did this would never, ever have a chance do it again.

“Jake, buddy.” Mike called Jake over to the corner. “Cherie needs information. The girl tell you anything at all?”

“No, just her first name,” answered Jake, “Devlin.”

Cherie, the young Social Services officer, joined them. She shook her head.

“Mike said she had no ID on her. I double-checked her clothes. Nothing. She was wearing old tennis shoes. No socks. The Denver Broncos sweatshirt you cut off was a man’s large. Maybe it was stolen from a Goodwill or something. I’d like to ask her a few questions.” Cherie glanced at Jake. “You think she’s up for that right now?”

Mike answered for Jake. “Think there’d be any harm in waiting twenty-four hours? She’s not going anywhere.”

Cherie sighed. “No, I don’t have a problem with it. My supervisor might, but I’ll explain the situation, let him know how sick she is. Like you said, we don’t have a missing persons report that matches this kid.” She paused, considering. “Yeah, it can wait. I just don’t like leaving her alone. She might have some family somewhere that actually cares. If so, I’d like to get in touch with them. I’ll see if Shauna got anything. I don’t think there was much, some blood under her fingernails, maybe semen...” Cherie trailed off. “She did get a set of prints. I’ll see if the kid’s got a file. Let you know if I find something,” she said. “You two sticking around?”

“Nah,” said Mike, “I can’t speak for Jake, but I need to report off and get some sleep. I’m dead on my feet.”

“Talk to you tomorrow then,” said Cherie as she headed out the door.

“Jake, you ready to roll?” asked Mike.

“Give me a minute,” answered Jake, steaming at Cherie’s almost casual mention of Devlin’s rape. “I want to talk to Mary.”

Mike waved his acknowledgement as he followed Cherie. “Whenever you’re ready. Come get me. I’m gonna crash in the waiting room.”

Jake checked the monitor before he left the room. Devlin’s heart rate had dropped to ninety, normal sinus rhythm. He stroked her cheek, but she didn’t wake. Reassured, he strolled to the desk, waiting for Mary to finish up with her charting.

“Who you passing her off to?” he asked.

“Ray Walters. He’s a good guy. Grandfatherly type. I think she’ll be okay with him, and I’ll look in on her when I come on duty tonight,” she

replied. "Listen, I appreciated your help, Jake. You made it a lot easier for her. For me too."

Jake nodded. "I'm off the next four days. Right now I need some sleep, but you think I could come back later? Maybe spend some time with her?" He put an affectionate hand on Mary's arm.

"She got to you, huh, Jake McKenna?" she teased lightly.

He surprised himself by blushing. "A little."

"It's those big eyes." She chuckled. "Yeah, me too. It's hard to be all business when you see something like this. Don't worry, I'll write the order now. You can spend as much time up here as you want. I suspect it will do her good."

"How bad is it? How bad...I mean, is she permanently injured?"

"No," Mary answered. Jake knew she understood the unstated portion of his question. "Some bruising and bleeding, but nothing permanent. Physically, I think she'll be all right. It's dealing with the fact of it that will probably be the worst."

"What about the possibility of a pregnancy? Anything you can do?"

Mary frowned at the chart as she answered, "Well, from the immature look of her cervix, I'd say pregnancy probably isn't much of a concern. I suspect that either she's never menstruated or, because of poor nutrition, started and then stopped at some point. It's the least of my worries. The antibiotics should cover most STDs. You know, Jake, I really shouldn't be talking to you about this."

Despite his anger at the girl's condition, Jake actually found himself grinning at that last comment. "Yes, darlin', you should."

Mary was a good friend. Jake picked up her left hand and, with a teasing gesture, kissed her palm. Mary's smile was wide.

"Why, oh why, did I dump you, Jake McKenna?" she laughed.

"Because you found someone way more reliable than me," he answered with a chuckle. "How's the baby?" He eyed her bulging belly.

"Good, good, second trimester's a lot easier." Mary's expression changed. "We need to talk, right now," she said, "There's something you need to know, and I think I need to be the one to tell you. But you have to make me a promise."

Jake was concerned by the tone of her voice. "What's that?"

“Heed the message, but don’t kill the messenger. Let’s go to the medical library. It’ll be empty this time of day.”

* * * *

Mary used a key from the chain around her neck to unlock the door to the medical library. She’d guessed right—it was empty. She plopped down on the sole couch. Jake sat at the other end and angled his big body toward her. He reached down and grabbed her feet, flipping off her clogs and turning her so her feet rested in his lap. He began massaging her arches.

“Oh my God, that feels good,” breathed Mary. “Don’t tell Kenneth I let you do this. He might have to hurt you.”

Jake snorted. “Kenneth? Hurt me? He’s glad someone’s watching out for you since you never watch out for yourself. Why the hell are you still working nights? You should be off your feet and in bed with your husband.”

“Yeah, yeah, I wish. You’ll be happy to know, I’m only on nights for another month.” She hesitated for a moment. “That’s why we hired Peters.”

“Great,” Jake said, his voice dry as toast. “If I could, I’d go to days myself.”

Mary closed her eyes for a moment and let Jake work the kinks out of her tired feet and ankles. He was a good friend. They’d both grown up in the country around plain, hard-working folks. Neither of them was the type to mince words, and neither of them had a lot of patience with whining and stupidity. Mary dreaded telling him what she suspected, but more than that, she hated the thought of him being trapped in a situation that was not of his making. —She’d decided she wouldn’t stand for it.

Even though she and Jake had dated at one time, he’d become close friends with Kenneth. Jake had been a groomsman at their wedding nine months ago. Jake had introduced them in the first place. Kenneth still had a year to go in his neurosurgery residency, and then he intended to continue to work at the teaching hospital in Denver. Mary planned to stay with emergency medicine, but she hoped to cut down to part-time after the baby was born. And she didn’t want to wait more than three or four years to have a second child.

Older motherhood, it was an occupational hazard. Doctors spent so much time in school and training that it was rare for any female physician to

have a baby before the age of thirty. By then, you could already be getting into fertility problems. Mary felt very lucky. She got pregnant on their honeymoon. So far, other than initial morning sickness and some lingering fatigue, Mary felt wonderful. She sighed as Jake's hands worked their magic.

"You falling asleep on me, sweetheart?" Jake's voice rumbled low, reminding Mary why she'd asked him to accompany her.

"Give me my feet, Jake. I can't concentrate when you do that," she grumbled.

He laughed and released her feet.

Mary turned to him. "Look, this is hard to tell you, so I'm just going to say it right out. Okay?"

"Okay."

"I think Janice is pregnant, and I don't think the baby's yours." Mary paused a beat. "And I think she's going to try to convince you it's your kid."

Jake stared at a spot on the wall just past her head.

"Listen, I'm sorry. I know perfectly well that this is none of my damn business but...well, it is my business!" Mary scolded, "You are one of my best friends, and if I hadn't asked the ICU charge nurse to lend some extra staff that night, you never would have met Janice. I'm still not sure who made the first move."

"I thought I did." Jake laughed. "Maybe not."

"Why are you laughing?" demanded Mary, irritated. "This could ruin your life. You are not going to marry her. I forbid it! I can't even believe you two lasted almost seven months! She is so not your type!" Then Mary laughed at herself. "Listen to me, I sound like a pregnant, married, jealous ex-girlfriend."

"I do love you, Mary," said Jake. He leaned over to kiss her cheek. "I won't kill the messenger."

"Then I'm going to pry. Is it possible? Could the kid be yours?"

Jake paused for only a second. "Anything's possible, but I doubt it. You want details?"

"Yes," she answered. "I'm a masochist."

"I always used protection. You think Peters did?"

"You want my honest opinion?"

“Would you give me any other kind?” Jake tugged on a lock of her hair that had strayed out of her ponytail.

“Then no, I don’t think he used protection. For God’s sake, they even did it in the residents’ break room. Last I checked, we don’t stock condoms in the break room! Sorry to be so blunt,” she added.

Mary knew Jake well enough to recognize the signs of anger just below the surface. He had cared for Janice, however brief their relationship was, and the betrayal hurt him, not terribly, but it hurt just the same. It had become obvious to everyone, including Jake, that Janice was making more of the relationship than actually existed. Everyone but Janice seemed to know that the breakup was coming, and they had anticipated hurt feelings, cold shoulders, crying jags, but not a public, get-even, in-your-face sexual fling with Peters.

Jake interrupted her thoughts. “How do you know she’s pregnant?”

“Easy,” Mary said. “Not only am I the oldest of six children, not only have I recently been there and done the early pregnancy thing, I’m a doctor. She walks around with a Coke in her hand and stocks saltines in her locker. It’s pretty hard to ignore the frequent trips to the bathroom. A couple weeks ago, she didn’t realize I was already in a stall when she rushed in, puked, then cleaned up and continued her shift as if nothing was amiss. She’s putting on weight, not much, but she’s a little rounder on top. I’m not even sure a guy would notice. Well,” she added, seeing the amusement in Jake’s eyes, “he’d notice, but not for the right reasons. A woman notices.”

Jake stood up. “You need to go home,” he said.

“What are you planning to do?” Mary asked, slipping on her clogs.

“Play nice,” Jake said with an insolent grin. “Don’t worry, I don’t intend to marry her, even if the kid turns out to be mine. I’ll wait and see. I wouldn’t abandon my own child. You know me better than that.”

“I didn’t think you would.”

Jake helped Mary to her feet. “She’ll have a rough time telling her dad, you know.”

“I know.” Mary shook her head. “I don’t envy her.”

* * * *

Jake made a quick stop in the ICU to check on Devlin. She appeared quiet, the O₂ mask covering most of her mouth and nose. His heart clenched as he paused a moment in her doorway, taking in the tubes and lines everywhere. She didn't deserve this. The results of the first blood cultures had come back, and Dr. Walters had added another antibiotic. He seemed to feel that Devlin was about as stable as she was going to be for now. He said he hoped to see signs of improvement within twenty-four hours. When Dr. Walters bent over a chart, Jake knew he'd been dismissed. It wasn't personal.

Jake's second stop was the ICU waiting room, where he found Mike sacked out on a couch, his jacket under his head, oblivious to the Disney VHS tape playing at full volume on the TV while three young kids used the remaining furniture as trampolines.

"C'mon, bud." Jake punched his arm. "Let's go."

"Uuunnn," mumbled Mike as he cracked open his eyes and stretched.

"Time to go," repeated Jake. "You think you can drive, or you need me to get you to the station?"

"Nah, I got it," Mike replied. "Just give me a sec."

"Where's your gun?"

Mike gave him a dirty look. "Locked it in the vehicle. What you think I did with it? Contrary to popular belief, I do have a brain."

"Yeah? That's debatable."

Mike rose to his feet. "What's got your panties in a bunch?"

"Long night. Just a very long night. Let's go."

Mike turned toward the ICU. "You check on the girl?"

Jake started walking toward the ER parking lot. "She's holding her own."

"You coming back to see her?"

Jake hesitated before answering. "Yeah, later. Something I gotta do first. And then I need some sleep."

"Something involving Janice?"

"You ask too many questions."

"I am a cop. Occupational hazard."

"Yeah, I need to talk to Janice, and then I gotta get some sleep."

"Good luck. You definitely need it. And call me when you come back to see the girl. If I can, I'd like to tag along."

Jake and Mike reached the ER parking lot. The sun had risen from behind the clouds, but the daylight seemed watered down, cold and pale. Janice waited in her car just beyond the door. Jake deliberately slowed his pace. She rolled down the window as they passed.

“Hey, Jake,” she said, her voice pitched for his ears alone. “Um, I know you’re not too happy with me right now, and I’m really sorry about that. But I need to talk to you. I’d-I’d like to talk to you if that’s okay.”

Janice had a very husky voice in the morning, especially when she was tired. Even more so when they’d been at it all night long. It was something he’d found incredibly appealing when they first got together. Now, hearing that tone in her voice just made him feel disappointed. That’s the only word he could come up with. Disappointed in her, but even more disappointed in himself. He’d let things go too far with Janice. He should have ended it a lot sooner. No excuses. She’d convinced herself that he was her future. He knew it. If he was really honest with himself, he had to admit that he’d known within a couple of weeks that he was nothing of the kind. He should have ended it right then.

Jake was only twenty-four, and he had no intention of settling down for a long time. On the other hand, when you’re twenty-four, it’s hard to walk away from a beautiful, willing woman in your bed. Janice was very beautiful. She could also be funny and entertaining. Despite her normally well-heeled lifestyle, she’d even given backpacking a try once at his urging, and she did all right. It was rough on her, but she’d been a good sport. Jake didn’t think she’d ever try it again, but he appreciated the fact that she made the effort for him. Of course, she also insisted they hike back to the truck and drive forty miles into town one night for a dinner out. Janice took him to a Western store, the only clothing store open on a Saturday night in Stanley, Idaho, and bought him a button-down shirt to wear to the steak house. Jake humored her that night. But he’d never worn the shirt since, and he knew it irked her that it just sat in his closet.

Jake bent down toward the open car window.

“Sure, Janice,” he agreed, “seems like we might as well.”

He waved Mike on, and Mike continued to his patrol car without a backward glance. Jake folded his length into the passenger seat of her two-seater Mercedes coupe as she put it in gear.

"Do you mind coming for breakfast?" Janice asked, sounding a little uncertain. "I'm starved, and I know you haven't eaten yet."

Jake turned toward her, but Janice had put on her sunglasses and kept her eyes focused on the road ahead.

"That's fine."

They sat in silence for the remainder of the drive. Traffic was light, and in a little over ten minutes, they were pulling into a parking lot behind the waffle place near Jake's apartment.

"I hope you don't mind," Janice said, her voice quivering slightly, "I just...I know you like this place."

"I do."

He got out of the car. Walking to the other side, he opened the driver's door for Janice. She thanked him, and he nodded again, very polite. He held the door of the restaurant open for her too and spoke to the hostess about a table. Jake didn't ask for one of his preferred tables near the front windows. He asked for a table in the back. He was hoping to give them a little more privacy, because he didn't think either of them would be very happy with the outcome of their conversation.

"Thank you for coming," Janice began, fiddling with her menu, "I've wanted to talk to you for the longest time, but I know, well, I know how angry you've been."

The waitress poured them both coffee. Jake noticed that Janice set hers aside. Jake added cream to his coffee and stirred, wondering what she had planned. He decided he'd better choose his words carefully and say exactly what he meant so there would be no misunderstandings.

"I'm not angry anymore, Janice," he told her.

She looked relieved. "Good," she said, "I've been really worried. Jake, I didn't...I mean, Jake, I wanted..."

The waitress approached, pad in hand, and asked if they wanted the usual. Jake nodded and handed her his unopened menu.

Janice said, "If you don't mind, I think just some toast this morning, and would it be too much trouble to get some hot tea with lemon instead of the coffee, please?"

The waitress said, "Sure, honey," as she picked up the menu next to Janice's arm, along with the coffee cup.

"Since when do you drink tea?"

“Oh,” said Janice with a half smile, “I’ve developed a taste for it recently. Besides, I don’t want to be up all day. And you know I don’t like decaf.”

Again, Jake was very polite. “You were saying?”

“Jake, I didn’t mean that to happen. You have to know that. It didn’t mean anything to me,” Janice said, a note of quiet desperation in her voice. She reached for his hand. “I’ve told you how sorry I am, and I’ll tell you again and again until you believe me.”

Jake disengaged his hand from hers. “I believe you,” he replied, sincerity in his voice. “I believe you are sorry that it happened.”

Jake thanked the waitress as she brought the tea. Janice was silent. Jake could see tears shining in her eyes. God, this was hard. It had been bad enough breaking up with her the first time, but now he knew he’d have to make it very clear to her that things were not going back to the way they were. Ever.

Jake liked women. More to the point, he loved them. He didn’t want to hurt a woman, including Janice, but in this case, he didn’t have a choice. Regardless of the circumstances, Jake did not intend to marry her. If she was pregnant, and if by some unlikely twist of fate the child turned out to be his, he would take responsibility. Shit, he’d even raise the kid himself if she didn’t want it. Peters probably wouldn’t give a damn. Jake could feel himself grow angry as he thought about Jim Peters. He excused himself and headed to the restroom to cool off. He didn’t want to be angry with Janice. She’d got herself caught between a rock and a hard place, and while he didn’t plan to take responsibility for something he hadn’t done, he didn’t feel she deserved to be treated cruelly.

* * * *

Janice breathed a sigh of relief when Jake excused himself. She could tell that he believed that she was sorry. He said he wasn’t angry anymore. She should be feeling encouraged. Instead, she felt frightened and a little sick. Not morning sickness sick, but sick at the sudden, overwhelming realization that he honestly didn’t want her back. He didn’t care for her anymore, not in that way. Sitting at a lonely table in the back of Jake’s favorite breakfast place, it was crystal clear to Janice that she meant about as

much to Jake as the waitress did, maybe less. What on earth had made her think she had a chance to win him back?

Jake returned at the same time as the waitress. The woman placed Janice's toast in front of her, then handed Jake his big plate of extra-crispy hash browns, two eggs over easy, and whole wheat toast, along with a side of bacon. Janice couldn't look at his breakfast. She thought she might gag at the smell alone.

"This was a bad idea," she said, rising from her seat.

Jake pushed his plate away and guided her back down into her chair.

"Janice," he said, his voice gentle, "say what you have to say. I'm listening."

God, she wanted to cry. Why was he being so nice to her?

"I thought...I thought maybe there was a chance for us. Maybe we could work things out. Get back together. But, I know now we can't. We can't go back. It's gone, isn't it?"

"Yes," Jake answered in the same gentle voice, "it's gone. We're not going back."

Janice felt her feet move all on their own, and without even realizing how she got there, she found herself standing by her car, Jake at her shoulder, helping her with her jacket.

"Get in." He directed her into the passenger seat. She got in and handed him her keys.

"Where are you taking me?"

"Home," Jake said, "I'm taking you home."

"But how will you get back? How will you get to your car?"

Jake adjusted the seat and started the ignition. "Don't worry about it."

Chapter Three

Jake woke from an unusually deep sleep. He heard a phone ringing, but he couldn't quite get his bearings. He didn't know whether he was in his bunk at the station house or in his own bed. He'd been dreaming of eyes, aquamarine, flecked with gold. Large eyes, frightened eyes, and a pale face. He reached out to the side of his bed, his hand fumbling toward the noise.

"Hello?" Jake's voice sounded harsh, even to his own ears.

"Wake up, buddy." It was Mike, sounding inordinately cheerful.

"Fuck off," replied Jake, and he hung up the phone, turning onto his stomach and burying his face in the pillow. The phone rang again.

"Wake up, asshole, or I'll drag you out of bed," demanded Mike, sounding far less cheerful.

Good, thought Jake. He couldn't deal with cheerful today. "What time is it?"

"Nine and we gotta head back to the hospital. I think we got an ID on the kid, but Shauna says she won't talk to her. Neither will the person who ID'd her. Your presence is requested. By the way, I'm coming with you. You need a lift? I saw your car parked at the fire station."

"Yeah, thanks. I need a shower first." Jake paused. "How is she?"

"Devlin? Awake. See ya in a few." Mike clicked off.

* * * *

Jake gave his thick hair a brief rub with a towel and ran his fingers through it. A quick check in the mirror told him he had a pretty pronounced shadow beard, but he wasn't in the mood to shave. In fact, the thought that he might learn who abused Devlin had him feeling downright savage. Like maybe he'd have the opportunity to tear someone limb from limb.

Jake pulled on a pair of faded jeans and headed to the kitchen for some instant coffee.

"Jesus Christ! Don't you knock?" he exclaimed as Mike handed him a mug of steaming coffee with cream.

"When you learn to lock your door, I'll learn to knock," stated Mike blandly. "I called Shauna. The girl still won't talk to her, neither will the witness, or whatever she is. She wants you there ASAP."

Jake grabbed a couple of slices of whole wheat bread from a package sitting on his counter and stuffed one in his mouth. "Just give me a minute," he mumbled, talking around the bread. "I gotta find my shit-kickers."

"Put a shirt on while you're at it, and a sweater. It's fucking freezing outside this morning," Mike added as he followed him to the bedroom. "So what's up with you and Janice?"

"Nothing's up. I took her home."

Jake heard Mike muttering. "What's your problem?"

"Please tell me I won't be standing up for you at a shotgun wedding."

In the middle of pulling on a black tee shirt, Jake stopped and glared at Mike. "What do you know about it?"

"Enough."

"No," said Jake as he grabbed a sweater slung over the foot of the bed, "I don't plan to marry her, but once the baby's born, if a blood test shows that I'm the kid's father, then I'm the kid's father. You got a problem with that?"

"It's not your kid! How the hell can you be so calm about this?"

Tugging on his boots, Jake didn't bother to look up. "Because you're right. It's not my kid. Let's go."

* * * *

"Well, well, if it isn't Mutt and Jeff," clucked Shauna when she met them at the hospital entrance. "You off already, Mike?"

"Gee, Shauna, what gave me away? Maybe I'm just undercover," retorted Mike.

"Nah, the leather jacket's too nice," she commented, sizing him up.

Mike grinned at her. "Be still my heart."

Shauna rolled her eyes and deliberately ignored his comment. She turned to Jake. "So, Jake, how you doing?"

"Good, Shauna. You?"

"Good, thanks. I suppose Mike filled you in?"

Jake nodded. "Yeah, no matching prints, she's not in the system, but if I understand correctly, you may or may not have someone who can identify Devlin. You want me to talk to both of them?"

"Actually," said Shauna, "I have a teacher from Sunset Springs High who came into the station early this morning to talk about a student who might or might not be missing. She ended up at my desk. I listened to her story and showed her a photo of the girl, one we took last night. The teacher clammed up on me. Refused to say another word."

Mike and Jake exchanged glances. Mike was the first to speak. "So you think she knows exactly who the girl is and probably who did this?"

"But for some reason is scared to say," finished Jake.

"Right," said Shauna, "but the thing is, I don't think she's scared for herself. I think she's scared for the girl. I want you here, Jake, because Dr. Workman suggested I keep you involved. She thinks Devlin, if that's her real name, will open up to you."

"It's her real name," muttered Jake, pacing.

"And I brought the teacher with me. She's upstairs in the nurses' lounge."

"I hope you didn't leave her alone," said Mike.

"Yeah, right, Mike, I left her alone." Shauna threw him a feral smile. "Scott's with her."

Jake loped toward the elevators, Mike and Shauna trailing after him. He hit the up button and turned to Shauna. "I want to hear what the teacher has to say."

* * * *

"Miss Ellis," said Shauna, "this is Jake McKenna. He's one of the paramedics who brought Devlin in. And this is Officer Mike Jones, he answered the call. In fact, he was the first one on the scene. They'd like to talk to you, if that's okay."

Miss Ellis was a young woman, attractive, with wide brown eyes and shoulder-length amber-colored hair that she twisted nervously. Jake figured she hadn't been a teacher very long. She still had the innocent, idealistic look of a college student. She stared suspiciously at both of them.

She turned to Shauna. "Why?"

At that moment, Mary Workman walked through the door. "Because they want to help," she said. "Miss Ellis, I was the doctor on duty last night when Devlin came in, and I saw up close what was done to her. I know she connected with Jake. I don't think she would have tolerated anything we had to do to her in the ER without Jake right beside her. I insisted Shauna call him because, first of all, I want him here, and secondly, I believe that Devlin will tell him what happened. And right now, there's nothing I want more. She needs help, and whoever did this to her needs to be identified and arrested. I'm guessing you know that as well as I do. Otherwise, you wouldn't have shown up at the police station in the first place."

Miss Ellis blushed. Jake thought she was very pretty when she blushed, and one glance at Mike told him Mike noticed the same thing.

"I'm so sorry," Miss Ellis stammered. "I didn't mean to...It's not that I don't trust you, it's that I don't want to make anything worse."

Mike took her arm and led her to the couch. "Why don't you sit down? Jake and I have known each other for a long time, and I promise, we won't let anything happen to Devlin." He looked in Jake's direction, warning him to keep his mouth shut. "Just tell us what you know, and we'll find a way to protect her. And you," he added at her look of distress.

Jake decided to let Mike handle her. He was too edgy, pacing, anxious, to find out what Miss Ellis knew about Devlin. She was afraid. Jake could practically smell it. Mary must have recognized his rising anger because she approached him.

"Calm down," she whispered. "You don't want to scare her off."

Mary squeezed Jake's arm. He was grateful for her good sense and the fact that she knew better than to be afraid of him. Jake had a quick temper, but he'd never hurt anyone who didn't deserve it, especially not a woman who seemed scared to death. Miss Ellis seemed almost as afraid to talk as Devlin.

"Devlin's in my senior Advanced Placement English Literature class at Sunset Springs," she began abruptly, "at least when she comes to school."

“A senior?” interrupted Mary. “She looks like she’s about fourteen.”

“No, she’s not fourteen. She’s seventeen, almost eighteen.”

Jake crossed his arms over his chest, considering. He decided to get right to the point. “Hasn’t it occurred to anyone at your school that the girl’s as thin as a rail? It’d take a blind person not to notice. I don’t believe for one minute that you’ve never seen bruises on her.”

“Jake...” Mary interrupted.

“No, I’m dead serious.” He disengaged her hand from his arm. “No way do I believe that no one at your school’s ever discussed this.”

“Shut up, Jake,” hissed Shauna.

Miss Ellis burst into tears. Mike began to pat her back while Mary retrieved a box of tissues from a cabinet. She handed it to the crying woman.

“Thanks.” Miss Ellis sniffed. “He’s right. He’s absolutely right. We all knew something was wrong, that something very bad was going on, but we didn’t know what. We tried, we tried to intervene, but nothing happened. I called Child Protective Services three times. All they said was the family seemed fine. I don’t even know if they went over there. They wouldn’t give me any information. I went over there myself one evening. Her uncle told me Devlin was at the library, at nine o’clock at night.”

“The library closes at eight,” volunteered Mike.

“Uncle?” asked Shauna.

“Yes,” answered Miss Ellis, “she lives with her aunt and uncle.”

“When did you call Child Protective Services?” asked Shauna.

“The last time was just a month ago. Before that, in September, and another teacher called last spring, a few months after Devlin was admitted to our school.”

“I need her name,” said Shauna, “to get those reports.”

“She goes by Devlin, but her name is Eleanor Devlin Barre, with an *e* at the end.”

“Do you have a birth date?” asked Scott, looking up from his pad.

“I guess it would be April 13. She would have turned seventeen last April 13. So she would have been born in, what, 1963?”

“On it,” said Scott, and he strode out of the waiting room.

“You said she lived with her aunt, Miss Ellis?” prompted Mike.

“Please, call me Beth. Yes, she lives with her aunt and uncle. She transferred to our school last winter after some sort of motor vehicle

accident. From what I understand, her parents, her grandparents, and her younger brother were all killed. I guess Devlin was thrown from the vehicle and survived. I think she had quite a few broken bones or something. According to school records, her aunt is her legal guardian."

Jake suddenly realized Mary had gone absolutely silent. He turned to look at her. She was pale as a ghost. She grabbed him, her hands like ice cubes on his wrist.

"I know her," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "I know this girl. Oh my God. I know about the accident."

Jake thought Mary might pass out. He put an arm around her for support, helping her to the couch. Mary struggled to sit up, but Jake held her shoulders down.

"Easy, baby, easy. You look like you've seen a ghost. Mike, can you get some water?"

"Yeah, got it." He jumped up and headed to the cooler.

Mike handed Jake the paper cup. Jake held Mary's trembling hands, helping her to drink.

"What are you talking about, baby?" asked Jake, confused, "How could you possibly know anything about it? You didn't recognize her last night."

"That's because I haven't seen her in years, not since she was ten or eleven years old. She's my youngest brother's age. They're friends. God, they've been friends since they were born, but we always called her Ellie. I'm sorry, but this just doesn't seem possible. Let me sit up, Jake, okay? I need to sit up."

Jake helped her to a sitting position, letting her lean against him. "Take it slow," he said, rubbing her shoulders with his big hands. "I'm right here."

Mary began to speak, all eyes on her. "Her grandparents owned the farm adjoining my parents', near Treynor, Iowa. Twelve hundred acres, if memory serves. They grew corn and soybeans and raised some cattle. The farm had been in the family forever. Their names were Janelle and Gary Reynolds. They had two daughters, Catherine and Carolyn. My God, Catherine used to babysit us. Carolyn married young and moved away. I never really knew her, but Catherine stayed in Iowa. She was a professor at Grinnell College, in the Physics Department, I think, and she married Griffin Barre, a professor of medieval history. They had two kids, Devlin

and, God, I can't remember her little brother's name, but I think he was eight, maybe, when the accident happened.

"My mom called to tell me. It was a year ago last September. The Barre family was leaving for somewhere, leaving the country, I think, on sabbatical. Gary was driving them all to the airport in Omaha when something happened. I don't know exactly what. My mom said it wasn't really clear. They were on the interstate bridge between Iowa and Nebraska, heading to the airport, when Gary lost control of his van. Mom said they rolled several times, hit the guardrail and flipped over, off an overpass, onto the road below. Devlin was thrown from the car before it flipped. Somehow, everyone behind them saw what happened and managed to stop in time. She ended up at Creighton University Hospital for months. The last I heard, the aunt came and got her."

"My mom wasn't sure where Carolyn took her, but the Reynolds' farm wound up with a property management company, and my brother Mark leases it. He's leased it for over a year. The accident was a terrible tragedy. The Reynolds family was an institution. Everyone thought well of them. My mom sent me all the clippings from the local newspapers, the *Omaha World-Herald*, the *Council Bluffs Nonpareil*. I may still have them at home."

Before Shauna could get in a word, Jake asked quickly, "The aunt and uncle, what are their names?"

"I don't know," said Mary. "I barely knew Carolyn, and I can't remember her married name. My mom would."

"I know her married name," said Beth. "It's Franz. William and Carolyn Franz."

"The title company Franz?" asked Shauna.

Beth looked at her. "Yes."

Mike whistled through his teeth. "Shit."

Then Jake asked the question they were all thinking, "Still no missing persons report?"

Shauna shook her head.

Jake had heard enough. "You can get the rest of the story. I want to see Devlin," he said, heading to the door of the ICU.

Shauna halted him. "Hold on there, cowboy. I don't want anything she says compromised. And I don't want you scaring her. So, either I come with you or you don't get within a mile of her. Am I making myself clear?"

"I want to see her now," Jake insisted. "Look, you need to finish up with Miss Ellis and Mary. I just want to see her, sit with her. I need to know she's okay. I won't even talk to her until you get in there. Good enough for you?"

When Shauna hesitated, Mary spoke up. "I'll stay with them," she said, "and I'll come get you if she has anything to say."

"All right," she agreed, "but Jake, keep it under control. And Mary, I want to see the articles. I'm sure there was an investigation."

Jake nodded. For Devlin's sake, he would keep it under control, for now. And then that fucking bastard better watch out.

* * * *

For the first time in nearly a year, Devlin slept. She actually slept deeply enough to dream. Devlin hadn't dreamed in months. These particular dreams were filled with visions of a man who had eyes such a deep chocolate brown that his irises melted right into his pupils. He must be an angel, she thought, watching him stride on powerful legs through her dreams, a big, beautiful, dark-haired, avenging angel. He kept the demons at bay. Her angel was real, and he had a name. Jake. Devlin remembered. She remembered everything about the past two years.

Devlin's eyes flew open and she tore at the oxygen mask covering her mouth and nose, panic-stricken. She had no idea how long she'd been asleep, whether or not someone had already identified her, or if *he* knew where to find her. Maybe *he* was out there right now, smiling, nodding his head with concern and convincing the doctors that she was just another troubled teenage runaway. That she'd been nothing but trouble since the day she arrived in Denver. Devlin's heart pounded in her chest as she scanned the room for any sign of his presence. There was nothing. The faint lights from the beeping monitor illuminated an empty room. Devlin sighed with relief and lay back on the pillow, coughing hard as she did so. She felt a sharp jolt of pain in her ribs with each cough.

One of the nurses entered through the open door. Noticing that Devlin was awake, she handed her an extra pillow. "Here, sweetie, hold this over

your abdomen, like this, when you cough. It will help to stabilize your ribs and decrease that pain you're feeling." She showed Devlin how to use the pillow as a splint.

She pulled the stethoscope from around her neck and instructed Devlin to lean forward so she could listen to her lungs.

Apparently she didn't like what she heard because she said, "Cough for me," and then, "A little better." She popped a rechargeable thermometer under Devlin's tongue and, while she was waiting for the temp, pulled a blood pressure cuff from the wall and wrapped it around Devlin's left arm. The right arm had an IV going with what looked like an antibiotic piggyback hooked in via a separate IV pump. Devlin knew what a piggyback was. She'd had more than her share of IV piggybacks during her three-month stay in the hospital after the accident.

"Pressure's one hundred over sixty," the nurse commented, "and your temp's down to 100.3. Good job, girl. You feeling better?"

"Better is a relative term," replied Devlin. "I guess I'm feeling better, but I kind of don't remember everything. How long have I been here?"

"You came in early yesterday morning. You've been pretty out of it since then. It's almost 9 a.m. I'm Amy, by the way, your nurse for today, and you are?"

"Devlin."

"I already knew that." Amy laughed. "It's okay. I get it. It seems like you've been through a lot these past few days, but let's hope things will get better from here on out."

Despite her fear, Devlin smiled back. It was hard not to when Amy had such an infectious laugh. Devlin remembered the title of a book on her mom's bedside table, *Been Down So Long It Looks Like Up to Me*. Her mom never found the time to read it. Somehow, Devlin didn't think things were going to be looking up anytime soon, but right now was right now. Right now could be a whole lot worse. At least Amy didn't know her last name, which meant the police didn't either.

"What do I have?" Devlin asked. "Pneumonia?"

"According to the chest X-ray, yes, you do, among other things. But, you're young. You'll bounce back quickly."

Devlin blushed as she asked the next question. "Um, do I have a Foley catheter in?"

"Yeah, why? Is it uncomfortable?"

"A little," replied Devlin. "Would you mind taking it out? I know I'm weak, and it might be hard to walk to the bathroom, but I really want it out. Now."

Devlin had had enough of catheters. When she'd been hospitalized after the accident, before she was able to walk again, she'd harassed the nurses into getting an order from her doctor to remove the catheter. On occasion, when the nurses were busy with other patients, Devlin had to roll out of bed onto the floor and drag herself to the bathroom with her arms, but that was better than a catheter. Just the thought made her feel helpless and dependent, especially now. You couldn't run away from someone with a catheter bag slung over your arm.

"I'll need to call Dr. Walters for an order, and it's kind of early. He doesn't usually do rounds until afternoon."

"Can you please, or can you just take it out and tell him I pulled it out? Because I really want it out right now. In fact," Devlin added hopefully, "if you hand me your scissors, I can deflate the balloon, and then you don't even have to be involved."

Amy looked Devlin over. "You know too much, little girl," she said, rolling her eyes. "All right, I'll tell him you threatened to remove it yourself, so I was forced to assist you. Anything else, princess?"

Devlin laughed without thinking, though her laughter ended in a coughing fit. "Yes," she was surprised to hear herself say when she finally stopped coughing, "I would love some French fries with lots of ketchup and a Coke!"

* * * *

Twenty minutes later, Devlin sat on a plastic stool in the shower, letting the hot water run over her aching body. When Amy had been nice enough to walk her into the bathroom, Devlin had taken advantage of her brief solitude to clamp off her IV line and detach herself from the pumps, tossing the two lines over the hooks and shutting the pumps off before the alarm mode kicked in. The trick was to depress the power button until the pump beeped once and the backlight switched off.

When Amy checked on her, she said, “Your name isn’t Devlin. It’s Devil Child. Where did you learn how to do that? You are gonna get me in a world of trouble.”

Devlin grinned at her and asked for some soap, shampoo, a toothbrush, and some toothpaste. And two gowns, the second to wear across her back so her rear end wasn’t open to air. Amy obliged her, then pulled in a plastic chair and sat down to supervise.

“I do have other patients, you know,” she teased Devlin.

Devlin merely sighed and inhaled as much steam as she could.

“You don’t need to do this right now. I can give you a bed bath.”

“It’s not the same,” replied Devlin with a cough, and then she hesitated. “I have to do this. I can’t...I have to wash him off me.” She glanced at Amy. “Do you understand?”

Amy looked away for a second and cleared her throat. Rising from her chair, she pulled Devlin’s wet hair away from her face, water splattering over her green scrubs and her white leather shoes.

“Let me give you a hand,” she said, her voice quavering ever so slightly. “Somebody needs to work on these tangles.”

* * * *

Jake could feel himself burn with inner rage as he and Mary waited for the elevator. In his book, anybody who hurt a woman, a child, or an animal didn’t deserve to live. He ached with the need to beat William Franz to a bloody pulp. Because he knew, without a doubt, that her uncle had done this. Of course she wouldn’t give her name. The ER would have called him without realizing what they would be doing to her. He winced as he thought of the danger she would have been in had she identified herself. The danger she was in even now. She’d had to live with him for a year. Jake shuddered. He’d already decided that the son of a bitch wouldn’t get anywhere near her. He’d kill him first.

Mary laid a hand firmly on his arm. “Like Shauna said, you need to keep it under control.”

Jake grunted in reply as the elevator doors opened.

“What do you know about this?” he asked, keeping his voice as even as possible. “I want to know everything you know about her.”

Mary sighed, and as the elevator doors closed behind them, she was in Jake's arms, shaking.

"Page Ken," she whispered. "I want Ken."

* * * *

Ken met them in the ICU waiting room. Mary sobbed in his arms as Jake filled him in.

"Son of a bitch," was his response, and he tightened his hold on Mary, "Honey, I think I should take you home. I know you want to do something, but you're upset. It's not good for you or the baby."

"No." Mary wiped the tears from her face with the back of her hand. "I need to see her. I need to apologize and find out what I can do to help."

"What do you have to apologize for?" asked Ken and Jake at the same time.

"For not recognizing her." Mary sighed. "I should have recognized her. I feel like I let her down, like I let her family down." She whispered, "Even though they're dead."

Ken spoke up quickly. "How could you know who she was? She was just a kid the last time you saw her, and a lot's happened since then. Don't beat yourself up about this. You are not at fault. Do not blame yourself. I won't let you blame yourself. Blame the goddamn asshole who did it."

"Mary," interrupted Jake, "it's a good thing you didn't recognize her. Think about it for a minute. What would you have done if you had? Called your mom to get some information and then tried to reach her aunt, right? And then what? Devlin was in no condition to defend herself against this guy last night. He would have claimed she was a runaway, a juvenile delinquent, that whatever happened to her happened on the streets. If she was even conscious and understood what was happening, she might have been too scared to speak up, too scared of what he'd do to her when he got her home." Jake ran his hands through his hair. "I looked into her eyes when we wheeled her out of the back room of that Kmart. I can tell you for a fact she gave me a first name only for a reason. Even then, sick as she was, I had to pull it out of her. From the looks of things, I'm guessing she went through a lot to get away from him, and if you'd recognized her, you'd have sent her right back to him."

Mary raised a hand to her mouth. “You’re right. I didn’t even think of that. Oh my God, that would have been terrible. Oh God...” Mary’s voice trailed off.

“So, what do we do now?” asked Kenneth. “I still think you should come home.”

“No,” answered Mary, “I’m actually supposed to be on duty in the ER. I only left because Shauna showed up with that teacher. I’m surprised they haven’t paged me yet.”

“I’m going to spend some time with Devlin, if she’s awake,” said Jake, “before the cops descend on her. Could be rough.”

“I’d like to come with you. I guess I told Shauna I would anyway. Ken, would you...”

“Yeah, I’ll talk to Peters. I passed him on my way here. He was in medical records. I’ll ask him. I doubt he’ll mind. He’s trying to get back into your good graces anyway.” Kenneth grinned and nuzzled the top of her head with his chin. “And then, you’re coming home with me.”

“No argument from me.” Mary stood on her tiptoes and, with a soft hand on each side of Ken’s face, drew him down and planted a kiss on his mouth.

Ken winked at Jake as he strode from the room.

* * * *

Jake and Mary entered the ICU, heading to Devlin’s cubicle. Her bed was empty, and the oxygen mask lay on the pillow. Jake stopped dead in his tracks. His chest felt as cold as ice, and he could sense Mary’s panic as if it was his own.

“Where’s the patient?” asked Mary in a voice directed to all staff in the vicinity, pointing at the empty bed. “Where is she?”

“Right here,” answered Amy, dripping from head to toe as she unclamped Devlin’s IVs and turned on the pumps with one hand while she supported a freshly showered and shampooed Devlin with the other. “Now if you wouldn’t mind getting her into bed, I need to find some dry scrubs. I do believe my shoes are squishing.”

Devlin stared at them both, stunned, recognition in her eyes when they lit on Mary’s face. Her knees began to buckle. Amy turned quickly to grab

her while Mary hurried to her side, but Jake was there in two strides. He'd already swung the girl up into his arms. Cradling her against his chest, a "rules be damned" look on his face, he carried her toward the hospital bed. Mary trailed after them with the IV pump.

Amy cranked the oxygen up to six liters and handed Jake the mask. She headed out the door, the rubber soles of her shoes squeaking loudly with the words, "I'll be right back."

Jake took a good look at Devlin. She was just a skinny kid, yet he knew she would become a beautiful young woman. Her large almond-shaped aquamarine eyes were wide set, framed by lovely long, thick lashes. The kind of fairy lashes he'd only seen on a newborn foal. Her eyes were old. These were most definitely not the eyes of a child. When he saw them fill with tears, Jake knew deep down in his bones that he'd do everything in his power to protect her from hurting like this ever again.

Devlin began to cough without pause. Mary called for Amy, ordering to give ten milligrams of Valium IV and call the respiratory therapist, stat. She asked for an ET tube. He sat the girl up and leaned her forward while Mary cranked up the oxygen and pressed the mask tightly to her face.

* * * *

Despite her struggle to breathe, Devlin wondered what Mary's appearance meant. Mary Lyman, her grandparents' neighbor, was the last person she expected to see in her hospital room. Had she been identified? Why on earth would someone call Mary? Devlin remembered the doctor caring for her in the emergency room had been named Mary. Mary was her doctor. Seeking Mary's eyes, she peered over the mask. Mary looked back. Devlin knew she'd been recognized.

"Oh God," Devlin moaned, ripping off her oxygen mask. She covered her face with her hands. "Who else knows?" Tears spilled down her cheeks, and she was powerless to stop them. Racked by shaking sobs, Devlin began to cough uncontrollably. Then there was a big, warm body leaning across her bed, pulling her into strong arms, rocking her, stroking her hair.

"It's okay," he crooned. The voice in her ear was low, comforting, and confident. "Your uncle can't hurt you now. He won't ever hurt you again."

“Devlin,” Mary’s voice was firm. “I need you to calm down, slow your breathing. Concentrate, Dev. Look at me, and concentrate on my voice. You’re going to be okay. I’m going to get you a breathing treatment, and I’m giving you a mild sedative. Slow down your breathing, Dev. Slow down.”

Devlin tried to look up at Mary, but her eyes were streaming, and she couldn’t catch her breath. She pointed to the hollow of her throat, shaking her head. When Mary looked at her neck, Devlin knew she understood, that she saw the pink tracheotomy scar.

Devlin shook her head again, unable to speak.

“I’m not going to trach you, Devlin, but I may have to intubate you. It will be temporary. You understand that? Temporary.”

Devlin nodded. She leaned back against Jake. Closing her eyes, she felt him nestle her into the hollow of his shoulder.

* * * *

Despite the fact that he knew exactly what was going on, that he himself had intubated her the day before, Jake felt helpless, out of control. It was a damn uncomfortable feeling. Jake McKenna was never out of control.

Amy placed the endotracheal intubation set on the bedside table. She was injecting the Valium when the respiratory therapist arrived, pushing a ventilator. Devlin’s O₂ sats were dropping quickly. Once the Valium hit, her head fell forward, and Mary instructed Jake to lay her down. Amy assisted with the intubation as Jake held Devlin’s hand, murmuring in her ear. Just like the night before, the ET tube slid in easily. As the Respiratory Therapist attached the ventilator, Devlin began to struggle. Jake held her while Amy administered another ten milligrams of Valium. Amy hooked Devlin back up to the heart monitor and wrapped a blood pressure cuff around her arm.

“Vitals every fifteen minutes. Call Dr. Walters,” ordered Mary, all business now. “I want her kept sedated and...” Her voice drifted away as she left the room to go over medication orders.

Jake could hear Amy apologizing for allowing Devlin up, but Mary stopped her.

“It’s not your fault,” he heard her say. “It’s mine.”

First chance he got, Jake would call Ken to take Mary home.

* * * *

Mike, Beth Ellis, and Shauna stood beside Amy in the doorway to Devlin's ICU cubicle. Jake rested his head on one hand, his eyes closed. His other hand cradled Devlin's.

"I was hoping to ask her some questions," said Shauna in a low voice. "What happened? I thought Dr. Workman said she was coming around."

"She was. She crashed. We had to sedate her and put her on a ventilator," answered Amy.

Shauna turned to Miss Ellis. "Can you identify her?"

"Yes, that's Devlin Barre." She turned to Mike, distraught. Without hesitation, he folded her in his arms and drew her away from the room.

"Where's Dr. Workman?" Shauna asked Amy.

"She was exhausted," said Amy. "Her husband took her home. Dr. Walters is here if you want to speak with him."

Shauna looked around the ICU but didn't see anyone who looked like a physician.

"Please," she said, a bit taciturn.

The victim, her only witness at this point, looked pretty bad. Shauna sighed. She wanted an arrest. It would be a lot easier to prove her case if the witness survived to point the finger at her assailant, though if she didn't, it would become a murder investigation, the assault the direct or indirect cause of her death. After she got an update from Dr. Walters, she wanted to talk with Jake, find out if the girl said anything before they knocked her out. Then she planned to call in the troops and head over to the Franz's' home. She intended to take the asshole down to the station house and question him herself. She'd already sent Scott for a search warrant.

Amy led Dr. Walters from one of the other cubicles and introduced him to Shauna.

"The patient appears to have suffered a setback, what looks like possible sepsis, probably pneumococcal pneumonia. It's very serious." He was blunt. "The one thing she has in her favor is her youth, that and the fact that Mr. McKenna seems to have taken an interest in her. His presence could make a difference."

"I'd like her to live," said Shauna, handing him her card. "Call me if she wakes up."

Dr. Walters shot her an accusing look, then accepted her card. "Don't we all?" He dismissed her, disappearing into Devlin's cubicle with Amy, drawing the curtain behind them.

Jake walked out of the cubicle. He leaned against the doorframe, his handsome face drawn, tired. Shauna caught his attention and motioned him over to the ICU exit.

"Did she say anything?"

"Not much, she didn't have time. But she did seem to recognize Mary." Jake paused to rub his eyes. "She looked terrified. I think she assumed her uncle was right behind us."

"All right, I'm outta here. Like I told Dr. Walters, call if she wakes up." Shauna headed through the double doors.

Chapter Four

For three days, Devlin hovered near death, aware of only two things. The first was a deep sense of acceptance. She relinquished control of her life and her death. Whatever happened, happened. She didn't really care. The second thing Devlin felt deep in her bones. It was the awareness of a constant, passionate, warm, very male presence at her side. Despite the disinterest she felt for her own body lying in the hospital bed, Devlin knew without a doubt that the man sitting next to her was Jake. He alone was the string that connected her, like a kite, to her physical self. His will held on to Devlin with a force she couldn't deny. Every time she tried to leave, Jake called her back. For three long days, she felt him pour his own strength, his hope, and his courage into her. If Devlin managed to open her eyes, she knew it would be because of Jake.

* * * *

Jake ran his fingers through his hair as Mary listened to Devlin's lungs and checked her pressures. He hated the fact that they'd had to insert a central line, but he understood the need. The past three days had been hell. He felt like he was the only thing keeping Devlin here. He desperately wanted her to fight for herself, but it was as if the fight had gone out of her, as if any desire to live had vanished. He fought her battle for her, holding her here, giving her as much of his strength as he could. He tried his best to reignite the fires within her.

From what Mary told him, back in Iowa Devlin had been a little hellion, always running wild and getting into trouble with Mary's brothers. She'd been the leader of the pack, even though she and Mary's brother Jason were the two youngest. Mary mentioned the time Devlin and Jason were six years old and they had somehow managed to set up a jumping course for their

ponies using bushel baskets, bales of hay, and giant pumpkins stolen from the pumpkin patch behind the barn. Mary's mom noticed the strange quiet, but nobody caught on until the two of them were already flying down the cornfield on the backs of their bay ponies, without saddles or bridles, out of control, squealing in hilarity at the top of their lungs.

Mary's father and her brother Mark had taken off after them, yelling, "Whoa! Whoa!" Mary said the amazing thing was that both managed to jump the entire course and stay on until they reached the other side, where they both fell off in a fit of giggles. Mary's dad caught up to them and tanned their little hides.

Mary claimed that was the Devlin she remembered—the exuberant, intelligent, mischievous little girl who kept Mary's brothers enthralled with her wild antics, and all the adults on edge, wondering what she'd get into next. That was the Devlin Jake ached to know, not this shadow-girl who'd lost all desire to live. Jake shook his head, confused by his feelings. It was odd to care so much about a complete stranger, but he felt somehow connected to her and fiercely protective of her. Above all, he wanted life to return to her eyes. He wanted her to have a reason to live. Even if he had to make one up for her, especially now, with what Mary told him about the accident and what he'd learned two days ago from Mike.

Mary ruffled his hair, interrupting his thoughts.

"You look like shit," she said, affection in her voice. "You need some sleep."

"How's she doing?"

"Holding her own. No worse, maybe a little better."

"She loses any more weight, she's going to disappear."

Mary laid her hand on his shoulder. "Actually, it's you I'm worried about right now." She paused. "You don't even know her, Jake. Look at you. You've barely slept. You haven't eaten. You need to go home, shower and shave, and get a good night's sleep. Honestly Jake, I don't understand why you are doing this to yourself."

Jake looked up at Mary, the misery he felt etching lines around his eyes, straining his attempt at a smile.

"I don't understand either, darlin'," he sighed. "I have no clue what this is about. All I know is that I need to stay. Whatever happens to her, I need to be here."

"My mother gets in this afternoon. She's coming straight to the hospital. I want you to promise me that when she gets here, you'll go home for a few hours. Promise me," insisted Mary.

"Yeah, I'll think about it. I promise I'll think about it." He stood up and stretched his long body. "I'm gonna get a cup of coffee. Want anything?"

"No, thanks," answered Mary. "I need to order a few more tests. I'm encouraged by the results of her blood work this morning. I think I'm going to decrease the sedation. I'd like to see if she'll come around so we can start to wean her off the ventilator. I do not want her trached again."

Grabbing some coffee in the cafeteria, Jake was surprised to find Mike sitting at a table with the teacher, Beth Ellis. He flipped a chair around and sat down facing them, leaning over the back of the chair, elbows resting on the table distractedly.

"Well you look like shit," said Mike affably.

"Thanks. You're the second person who's told me that in the past twenty minutes." He nodded politely to Beth. "What are you two doing here? Don't you-all work?"

Mike rolled his eyes. "It's Sunday."

"Goddamn." Jake had definitely lost track of time. "So why are you here on Sunday?"

"Beth wanted to come by and see how Devlin's doing," Mike answered. "And I wanted to see if I could drag you out of here."

From beneath lowered eyes, Jake glanced from his friend to Beth Ellis. This was an unexpected development. He took a closer look at Miss Ellis. She was slender and softly feminine, not Mike's usual buxom, in-your-face type. But she had warm brown eyes, a sensitive, expressive mouth, and lovely cheekbones. His friend could definitely do worse. Jake just barely managed to conceal a grin as a very serious Beth laid a tentative hand on his arm.

"How is she?"

"Holding on, just barely."

"I want to be here for her. She doesn't have any family now, and the poor girl doesn't even know it."

"It's tough." Mike pushed his coffee cup aside, slipping an arm around Beth's shoulders.

“Any word on the uncle?” asked Jake, anger simmering beneath the simple question.

“Last I heard, the FBI traced him to Singapore. Looks like he hopped a flight to Bangkok. He can disappear for a long time over there. At least he can try.”

“Can they track the money? Is he accessing his accounts?” asked Jake.

Mike stroked his chin thoughtfully. “He liquidated everything. Took his clients’ money, his accounts, savings, stocks, everything. Looks like he set up some sort of dummy corporation, kept the money offshore. The FBI was able to freeze a couple of the accounts, but I don’t know. I’m guessing he has some stashed that they don’t know about.”

“Did he touch any of Devlin’s money?”

“No, he can’t. It’s all in a trust, held in an account for her by an attorney in Iowa. She gets it when she turns eighteen. According to Shauna, from what the lawyer said, Franz tried last year, tried every way he could to get control of the assets, but her grandparents had built in some protections. They didn’t trust the guy. In fact, I’d venture to say they hated him. When they died, the aunt got a one-time lump sum of twenty-five thousand dollars. That’s it. Devlin got the rest, all the life insurance, all accounts, the farm, her parents’ home in Grinnell—it’s all hers.”

“I doubt she has any idea,” commented Beth. “Who’s making arrangements for her aunt’s body?”

“Dr. Workman’s mother,” answered Jake. “She’ll be cremated, then flown back to Iowa and buried with her family.”

“What a mess, huh?” sighed Mike.

“Yeah, what a mess,” agreed Jake, wondering, as he had for the past two days, how the news would affect Devlin. He was afraid her aunt’s murder might be the last straw. How much could one young girl be expected to handle?

“Mike,” Jake began as a thought occurred to him, “what caused the accident, the accident that killed her family?”

“I’m not sure. Mary indicated that Devlin’s grandfather lost control of his van at high speed.”

“Has Shauna looked into it yet? Five people died. There must have been an investigation.”

"And you want to know because you're thinking that, if everyone had died, the aunt, or rather, the uncle, would have gotten his hand on both estates," finished Mike. "I imagine she's checking. I'll see what I can find out."

"Why now?" Jake blurted out. "Why'd he kill her now?"

"It was my fault," Beth cried. "It was because I went to the house asking about Devlin, after she'd missed several days of school. I checked with the attendance office. Nobody had called in. I was worried. Her uncle answered the door. He said she was sick and slammed it in my face. He must have panicked and thought I'd call Child Protective Services again, so he killed her." Beth buried her face in Mike's jacket.

"No, that isn't it. You had nothing to do with it. I can't discuss the details, but I can tell you for a fact that he didn't kill his wife because you came by looking for Devlin." Mike wrapped his arm around her.

"Can you at least tell me when she died?" asked Jake.

"The coroner thinks it was the day we brought Devlin in, sometime in the late morning, early afternoon," Mike answered. "We still don't know exactly when Devlin left the house."

Jake looked puzzled. "My question stands. Why then? Why kill her then? Did he find out Devlin was here? How would that be possible? Devlin certainly wasn't talking. Did her aunt try to go to the police to report her missing? Did he panic? I don't get it."

Mike gave his friend a sharp look. "I don't know. If they catch the son of a bitch, we'll find out. Or when Devlin can talk, maybe she can shed some light on the situation. Until then, we don't have much to go on."

"I thought Devlin kept quiet to protect herself," said Jake. "But now I'm thinking maybe she kept quiet to protect her aunt." He pushed his coffee cup aside and stood up. "Later."

Mike ran his thumb absently around the rim of his cup. "You may be right. Damn, you may be exactly right."

* * * *

Jake was long gone before her mother appeared in the living room, looking her usual sophisticated self. By that time, Janice was sobbing incoherently. Though Bitsy Matheson wasn't known for being particularly

affectionate, she actually handed Janice a box of tissues and sat down in a chair across from her. She waited for Janice to speak, twisting the big diamond ring on her finger with impatience. Like a good girl, Janice told her everything. Bitsy sighed.

“Well, you know what you have to do, don’t you?”

“What?” choked out Janice. “Jake’s not going to marry me, and I refuse to discuss this with Jim Peters!”

“Of course not,” said Bitsy. “Don’t be silly. You’ll have an abortion. It’s the only thing you can do.”

“But I don’t, I mean, I haven’t even thought...” stuttered Janice.

“That’s always been your problem, Janice. You don’t think. You just act. I’ll call John Duarte. I’m sure he’ll be able to fit you in today or tomorrow.”

“What if I don’t want an abortion?” Janice flared, suddenly defiant.

“Janice,” said her mother calmly, her voice almost sugary, “be reasonable. If you have a baby now, your father will never be able to hold his head up in this town again. It would ruin him. You wouldn’t want to do that, would you?” She paused. “His little darling? Pregnant? Out of wedlock? That would just about break his heart. Think of someone besides yourself for once. You’ve already disappointed him so deeply. How can you even think of doing it again?”

Janice felt hot tears on her cheeks, tears of shame and embarrassment, the same tears she’d shed as a child when she’d disappointed her parents. Starting with the disappointment of being born a girl instead of the hoped-for son and heir. All the fight went out of her.

“I’ll tell you what,” her mother said conspiratorially. “We don’t even have to tell him. We can take care of this little problem ourselves, just us girls. Your father never has to know a thing.” She drew a finger across her lips. “Maybe we can go to the club for a late lunch after, if you’re feeling up to it,” she added.

Janice nodded.

“Now that’s settled.” Her mother seemed to dismiss the entire situation from her mind. “How is it that Mr. McKenna brought you home?”

Janice had wondered how her mother did it, this ability she had to ruthlessly compartmentalize everything. Whatever didn’t fit into her neat world simply vanished into the ether. Janice envied her mother’s capacity to

dismiss the world's imperfections so easily. She wished, not for the first time in her life, that her mother could dismiss Janice's imperfections as easily as she did everything else that didn't suit her. She shook her head to clear her thoughts.

"What did you ask?"

"Mr. McKenna," repeated her mother, "why did he bring you here if you're no longer together?"

"Oh, he felt sorry for me, I guess."

"Does he know?" her mother asked.

"No, he doesn't know. He was just concerned because of the breakup. And we had a tough night. We both stayed late to help out a runaway."

"Oh?" Her mother seemed interested. Janice was surprised. Her mother never took much of an interest in her work.

"Yes," Janice replied, eager for the opportunity to have an actual conversation with her mother. "The paramedics brought in a teenage girl. She was in pretty bad shape. She had pneumonia and she was, well, she'd been beaten and raped."

"Really?" Her mother raised an eyebrow. "You don't say. I certainly hope it wasn't a local girl."

"I have no idea," said Janice. "We didn't get a name. Well, just a first name, but it wasn't a name I recognized."

"What was it, dear?"

Janice looked at her mother in surprise. "What was what?"

"The name," said her mother, "not that it matters." She shrugged. "These runaways must be a dime a dozen."

"Oh. I guess it won't hurt to tell you. It's just a first name. She said Devlin. That's all I know." Janice noticed her mother stare off in the distance for a second, then blink, just once.

"Well, dear," said her mother, rising from her chair, "I'd better make those arrangements. Why don't you have Cook make you a cup of tea? I sent Louise to freshen up your old room if you want to lie down." She patted Janice's knee perfunctorily. "I'll let you know what time John can see us. And don't worry about your father. He's in London at a conference."

Dr. Duarte saw Janice the next morning. She came home and went directly to bed, the promised late lunch forgotten. Here she'd stayed. She

hadn't seen her mother since she drove her home from the appointment, although she'd heard her call for Louise a short time ago.

Janice couldn't bring herself to get out of the bed in her old bedroom, in her parents' home. She'd lain there for two days. Somehow she had thought having an abortion would be easier than it was. She hadn't wanted a baby in the first place. She just wanted Jake. Now she'd lost him and, in fact, lost anything that could possibly bind her to him. But as her mother kept insisting, what choice did she have? It wasn't Jake's baby, and she didn't want to marry Jim Peters, even if he would consider it.

Jake hadn't said a word in the car after they'd left the restaurant. Other than the hum of the engine, there had been complete silence. What was there to say, Janice asked. No matter how hard she tried to pretend otherwise, her relationship with Jake was over. The truth was as plain as the nose on her face.

He'd been kind. That was the worst part. He'd parked her car in the long drive, helped her climb out, then escorted her to the front of the house and used her keys to unlock the front door. He seated her in the living room, kissed her on the cheek, and asked the housekeeper, Louise, to let her mother know that she was there. Then he turned away and left, closing the heavy door without a sound.

Janice doubted she could show her face in the ER ever again. She'd already requested two weeks of sick leave. She knew Jake wouldn't say anything, no matter what he suspected, but to have to see him constantly? She didn't think she could handle that. Maybe she'd transfer back up to ICU. And go to days. Because her father was a big deal at the hospital, Janet assumed it would be easy to get on day shift.

Janice turned over to face the wall. In her mind, she saw Jake with the girl, that runaway, the way he protected her, how he treated her like she was made of spun glass. Why didn't he treat her like that? *Sick*, she thought to herself. *She's only a teenager. What's the big deal about a stupid runaway?* They came into the ER all the time, a dime a dozen. That's what her mom had said. *A dime a dozen*. Janice barely even remembered why she and her mother were talking about it.

There was a knock on Janice's door, and her mother entered the room. She seemed perturbed.

"Janice, your father is coming home this evening, and I don't want him to see you like this. Get up, dear, and make yourself presentable. Better yet, why not return to your own house? We wouldn't want him to wonder what's wrong now, would we? I'm certain you'll feel much better in your own place."

Janice continued to stare at the wall.

"I've got to go out, darling, but I know you'll be just fine. Come over for dinner next Friday. We'll have roast chicken, your favorite. I'll have your father call tomorrow. Pull yourself together, dear."

Just like that, Janice was dismissed. She was twenty-six years old. She should be used to it by now. But she wasn't. Jake had been her hope. When she was with him, she felt like a different person, pretty enough, smart enough, funny enough, sexy enough, good enough. But he cared more about a teenage runaway in a hospital bed. Now she was just Janice Matheson, the daughter born by mistake, the child who should have been aborted.

* * * *

Two days later, Jake got a call from Mary that Devlin was awake and breathing on her own. The central line had been pulled, and her white count was approaching normal. Mary's mother, Delores, had arrived and taken things in hand, greeting Jake with a lecture about his own health before shoving him out of his chair, sending him home for a shower and a good night's sleep. Jake had to agree with her. After crashing for twelve straight hours, he felt back in control.

The first thing he did when he woke up was contact his supervisor and request a leave of absence. He had some time coming anyway. The plan was always to head back to Montana in the spring, help with calving, and then return to Missoula and the Bob Marshall Range and his new job.

He didn't exactly know how things would play out with Devlin, but over the past few days, he'd come up with a plan. If nothing else, he figured she'd need a place to heal, and he couldn't think of any place better or safer or more beautiful than his family's ranch. He could keep a close eye on her, his mom and dad would care for her as if she were their own, and in a place as isolated as the Crazies, a stranger like William Franz would stick out like a sore thumb. Let him come. That was Jake's territory, and he'd be

goddamned if Franz would get anywhere near the ranch or Devlin. He just had to get Devlin through the next few weeks. Jake had no illusions. The next few weeks would be hell.

Mike had asked, *“What’s the deal? Why are you taking this so personally?”*

Jake had no answer for him. He didn’t know himself. That was the only answer her could give Mike. He wasn’t obsessed with Devlin, at least not in the way it seemed. Jake didn’t want anyone getting the wrong impression, but he felt something for her. Something he couldn’t quite put into words. Maybe it was the haunted look he’d seen in her eyes when he leaned over her gurney. Maybe it was that her life had nearly been stolen from her, not once but twice. Maybe it was the fact that she seemed to trust him. He doubted she’d trusted anyone in over a year. Jake sensed that, after this, she was going to need a reason to live. He intended to make sure she found one. In any case, Jake figured the least he could do was offer Devlin a safe haven for as long as she needed one. He’d stay with her these next few weeks, help her get things settled, get her up to the ranch, and get on with his life.

Jake threw on a pair of faded jeans and pulled a black tee shirt over his still-damp hair. It was snowing, so he added a wool sweater, stepped into his worn hiking boots. Grabbing his leather jacket, he headed out to his pickup. Mary said that Shauna and Scott were coming by to talk to Devlin in about an hour. Jake intended to get there first. He’d already called Mike to give him the heads-up. Mike said if he could get away, he’d stop by too. Jake didn’t ask what Mike was getting away from. His shift didn’t start until 7 p.m. Jake figured it was none of his business, but he couldn’t suppress a grin. He knew whatever Mike was getting away from had big brown eyes. Mike had Devlin to thank for that fortunate turn of events.

* * * *

Jake entered the ICU and found Mary at the desk, chatting with Ray Walters. Though Ray Walters wore a gruff exterior, in reality, he was a kind, old-fashioned sort of country doctor. Jake knew he’d grown quite protective of Devlin over the past week. He’d dropped by at odd hours, popping his head into the room, asking Jake if he’d noticed any change in her condition, checking with the nurses frequently. Jake guessed he wanted

to be present in case Devlin crashed again. News of her aunt's murder would very likely be devastating, and they all knew it.

"Mind if I go in?" asked Jake.

"Since when do you ask?" teased Mary.

"Since I don't know how much she knows."

Mary and Dr. Walters both sighed.

"She suspects," commented Dr. Walters. "She doesn't know anything for sure."

Mary leaned her elbows on the desk and looked down for a moment. "My mom and I have talked about it. We don't know who should be the one to tell her, but neither of us wants it to be the police."

"How would your mom feel if you and I were right there with her?" Jake asked. "I've been with Devlin during the worst of it, and maybe I could say the words, but she really has no idea who I am."

Mary considered. "My mom thinks she can tell her, but no matter who says the words, it won't be easy for Devlin to hear them."

"Well, standing here isn't gonna make it any easier. Let's get it over with."

"Mind if I tag along, just in case?" asked Dr. Walters. "I'll keep my mouth shut."

"Please," Mary responded, "Devlin wouldn't have made it without you. Honestly, I can't thank you enough." She gave him a quick hug. He blushed, teasing her with an "aw shucks" look.

Jake heard them trailing behind as he strode to the door of Devlin's cubicle. She lay on her side, facing the door, hands folded beneath her cheek, eyes closed, sleeping peacefully. Jake smiled. Devlin must have managed a shower again, because someone, probably Delores, had braided Devlin's long hair, and the thick, wavy, wet auburn plait lay across her shoulder, the sheet damp beneath it.

As always, Jake was struck by her innocence and frailty and enraged by what was done to her. It was a visceral reaction, like someone had hit him in the gut every single time he saw her. He ached to run his fingers along her pale cheek, to smooth her unruly hair with his rough palm, to gather her in his arms and hold her close. He clenched his fists as he stepped forward into the room to physically stop from reaching for her. He reminded himself that

there was a big age difference between them, and he didn't want anyone getting the wrong impression. He wouldn't abuse Devlin's trust.

* * * *

Devlin opened her eyes and stretched a welcoming hand toward Jake. He was at her side in a heartbeat.

She took his big hand in hers. "Thank you," she said, her voice still raspy from the ET tube, "for staying with me."

"How did you know?" Jake seemed surprised.

"I felt you," Devlin answered, smiling up at him. Jake grinned back at her like a schoolboy.

"Anytime, darlin'," he answered. "Anytime."

* * * *

Despite the ever-present worry about her aunt, when Devlin opened her eyes and found Jake standing in the doorway looking at her with such open emotion on his face, she felt a surge of joy so strong that she reached for him without thinking. She had come back to life because he drew her back. And she didn't even know his last name. That was something she intended to remedy. Devlin's memories of the past week might be vague, but she knew Jake had been an integral part of everything she'd been through since she opened her eyes. She'd told him her name, and whether he knew it or not, whether he wanted it or not, she'd given him her heart.

"I'm Devlin Barre," she said, enjoying the feel of his rough, calloused hand in hers.

"Jake McKenna, ma'am," he answered, his thumb stroking the back of her hand. "Nice to meet you."

Devlin's youth and natural vivacity bubbled to the surface. She began to laugh. It might not be the most opportune moment, but she couldn't help it. Her mother had always laughed at the unexpected. When something awkward happened, something uncomfortable, but somehow funny too, her mom would practically, as her dad used to say, split a gut. She'd laugh so hard she'd roll on the floor, and pretty soon, the entire family would be laughing with her, and whatever it was didn't seem so awkward anymore.

Mary's mother, Delores, who had known Devlin's mother all her life, caught on immediately. Within seconds, she was laughing along with Devlin, grabbing at the box of tissues to wipe her eyes. Dr. Walters joined in and, finally, Mary.

Jake appeared confounded at first, but in the end, he couldn't seem to help himself. As if Devlin's laughter was contagious, he caught it as well. Before she knew it, he was leaning against the wall, laughing so hard he shook the glass window.

From beneath thick lashes, Devlin watched Jake let go of his control, throw back his head, and give himself over to the moment. This tall, rugged man had saved her life. She thought he was the most beautiful human being she'd ever seen. She knew she would be forever connected to him. Watching him laugh, his smile wide and white and wolfish, openly sexy, and utterly sincere, Devlin had an epiphany. She realized to the very core of her being that she loved this stranger. She knew, with the absolute clarity only trauma can elicit, that one day she would be with him, in every way a woman could be with a man.

When their laughter faded and an uncomfortable silence descended, Devlin decided she'd better take matters into her own hands.

"My aunt Caroline is dead."

No one answered immediately.

Delores placed a comforting hand on Devlin's arm. "Yes, honey, she's gone."

Devlin's expression went blank. She took a quick survey of the faces in the room, hating the pity she saw. The last thing she wanted was pity. Right now, she was poised on a tightrope, balanced between sanity and hysteria, and she had to stay perfectly still. Pity could tip her the wrong way. She glanced at Jake. If he felt sorry for her, she was lost. To Devlin's great relief, he appeared furious, furious enough to kill someone. With a sigh, she drew strength from his fury.

"Where is he?" she asked, relieved to hear only a slight hitch in her voice.

"Thailand, last anyone knew," answered Jake, not bothering to hide his anger.

Devlin heard a commotion at the desk as Shauna, her partner Scott, Mike, and Cherie, the Social Services officer, entered the ICU. Jake moved

closer to Devlin as Dr. Walters and Mary went to head off the troops. Mary's mother rose to her feet. Devlin slipped a tentative hand into Jake's, reassured when he squeezed back. ,

"Devlin," began Mary, "the police need to ask you some questions. Are you up to it?"

"Yes," answered Devlin, her voice quivering. "Tell me what happened to my aunt, and I'll do whatever I have to do to help you."

Shauna stepped forward, laying a tape recorder on the overbed table. Her voice compassionate, she said, "She was shot, once in the chest. The day you were brought into the hospital. She died instantly."

The room was silent for a moment, all eyes on her. Even Jake waited for her to crumble, but she didn't. Instead, she stared straight ahead. "It's my fault. If I hadn't gotten sick, she'd still be alive."

Mary stepped up. "Devlin, you know better than that. Carolyn's death is not your fault."

Cherie started to interrupt, but Shauna spoke up first. "It appears your uncle killed her. We assume he found out you were here, although we don't know how. As far as we can tell, he didn't find out from anyone who was involved in your case. We didn't even identify you until the next morning."

Devlin pulled her hand from Jake's. Drawing her knees up to her chest, she wrapped her arms around them, resting her chin on her hands. Jake perched next to her on the edge of the bed.

Devlin took a deep breath. "She died because I didn't get back there in time to kill him first."

Other than the ping of the heart monitor, the room was absolutely silent.

"There's an old saying my dad mentioned once," continued Devlin. "I don't remember right now where it came from. It goes like this, 'If your enemy is coming to kill you at eight, get up at seven and kill him first.' I intended to go back and kill him. I thought I had more time. I was wrong."

For a long time, nobody said a word.

"I need to record your statement," interrupted Shauna, breaking the silence. "Are you feeling up for that?"

Devlin nodded. "Can I ask a favor before we start?"

"Of course," replied Shauna.

"There are too many people in the room," she said. , Nervous, she pulled at the sheet.

"Okay people, clear out," ordered Shauna.

Jake started to get off the bed, but Devlin tugged him back down and held tight to his hand.

"Stay," she whispered. "Just don't look at me, that's all I ask. You too." She motioned at Mike. "I remember you from the first night in the emergency room. You're the officer who found me."

Mike introduced himself. Devlin took the hand he offered and thanked him.

Mary and Dr. Walters exited the cubicle. Mary's mother gave Devlin's arm a comforting pat before she followed them, pulling the curtain closed behind her. Shauna clicked on the tape recorder.

"Start with the accident," she instructed.

"My dad had a year's sabbatical, and he was taking us to France. He was researching the Duchy of Aquitaine. It was his area of expertise," Devlin explained with a shrug. "His obsession, I guess you'd say. I'm named for the woman he considered the most influential in the medieval world, Eleanor of Aquitaine. My dad was fascinated by her, and he planned to research the transfer of power, real power, through a daughter as opposed to a son. We'd packed up and spent the night at my grampa's farm. He and my gramma were going to drive us to the airport in Omaha the morning. Our flight to Chicago left at nine on a Sunday morning, so we needed to be on our way by six."

"Why didn't your parents use your vehicle? Why did your grandparents drive you?" interrupted Shauna.

"My parents left our car in Grinnell for a visiting professor to use. We were doing a house trade—his family would live in our house, and we'd live in theirs. So, my grampa drove up to Grinnell and picked us up. We planned to take my grandparents' station wagon to the airport, but when we got up that morning, it wouldn't start. My dad and my grampa tried jumper cables, but the engine still wouldn't turn over, and it was getting late, so my grampa pulled out his old blue van. The only other vehicle was the pickup, but six people wouldn't fit into the pickup, so we took everything out of the station wagon, threw it in the back of the van, and left."

"Where did your grandfather keep the van parked?"

"It was usually parked behind the barn, under an overhang. He didn't drive it much. Mostly my gramma and grampa used the pickup around the

farm and the station wagon for groceries, errands, stuff like that. He just kept the van in case of emergencies.”

“So it was parked outside?”

“Yes.”

“Could you see it from the house? I mean, if you were to look out the windows of the house, would you have a view of the van?”

“No,” replied Devlin, frowning. “You could only see the van if you were on the back side of the barn or if you were walking or driving up from the pasture. You couldn’t see it from the house or from the road to the house.”

Devlin realized what Shauna was getting at. She paused for a moment, her eyes glued to the far wall of the cubicle.

“We were late, and my grampa was speeding. I was sitting on the driver’s side in the third row with my brother, David. A car pulled up next to us, in the lane next to us.

“I-I thought it was going to pass, but then it swerved into us, swerved right into the van. I felt it clip the side right below my seat. I banged my head on the window. My grampa tried to avoid the other car, and he hit the brakes, but nothing happened. I could tell.” She repeated, “He hit the brakes, and nothing happened. I remember the van skidding sideways, and then it rolled. My seat belt broke. That’s the last thing I remember until I woke up in the hospital.”

“Devlin, do you remember anything about the other car? The one that hit you?”

“The police in Omaha asked me about it already,” she replied, feeling very tired. “You can read the police report.”

“I read it,” said Shauna, “but I’d like to hear about it in your own words.”

“It was an old brown sedan. Four door, like a Delta Eighty-Eight or something. If you read the police report, then you know they never found it. And nobody got a license number. One witness said the car didn’t have any plates.”

“Could you see who was in the car?”

“No,” answered Devlin, “I could only see that there wasn’t anyone in the passenger side of either the front or back seat. I couldn’t see the driver. The van was too high.”

"Tell me about when your aunt brought you to Denver." Shauna changed the subject.

"I had only met my uncle a couple of times before," said Devlin. "My aunt Carolyn usually visited without him. I knew my mom and my grandparents didn't like him, but they never said why."

"When I first got here, he was okay. He didn't speak much to me and wasn't home very often. I was still getting physical therapy and sleeping quite a bit, so I spent a lot of time in my room. One morning I heard yelling. He was yelling terrible things at my aunt. I tried to stay out of it, I did, but I heard her crying, and then I heard a slap and another one and a thud, like somebody fell against something. Then the front door slammed. I got downstairs as fast as I could, but I was still on crutches. I found my aunt sitting on the floor in the front hallway, holding her head, blood all over the side of her face and her hands, running down her neck onto her white silk robe. I tried to get her to call the police. I tried to convince her to see her doctor, but she refused. She said if she did, if anyone found out, he'd kill her. She said no one would believe her anyway."

"Why did she think no one would believe her?"

"Because she said she'd attempted suicide a couple of times and been hospitalized, in a mental hospital. She pulled up her sleeves and showed me her wrists. They were scarred. I didn't know. She always wore long sleeves. He told her nobody would believe her because she was crazy. He had her convinced of that. I didn't know what to do. I helped her get cleaned up, and she went to bed."

"After that day, he knew. I don't think my aunt told him, but he knew. He came to my room one night. He sat on the edge of my bed, saying he wanted to talk to me. At first he acted sweet, but when I wouldn't even look at him and scooted away from him, he grabbed my ankle and held me there. He said..."

Devlin had to stop for a moment. She felt close to breaking down. Just then Jake leaned in, barely touching her, and she drew strength from him.

Devlin took a deep breath.

"He said if I did anything, told anyone, he'd cut her apart, one piece at a time, in front of me. Then he said that, just in case I was thinking of running away, I should know that he'd hunt me down like a dog and beat me to death. He said, 'That is my solemn promise to you.' And then he smiled and

patted my cheek. He got up, walked to the door of my room, turned out the light, and closed the door. I knew when that door clicked shut that he meant every word.”

“Why did you run away then?” asked Shauna.

“Because I realized it didn’t matter,” she answered. “I was dead either way. Once my aunt told me about the money, I knew the day I turned eighteen I was dead. That’s what he wanted, the money, all of it. There was only one way for him to get his hands on it.”

Shauna tapped her fingers on the overbed table. “Do you really think your aunt would have allowed that? Wouldn’t she have come forward, tried to stop him?”

“No, she was powerless. She couldn’t stop him. She’d been beaten down for too long. She was going to let me do it. It was up to me to stop him.”

Devlin looked away at that moment, toward the door, thinking of bolting. Then she remembered where she was and why, and she sat in silence, staring at her hands.

In the quiet that followed her statement, Devlin knew everyone was wondering how her aunt could let this happen. “I don’t think my aunt Carolyn was capable of thinking ahead. She couldn’t look any farther than the next day, maybe only the next hour. She was too afraid. What else could she have done? I was all she had left and...” Devlin buried her face in her hands and began to cry. “She was all I had.”

Devlin heard Shauna switch off the recorder, giving her time to compose herself. When at last Devlin stopped crying, she clicked it back on and asked, “What happened the night you left?”

Devlin ran her hands over her eyes, her cheeks still damp. “I came home from school, and he was beating her. She was on the kitchen floor, crying, all curled up in a ball, while he kicked her. I don’t know why. I don’t even know why he was home. I don’t know what had happened, but he was shouting at her, shouting about someone, a name, a woman’s name.”

Shauna interrupted. “Do you remember the name of the woman? Or what he was yelling about?”

“It sounded like Betsy, or Betty, or something like that. I don’t know for sure why he was so angry, but he was almost incoherent. His face was beet red, and he was practically screaming, spitting at her. Something my aunt

found or said to him, something to do with this woman. He just...He blew up, worse than ever before. I tried to drag her away from him, but he shoved me to the floor and kept kicking her. I think he'd been cutting wood in the backyard because he was wearing his work boots. My aunt kept her arms around her head and was moaning.

"There was a steak knife lying on the floor, near where I fell. I don't know why it was on the floor. Maybe my aunt had grabbed it. I picked it up and stabbed him in the leg, in the thigh. Just to stop him from kicking her. I wasn't trying to kill him. I just wanted to stop him from hurting her anymore.

"He howled at me. He grabbed my wrists really tight, shaking me, and I dropped the knife. He dragged me from the kitchen to the top of the basement stairs. He kicked the door open, pulling me headfirst down the stairs." Her eyes drifted to the corner again.

"It's weird, the things you notice," she said, "like his pants. His leg was bleeding. I could see a red circle spreading on his jeans like a flower, a chrysanthemum opening up. That's what I was thinking about as he dragged me down the stairs, a flower. Stupid, isn't it?" Devlin laughed while everyone else sat in silence. Only Shauna was able to meet her eyes.

"I can't..." Devlin stuttered. "I can't...Oh God, I can't..."

Shauna clicked the tape recorder off as Devlin's shoulders began to shake, her slender body racked by silent sobs. Feeling helpless and ashamed, she turned toward Jake. He opened his arms and drew her into a protective embrace. Without a second thought, Devlin buried her face in the warmth of his shoulder and cried as she hadn't cried since she woke in the hospital the year before to find herself alive and everyone she loved dead. Jake rubbed her back, stroked her hair, and crooned nonsense in her ear as he had done that first night. Devlin didn't know what he said, nor did she care. Like a drowning victim, she clung to the sound of his voice, her only lifeline in a stormy sea. Devlin's sobs subsided. She felt limp as an old dishrag.

"I can't get it out," she said, feeling desperate, trapped. "How can I say this? Help me. Please help me."

Jake looked into her eyes. Laying a hand on each of her shoulders, she knew he tried his best to reassure her. "I'm right here, Devlin. I'll stay right here. He won't get anywhere near you. I promised you it would be okay that

first night, and I intend to keep that promise. If anyone tries to hurt you, they have to go through me first.”

He lifted Devlin’s chin and looked directly into her eyes, adding, “No one blames you for what happened, to your aunt or to you. No one.”

“We’re here for you, Devlin,” echoed Mike.

“All of us,” added Shauna.

The Social Services officer, Cherie, spoke up for the first time. “Sometimes, the best way to say something you don’t want to say is to simply spit it out. You are carrying him around inside you, everywhere you go. You take it with you, what he did to you.”

Devlin lifted her eyes, giving Cherie her complete attention.

“Don’t give him that kind of power, Devlin. I’m not saying it will all go away if you say the words out loud, but I don’t think it will get any worse. Don’t keep him inside you. That’s what he wants. That’s what every person like him wants, power over you. Power over you, inside and out. That’s what he did to your aunt. Don’t give him that power. Throw him out. Throw the bastard out, Devlin.”

Devlin shook her head, clearing her thoughts. She felt her cheeks grow warm. Determination stiffened her spine, and she sat up straighter.

“You’re right. Saying it won’t make it any worse.” Devlin paused. “I’m sorry, I don’t know your name or why you’re here.”

“I’m Cherie, a social worker. The hospital called me when they realized you’d been raped. I was here the day you came in.”

Devlin felt Jake jump at Cherie’s words. She squeezed his arm, her touch too light for anyone else to notice. She wanted to reassure him, let him know she could handle this.

He’d been a pillar of strength, and now it occurred to her that she wasn’t being fair to him. He was a complete stranger, and here he was, supporting her through this ordeal, asking nothing in return. She’d come to depend upon him very quickly, and she wondered what that said about her. Was she being selfish? Then she felt him shift his body just slightly, as if to shelter her. Devlin felt tears in her eyes. His generosity overwhelmed her. The kindness of all these strangers gave Devlin the strength to tell the rest of her story. Clearing her throat, she pushed herself away from Jake and leaned back on the pillows.

“He dragged me down the stairs and threw me on the basement floor. When he let go of me, I tried to get away. I-I crawled away, but he began kicking at me, and I curled up in a ball to keep from getting hurt any worse than he was already hurting me. He started cursing at me, screaming about how my parents got everything, how my mom got everything and he got nothing. How my grandfather was a sorry old son of a bitch who should have died a long time ago. Then I saw him unbuckle his belt. At first I thought he was going to hit me with it, but he didn’t. He flipped me onto my back and sat on my chest so I couldn’t move. I tried to fight him, but he was too strong, and I couldn’t breathe. He grabbed my wrists again and wrapped his belt around them, tying them together. Then he...Then he...Then he pulled off my jeans, and he-he raped me.”

Devlin wrapped her arms around herself again.

“He was angry because it was so hard for him to-to...get in. It hurt. He...he...I can’t...I can’t say any more about it.”

“Go ahead and tell me what happened afterwards,” instructed Shauna.

“He rolled off me, stood up, and zipped his pants. I tried to roll away from him, but he stepped on me, on my leg, and he said that if I told anyone what he’d done, he’d kill my aunt. He said I could lie there and think about that. Then he said that he and I were starting a new chapter and I’d better get used to it. That I’d better get used to him. He went up the stairs and bolted the door behind him.”

Chapter Five

As he listened to Devlin's words, Jake had to stop himself from shaking with rage. He wanted to hunt down William Franz and rip him apart, make him suffer the way he'd made Devlin and her aunt suffer. He wasn't sure how much more he could hear before he'd have to punch something, or someone. He'd been taking care of accident victims for two years now. He'd seen his fair share of assaults, and his unit had been at a couple of murder scenes, but he'd always been able to put his work face on. Not this time.

Jake remembered the first time he saw a dead man. He was training with the sheriff's department search and rescue, and they'd gotten a call about some ice climbers stuck on a snowfield near Glacier. By the time they arrived, one of the climbers was still alive and barely holding on with a single ice axe and his crampons. The other had fallen several hundred feet to his death. If they'd been roped together, they'd both have died. While the 'copter plucked the climber from the side of the mountain, Jake went in below with the recovery unit. The guy had been smashed to a pulp on the rocks. Jake had always prided himself on his cast-iron stomach, but he spent the first few minutes on scene vomiting in a bush. It had hit him hard, just how fragile the human body is. He was young, twenty-one years old, and he'd never thought about death before, at least not that kind of death.

Jake had grown up on a ranch, and he knew things died. Cattle, horses, chickens. It was part of life. He and his dad had hunted when he was younger, and he knew how to kill and butcher a deer or an elk. They never killed for sport. It was meat, and around the ranch, nothing went to waste. Once he'd tagged along with Fish and Game on a hunt to kill a rogue grizzly that was going after newborn calves. He was sorry for the necessity of it, but the cattle were their livelihood. He was glad it only had to happen once.

But until he saw that man's broken body lying at the bottom of a crevasse, he'd never thought about how frail a human being is. It was a

punch in the gut. That's how Jake felt listening to Devlin tell her story, like he'd been punched in the gut. Human beings weren't supposed to treat each other this way. Intellectually, Jake knew they did, but that didn't make her words any easier to hear. After that first time, puking in the snow at the base of the cliff, Jake had made sure it was never personal. Well, now it was, whether he liked it or not. And there wasn't a single thing he could do to make it better.

Killing William Franz would make it better. Hunting him down like that rogue grizzly would make it a whole lot better. Jake hadn't enjoyed watching the bear die, but it was necessary. It had been the bear or his father's cattle. William Franz was something else altogether. He preyed upon helpless women. He was a monster and deserved whatever he got. Jake hoped the authorities in Thailand managed to track him down soon. Otherwise Devlin would be looking over her shoulder for the rest of her life. Jake wondered who else he might hurt, who else he might have involved, like this Betsy or Betty person. Was she another one of his victims?

Shauna's voice interrupted Jake's thoughts. "What did you do then?"

"I-I laid there. Just laid there. I couldn't think, couldn't move. After a while, I heard the front door slam and his car drive away. That noise sort of shook me, kind of brought me back to myself, I guess. The belt was still around my wrists, and I had to get it off. He'd been pulling it tight, but when he let go and got off me, it loosened up. I was able to use my teeth to get it off. I put my clothes back on and crawled up the stairs. The door was bolted, but I wanted to find out if my aunt was all right. I called to her, and she answered right away. I think she was sitting on the other side, on the kitchen floor. I asked if she could let me out, but she said he'd taken the key, and she didn't have another."

"We talked for a few minutes, and for once, she was clear, really clear, on what I needed to do. We both were. She said she would turn off the alarm system and shut off the motion sensors, you know, those automatic lights. If I could get out a window, no one would see me. I begged her to leave him, to come with me and go to the police, but she refused. She thought she could keep him from coming after me for a few days, stall him, and give me a chance to get away from him. I told her it was too risky. He'd be furious and hurt her. I wanted to kill him." Devlin paused, as if considering her words. "What I mean is, I wanted her to let me back in the house so I could get his

Smith and Wesson, and when he came home, I'd shoot him. I'm a good shot. I wouldn't miss. But she refused. She wouldn't let me back in."

"Where did he keep his gun?" asked Shauna.

"He had two, one in his office, in the top right-hand drawer of his desk. He kept the other in the nightstand on his side of the bed, in the top drawer. They were always loaded."

"How did you know about the guns?"

Devlin shrugged. "He bragged about what a good shot he was, and he talked about his favorite pistols. I looked for them. He didn't try to hide them. Like I said, he wasn't home much. I wanted to know where they were in case I needed to use one. But I-I waited too long. I should have killed him before...before it got so bad. I thought, I hoped...stupid of me, I guess, but I was hoping that when I turned eighteen I could leave. But when I found out about the money, I knew he'd never let me go. I found out about the money that night, leaning against the basement door. That's when my aunt told me. Until that moment, I had no idea. She hadn't said a word."

"How did you get out?"

"I used a broom to break the window above the washing machine. I poked out as much of the glass as I could. Then I grabbed a towel from a pile on the dryer. I threw it over the broken pieces on the bottom of the sill so I wouldn't get cut. Even standing on the dryer, it was kind of hard to pull myself up. There wasn't a stool. The window was pretty high. Even for me, it was a tight squeeze, but I didn't have much choice. I found an old Denver Broncos sweatshirt in the dryer, so I threw that out first, because I didn't have a coat. I knew it would get pretty cold. I was lucky there wasn't any fresh snow. He could have followed me, at least for a ways, if there was snow. This way, he didn't know which direction I went. I cut through the woods in case he came back home. I didn't want to take a chance that he might see me on the road."

"What did you do for three days, Devlin?" asked Cherie.

"I got as far away as I could. I didn't want to be anywhere he might spot me. I don't really remember exactly, but I kept away from my school. I walked all night, to get across town and to keep warm. I didn't have any money, so I didn't eat. I stopped at McDonalds to use the bathroom, get a drink. Then I sat in the alley behind Kmart, where they throw the empty cardboard boxes, waiting for a chance to get inside."

"Devlin, earlier you said, if you hadn't gotten sick, you'd have killed your uncle. Is that why you didn't leave Denver?" asked Shauna. "You could have hitched a ride out of town."

Devlin sighed. "That was my plan. I just needed some food, some warm clothes, and a few hours of sleep. That's why I snuck into the Kmart. I had to wait four days, because I wasn't sure my aunt would let me back in the house, but the gardener would. He came by every Thursday morning. He had a house key since he took care of the plants inside the house too. Every Thursday my uncle left for racquetball at seven in the morning. The gardener was always nice to me. All I had to do was tell him that I'd lost my key. He'd let me in.

"I knew my uncle wouldn't change his schedule, just like I knew he wouldn't call the police to report me missing. He couldn't take the chance. He'd just hope I'd taken his threats seriously, the threat that he would kill my aunt, that he would kill me, and that I'd keep my mouth shut. Every day he didn't hear from me, every day the police didn't come by or call, would make him feel more confident. So he'd go play racquetball, like always. I planned to watch from the woods to make sure. Once I got in the house, I'd get one of the guns and wait for him. I'd aim for his chest. It's a bigger target than the head."

"How could you be certain he wouldn't move the guns? Just in case you came back?" Shauna asked.

Devlin laughed. Jake heard a touch of hysteria in her voice. "You're kidding, right? My uncle thinks highly of himself. He'd never even consider the possibility that someone might get the better of him. He wouldn't move the guns."

"Why didn't you come to us?"

"Because he would have just killed her sooner. I hoped, by waiting, I'd have a chance to kill him first."

Scott spoke up. "Do you remember anything else? Anything at all about the woman you heard your uncle mention?"

"No. Just that her name began with a *B*. I'm pretty sure it was Betty or Betsy."

"Do you have any idea why he might have panicked?"

"No, I don't. Maybe the school called? Honestly, I don't know."

Devlin closed her eyes, leaning heavily against Jake.

"I'm sorry." Her voice sounded hoarse. "I'm too tired to answer any more questions."

Shauna shut off the tape recorder. Laying a hand on Devlin's arm, she said, "I'm sorry this happened. I wish we had known."

"Thank you."

Shauna and Scott left the room, but Cherie hung back. She approached the bed, speaking directly to Devlin. "In a couple of days, we need to talk about your future. I wish I could say this is the last you'll see of me, but I'm afraid it's not. For now, you get some rest. I'll see you later." She followed after Shauna and Scott.

Jake realized that Devlin couldn't stay awake much longer. He lowered the head of her bed, piling some pillows behind her. She smiled a brief, exhausted smile at him as he laid her down. She was asleep in a heartbeat.

Jake stood up from the bed, running a tired hand through his hair. He felt as exhausted as Devlin. Mike laid a hand on his shoulder. As Jake glanced up, Mike tipped his head toward the door. Jake followed him out of Devlin's room. They stopped at the desk to let Dr. Walters know Devlin was asleep. He reported that Mary had taken her mother home. They'd be back first thing in the morning. Amy stood nearby, drawing up a syringe of medication for another patient. She promised to keep a close eye on Devlin.

"I need some fresh air," commented Mike.

Jake agreed. They caught the elevator and headed down in silence.

"Pretty rough," said Mike when they got outside. "Really tore me up listening to her. How you doing?"

"I'm not sure I know how to answer that."

Mike rubbed his jaw. "Son of a bitch needs a good killing."

"How'd he get out of the country so quickly?" asked Jake.

"Hopped a flight to San Francisco before we even knew who we were looking for. He had maybe a twenty-four-hour head start. Caught a flight to Hong Kong before we could trace him, then disappeared. His name showed up on the passenger manifest of a Cathay Pacific airliner that landed in Bangkok, but there was no warrant. Nobody knew to stop him. The FBI and the State Department are involved now. There's more to it than Devlin and her aunt."

"What more?"

"The title company. He was using his clients' money. Illegal borrowing from Peter to pay Paul, I guess you'd say. Using the escrow money to make his own investments. He was living way beyond his means. He needed Devlin's money."

"You mean he needed her grandfather's money," corrected Jake. "You heard what she said. You saw her face. She put it together tonight. I think up until now, she was too busy surviving to even wonder about the cause of the accident. Will Shauna follow up?"

"I'm guessing yes," Mike replied. "But suspecting that he tampered with the van is one thing. Proving it is another, especially since I read in the report that the vehicle was totaled. I'm betting that, once the guys in Nebraska or Iowa or wherever it was finished with it, it ended up as scrap. As far as they were concerned, it was a hit-and-run. Just a tragic accident."

"The sedan never turned up?" asked Jake.

"Not so far. According to the report, nothing in the metropolitan area was reported stolen. There were no damaged rentals. Nothing found abandoned. There were only a few witnesses who were pretty far back. All of them stopped at the scene. Everyone said pretty much the same thing. The van was speeding. I guess they had to make up time after trying to get the station wagon started. The brown car looked like it was passing the van, then turned right into it. One witness claimed the driver slowed down for a split second and got out of the way when the van swerved, but took off. Nobody followed because the accident was just too bad. One of the witnesses drove to the closest pay phone to dial 911. Devlin's little brother was thrown from the car too. He was dead at the scene. I don't think Devlin knows."

Jake blew out an angry breath, and a cloud of frost wreathed his head. "That goddamn motherfucking son of a bitch!" He headed to his pickup, Mike trailing behind.

Suddenly Jake stopped. "What about here?"

"Here, what?" asked Mike, confused.

Jake turned toward Mike. "What about a stolen car here, in Denver? Or a rental? Or maybe the asshole bought a used car and never registered it. It's not a long drive to Omaha. Shit, I could do it in seven, eight hours if I had to. But he wouldn't have been speeding. And he would have had plates on, at least until that morning."

Mike stared at Jake. "You're right. William Franz could have leased, stolen, or bought a car here in Denver and then ditched it somewhere. Or he could have stuck to the back roads, driven home unnoticed, and returned it to a rental agency, or even abandoned it in Denver."

"I bet he's got a personal assistant," continued Jake. "And I bet money that personal assistant keeps a date book. You find out where he was that week, and you'll find out where he got the car. Then you let me know."

He and Mike stared at each other in silence for a moment. Jake turned toward his truck.

"You okay to drive? I don't want you killing someone."

Jake unlocked the driver's door and looked back at his friend. "I'm not okay, but I'm not gonna kill anyone, tonight anyway. I gotta clear my head. I'll see you."

* * * *

Mike watched Jake back out of the parking spot. Tires squealing, he turned onto the main road. He shook his head. He and Jake had been like brothers since they were eighteen years old. He'd never seen him like this. Mike knew Jake had a big heart—he was the most generous guy he'd ever met. But Jake preferred to play his cards close to the vest. Except for his family and a few close friends, he kept to himself. This was different.

No question about it, Mike thought, nobody should have to go through what Devlin had gone through. He felt something for the girl too. She was not your usual teenager by any stretch of the imagination. But it went deeper with Jake. There was a connection there, between the two of them. It wasn't just a matter of Devlin depending upon Jake. That didn't strike Mike as particularly strange. Jake had that effect on people, especially female people. No, whatever it was that Devlin felt, Jake felt right along with her. He might be fighting it because she was so young, but he felt it all the same.

Mike sighed and headed to his car. Devlin may have been able to tell the story, but she had a long way to go. Her aunt's body waited at the morgue. In the eyes of the court, Devlin was still a minor. And despite the fact that he was a rapist, murderer, and thief, her uncle was currently her legal guardian. *Shit*, Mike thought. He needed to talk to Shauna and Scott. It was gonna be a long night.

* * * *

Jake drove for a while, in no particular direction, preoccupied with everything he'd heard tonight. Devlin's voice played over and over in his mind, convincing him that she was supposed to die that day on the bridge. If it wasn't that day, it probably would have been another. That's how desperate, how evil, William Franz was. It was only fate, or God, or who knows what, that kept her alive after the accident. She had ended up in Franz's hands anyway. Jake pulled over to the curb and stopped. He pounded his fists on the steering wheel.

He looked around, realizing the neighborhood was familiar. Janice lived two blocks away. She'd take him in, no questions asked. Jake threw the truck in gear and drove to her house. He parked across the street. Her lights were on, the curtains only partly drawn. She was home. All he had to do was get out and walk to the door. One night in bed with a willing woman, that's what he needed. To gain some distance, some perspective, plain old work off some steam.

Sitting there, Jake told himself to get out of the truck.

Go, he thought, knock on her door, crush your mouth on hers, bury yourself inside her, maybe right there against the wall in the living room with the curtains half open. Forget everything you're thinking about for one hour.

He couldn't move. His hands refused to release the steering wheel. What kind of man would he be if he used Janice like that? She didn't deserve to be treated like a sexual punching bag. Jake was disgusted with himself for even considering it.

As he sat there looking toward the house, Janice drifted by the front window, a dark silhouette against the light. Jake wondered how she was feeling, what she'd done about the pregnancy. God, he hadn't thought about her in days. He didn't even know if she'd told her parents or said anything to Jim Peters. Jake was tempted to just talk to her, but he couldn't. She was too vulnerable, and he was too raw. Better to let sleeping dogs lie.

Jake waited until Janice's shadow passed out of the living room before he started his truck. He hadn't gone half a block before he slammed on his brakes and threw the truck in reverse. Jesus Christ! How had he missed it?

Janice's mother—the Ice Princess, as Janice sarcastically referred to her—her name was Rebecca Matheson, but she went by Bitsy. Everyone called her Bitsy. He would never have known her real name was Rebecca if Janice hadn't mentioned it. She was a mortgage broker, a mortgage broker who must have worked closely with the biggest title company in town, Franz Title.

Jake pulled into Janice's driveway and turned off the ignition. He took a deep breath as he climbed out of the vehicle, trying to decide what to ask and how to ask it. It might be nothing. Then again, it might be everything.

Janice was already at the front door when he knocked.

"What are you doing here, Jake?"

She looked thin and pale. Jake noticed the dark circles under her eyes. She wore a pair of baggy sweats, and her hair was pulled back in a severe ponytail. This wasn't the Janice Jake was familiar with. Despite his nagging concern for her well-being, he had other things on his mind right now. Right or wrong, he decided to file his concerns away for a later date.

Jake stood in silence for a moment, searching for the right words, wondering if Janice would ask him in. He remembered that he wasn't supposed to know about the pregnancy, so that topic was off-limits. Janice stared at him, both defiance and defeat in her gaze, but she said nothing, seeming to enjoy his discomfort.

Jake decided to keep it simple. "I wondered what happened after I left you with your mom. I wondered how you are."

"Why do you care? We're not together."

"You're right. We're not together," said Jake, feeling awkward. He'd never seen this side of Janice. "Look, I'm sorry. I should have stopped by before to see how you are, but I've been busy."

"Busy with what?" Janice intoned sarcastically. "A seventeen-year-old runaway? Got a sudden taste for little girls, Jake?"

Jake was shocked at Janice's tone. His body tightened. If Janice had been a man, he'd have decked him. Jake had learned when he was a boy that you never hit a girl, or woman. Right now, Devlin, for all her youth, seemed a lot more of a woman than Janice did. "What I do with my time is none of your damn business anymore."

"Then I guess it's *time* for you to leave." She turned to close the door.

"Janice, wait." Jake forced himself to place a gentle hand on her arm. "I have a question, and your answer is very important."

"Fine." She sighed, the anger controlled. "What?"

"It's about the runaway, Devlin. After I took you home, did you mention her to anyone? Talk about her with anyone?"

"Maybe. So what? I didn't mention a last name. What does it matter? These kids are a dime a dozen. They show up in the ER all the time."

"Who did you talk to? Do you remember? It's important."

"Why? What's so important about whether or not I mentioned the girl to anyone?"

Jake suddenly noticed the stack of unopened newspapers by Janice's front door. It appeared she didn't know who Devlin was, or anything about William Franz's involvement with her.

"Because somebody found out where she was, somebody who shouldn't have," Jake said.

"And you think I went out and told the guy who did it?" Janice was incredulous. "What kind of person do you think I am?"

"You were upset that morning. You might have inadvertently mentioned her name."

"Yeah, to my mom, so what? Who's she going to tell? C'mon, Jake, get real. We talk about our cases all the time." Janice was furious. "What? Are you suggesting my mom beat and raped her? When did you start using drugs, Jake McKenna?"

Jake refused to lose his temper with Janice. She had no idea why he was asking about her mother, and he couldn't tell her. But, if he was right, he'd just found out how Franz learned Devlin was in the hospital, that she'd already been pegged as the victim of an assault and the police were involved.

"No, I'm not suggesting anything of the sort. I'm not suggesting that you had anything to do with it. I'm sorry you misunderstood."

Jake reached toward the side of Janice's face and tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear. She stood still, as if frozen by his touch. He felt sorry for her, and he was ashamed he'd been superficial enough to become her lover.

"Good night, Janice. I'm sorry I upset you." Jake turned to go.

Janice called after him, "Jake, wait. What's all this about?"

"I'm not sure. You take care of yourself."

"You too," she whispered.

* * * *

Jake knew he should call Mike or Shauna, but he had to get out of the city. Janice's harsh words had added to his anger. Devlin's life had been stolen from her by William Franz. Now, depending upon how involved her mother was, Janice might find her family torn apart, but it would be nothing, nothing, compared to what Devlin had suffered. He pointed his truck west on I-80 and took the turnoff to Berthoud Pass. He was going to mention his suspicions and pass along the information he'd gleaned from Janice, but first, he wanted to inhale some clean, fresh mountain air. After listening to Devlin's story and talking to Janice, he felt like some of William Franz's filth had been scattered into the very air he breathed. A quick trip to the mountains would help.

It had begun snowing, but Jake barely noticed. His truck had all-weather tires and four-wheel drive, and he'd grown up in the mountains. Inclement weather didn't bother him. A lot of people were afraid of weather. Not Jake. He'd always felt a powerful pleasure when surrounded by the electric energy of a thunderstorm or the furious, icy winds of a raging blizzard. The louder the thunder, the better he liked it. The more dangerous the lightning, the happier he was. He appreciated extremes, whether it was in weather or people.

It was why he'd been attracted to Janice. She wore her sexuality for everyone to see, but the truth was, she gave it up to very few. She looked like a goddess, all legs, pouting lips, and round, high, generous breasts that were impossible to ignore. She'd wanted him from the moment their eyes met, and she made no pretense about it. She wasn't Jake's usual type. She was too beautiful, too out there. She was attractive to many men. She knew it, and she used it. Jake had never before been involved with a woman like that, and as far as he was concerned, he never would be again.

Jake wasn't into sharing. Up until he left for Montana, Janice had never cheated on him. He was confident of that. But he learned early on that she used her sex appeal to get what she wanted, from anyone, and it had rankled. Janice wasn't a bad person—that's how she functioned. It had always

worked for her. In the end, it all came down to maintenance. Janice needed a lot of it. Jake wasn't into that. He liked a confident woman, but he didn't want to be the sole source of that confidence. He had his own goals, his own hopes and dreams, his own needs, and he wasn't ready to drop everything and become something he wasn't merely to suit someone else. He had a lot of living left to do.

Janice, and his recent relationship with her, was still on Jake's mind when he pulled off at the trailhead. If he was right about her mother being involved with Franz, it could tear her family apart. Despite his current feelings about Janice, Jake didn't wish that for her, but he didn't see any alternative. He had to tell the police. Janice didn't deserve it, but then, neither did Devlin. Her family certainly hadn't deserved to die. If Janice's mother could lead them to the bastard, well then, so be it.

Jake headed up the trail at a brisk trot. Within ten minutes, he'd warmed up and broken into a run. It was cold, and he was steaming after the first mile. Despite the snow, or maybe because of it, Jake started to feel better. He quickened his pace, and his head began to empty in the cold air.

* * * *

Jake woke up starving. After a quick trip to the bathroom, he pulled on the pair of jeans he'd dropped on the floor the night before and headed to the kitchen. He'd run and hiked for three or four miles in the snow, hard and fast, working up a good sweat and feeling a hell of a lot better by the time he returned to his truck. The quiet and the solitude of the high, open country did him a world of good, and he felt like he had a better handle on things. He still needed to call Mike, but first he needed to eat. He hadn't eaten well in days, not since Devlin crashed.

Jake was a decent cook, especially when the food was eggs. He could whip up a mean omelet. He hadn't shopped lately, so he practically emptied the fridge, pulling out cheese, onions, potatoes, an overripe avocado, a container of leftover cooked potatoes, eggs, and cream. God, he didn't think he'd ever been so hungry in his life. He folded the omelet onto a big platter and laid on the black pepper and Tabasco. Then, his stomach growling, Jake wolfed it down and immediately made another one. Finally satisfied, he was just finishing off a big glass of orange juice when the phone rang.

It was Mike, calling to check on him. He was coming off his shift. Jake asked him to stop by on his way home.

* * * *

Devlin's stomach woke her up. She was ravenous, hungrier than she'd been in a year. Amy answered Devlin's call light.

"Do you remember," Devlin began with a grin, "what we were in the middle of a week ago?"

"You mean sending me out in a blizzard for French fries?"

"Yeah," laughed Devlin, "I would kill for a big plate of French fries."

Amy winked at her. "I'll see what I can do." Devlin burst out laughing when Amy left the room shouting, "Hey, ya'll, where are those French fries I got last week? The princess is hungry!"

Devlin heard a commotion near the desk, and within twenty minutes, a procession of staff members carried in a huge platter of French fries accompanied by an entire bottle of ketchup, two grilled cheese sandwiches, and an ice-cold, thick, chunky chocolate milk shake. Devlin thanked them and offered to share, but no one would hear of it. Amy plopped down in a chair and refused to leave the room until Devlin finished every bite.

Devlin made quick work of half the fries and both sandwiches. She and Amy were in the midst of a taste test to determine which they liked better, fries dipped in ketchup or fries dipped in the milk shake, when a voice said, "The shake," and Mary walked over to the bedside. With a smile, she reached across the table, grabbed a French fry, dipped it in the chocolate shake, and chewed daintily. "Definitely the shake."

"Oh, Mary!" Devlin climbed out of bed, throwing her arms around her friend, being careful of Mary's pregnant belly. "I'm so sorry it was you, and I'm so very, very glad," she whispered in Mary's ear.

Mary kissed her cheek. She held her out at arm's length to get a good look at her. "You look better. Thin as a rail, but better. How do you feel?"

"Alive, and very, very hungry."

Mary laughed. "My mom's already working on it. She's stocking up my fridge for you."

Devlin was taken aback. "I hadn't thought about that. I honestly hadn't thought about what I would do or where I would go. I guess I wasn't certain..." Devlin's voice trailed off.

Mary took her hand. "I didn't mean to catch you off guard. It's just that, well, my mom and I feel like we're your family. And we want...we want you to be with people you know. You can't go home yet, back to Iowa, I mean, and nobody wants you in foster care. I talked to the Social Services agent last night. She thought we could get a court order to take you home with us when you're discharged." Mary hesitated. "I guess nobody thought to ask you."

"No," protested Devlin, a slight hitch in her voice, "it's not that. Really, I'd like to go home with you." She squeezed Mary's hand. "I just haven't had time to think about my future. I didn't think I'd have one. But Mary, I don't know where to start, what to do. I know there are things I need to do."

"My mom's already handling some of it, and you have a lawyer, you know, back in Iowa. I have his number. You can call him anytime."

"I think I need to sit down for a minute. This seems kind of overwhelming."

"Then take it one day at a time, one thing at a time."

Devlin thought for a moment. "I need a lawyer, here, in Denver."

"Why?"

Devlin took her time responding. "I don't want you to think me ungrateful. It's so generous of you to open your home to me, you and Kenneth—that's your husband's name, isn't it?"

Mary nodded.

"Jason told me about him last summer. And I'd definitely love to stay with you, but I think I need to take things a step further. I know I'm almost eighteen, and then I'll legally be on my own, but for the next few months, I don't want to be a ward of the state or have to fight the courts over foster care. Do you understand what I mean?"

Mary nodded uncertainly, a little confused. "But if you come home with me, Kenneth and I could arrange to be your foster parents and you could finish school."

"I appreciate that," said Devlin, "but I think I want to be emancipated. That's why I need to see a lawyer here in Denver. I want to be declared an emancipated minor. I can still stay with you for a while if you like, but I

don't want anyone to have to take care of me. And I've"—Devlin flushed—"I've had enough of other people managing things for me, making decisions for me, controlling me. I want my mom and dad, but I don't have my mom and dad. So I'd rather do it myself." Devlin stared at the wall, silent tears rolling down her cheeks.

"It's okay, sweetie." Mary put her arm around Devlin's shoulders. "I understand. I'll see what I can do."

"Do I have money? Do I have the money to pay for a lawyer? My aunt told me I have money in a trust. How do I get it?"

"You have money, Devlin. Your aunt Carolyn called a lawyer and wrote a new will, the day after you ran away. She left everything she owned to you. For some reason, the house was in her name. She had a savings account that your uncle didn't know about. I guess when everything's released by the police, it's yours."

"Not my uncle's business," Devlin said, a look of horror on her face. "I don't want anything to do with him. I don't want anything he touched. And I don't want the house. I just have to get my—the photos of my family. They're in my bedroom. I don't want anything else. It can burn to the ground for all I care!"

Devlin buried her face in her hands and began to cry. She hated crying in front of people. It made her feel vulnerable. Vulnerability was a weakness. Her uncle had exploited any show of weakness. Devlin had learned not to cry, no matter what he did to her or her aunt. It hurt even now, to let the tears flow even though she knew she was safe from him.

* * * *

Mary stood beside Devlin, one arm around her, the other hand rubbing her own pregnant belly, comforting her baby and herself at the same time. She hated what had happened to Devlin and her family, mourning the loss of her neighbors and childhood friends all over again. Her impulse was to protect Devlin if she'd let her, but she understood and respected the girl's need for independence. She had already decided to help her in any way she could. She knew she could count on her mother and her husband to support Devlin's decision, and she was pretty sure Jake would be close by regardless.

His fondness for Devlin was obvious, and Mary knew better than anybody how stubborn Jake could be. Mary's only concern was that Devlin seemed to be equally fond of Jake, and it wasn't just the age difference that worried her. Despite what had happened and despite her obvious intelligence and maturity, Devlin still possessed a child's innocence. One look in those big eyes said it all.

Jake was only twenty-four, but he'd grown up quickly on the ranch. He was experienced in ways that were far beyond Devlin. Mary knew Jake would never take advantage of the situation, but she worried for Devlin. She didn't want her hurt any more. It amazed Mary that Devlin had managed to survive at all, let alone with her psyche intact. She'd make a point of talking to Jake before Devlin's feelings got out of hand. She was vulnerable right now, and that vulnerability might make her dependent upon Jake. Mary knew he had plans, and those plans didn't include Devlin. Yes, she would definitely talk to Jake as soon as things calmed down.

Chapter Six

The months of February and March flashed by in a blur. Devlin was discharged from the hospital and allowed to go home with Mary and Kenneth. With Kenneth's assistance, she found a well-respected attorney. A sympathetic judge listened to the entire story and, with very little deliberation, declared her an emancipated minor. She now had legal control of her finances and her life.

Jake fought her tooth and nail when she insisted upon going to her aunt's home to get her few possessions. Though he lost the argument, he never left her side as she removed treasured family photos and a few articles of clothing. He stood right behind her through her aunt's short memorial service at the hospital chapel, arms protectively draped around her shoulders, ready and waiting for the moment when she leaned back against his hard chest and sobbed her heart out. He shielded her through the crush of reporters outside the hospital as Kenneth and Mike escorted Mary and Mary's parents, Delores and Frank.

Devlin was grateful for Mike's continued presence, along with her former teacher, Beth Ellis. Over the past few months, she had grown close to both of them. Shauna, Scott, and Cherie attended the memorial, as did Amy and Dr. Walters and many of the ICU staff. Devlin felt like she owed every one of them a portion of her life, especially Jake and Mary and Mike. They'd all been with her since the morning she was found in Kmart.

Testifying before the grand jury had been torture. Devlin was forced to relive, in excruciating detail, the accident and every gut-wrenching event since. The suspected murder of her family and the tragic death of her aunt became public fodder, as did her uncle's illegal financial dealings. Shauna and Cherie had prepared Devlin, but that didn't make it any easier when she was confronted with constant headlines about the case. Some of the less responsible papers even referred to the story as the "Lolita Murder," as if

Devlin had solicited her uncle's attention, insinuating that he had killed for her.

What Devlin found more distressing than anything was the fact that her uncle actually had help. He had a lover, Rebecca "Bitsy" Matheson, a married, wealthy mortgage broker and local socialite. She was the one who told him Devlin had been found. She was the reason her aunt had been shot. According to Shauna, Mrs. Matheson's daughter, a nurse in the emergency room, had inadvertently mentioned Devlin's name that first morning, and her mother had dutifully reported Devlin's location to her uncle.

One afternoon, a beautiful woman walked out of the courtroom, approaching Devlin where she stood with Jake and Mike. Jake turned to intercept her. To Devlin's surprise, she slapped him hard across the face. Without a word, she turned and walked away, hips swaying, her high heels clacking against the tile floor. She disappeared around a corner. Jake made no effort to stop her or follow her. He turned on his heel and headed the opposite direction, leaving Devlin staring after him, shock evident on her face.

Her impulse was to follow him, to see if he was all right, but Mike stopped her. Without asking, Devlin knew she had been Jake's lover. Jealousy warred with pity in her. The woman had lost more than just Jake. But a sudden vision of her in bed with him overcame any sympathy Devlin felt. After a moment's hesitation, she asked Mike if she was the reason Jake and the woman were no longer together. Mike looked a bit taken aback, reassuring Devlin that their breakup was a separate issue.

Jake reappeared a short time later, a scarlet welt on his left cheek. As he rejoined them, Devlin avoided eye contact, but slipped her hand into his and squeezed. He squeezed back. She knew he looked over her head at Mike, but she pretended not to notice.

On the last day of testimony, an overly aggressive photographer shoved Devlin, nearly knocking her headlong down the granite steps in front of the courthouse. Jake's fist connected with the guy's jaw in the blink of an eye. The man sprawled on the stairs, stunned. His camera bounced downward, shattering on the sidewalk. Ignoring the man's loud threats, Jake plucked Devlin up in his arms and whisked her back into the building to demand a police escort to his pickup.

The indictments were handed down the next day. William Franz was indicted on one count of murder in the first degree, one count of rape, one count of assault and battery, and, based upon the testimony of his clients, ten counts of fraud and money laundering. After listening to new evidence, the grand jury also recommended that the district attorney in Iowa reopen the investigation into the accident that killed Devlin's parents, her brother, and her grandparents. Rebecca "Bitsy" Matheson was indicted on ten counts of accessory to fraud and money laundering. A warrant for her arrest was issued that afternoon.

Devlin listened as the indictments were read. Mary and Kenneth sat on one side, Jake, Mike, and Beth on the other. She knew she should feel relief and vindication, but instead, she felt numb. It didn't matter that her uncle had been indicted. He'd vanished. Even if the authorities in Asia managed to find him and arrest him, Devlin wasn't sure she'd feel any better. Her uncle was the worst kind of thief. He hadn't merely stolen money. He'd stolen lives, the lives of all those she loved. He'd shattered her visions of the future.

She felt like a tree in the forest, and the old saying applied specifically to her—if a tree falls in the forest and there's no one around to hear it, does it make a sound? Devlin wondered if she actually made a sound. Did someone exist if they weren't being perceived? Was she perceived? She was no longer related to anyone. There was not a single soul who could define her and nobody to define herself against. Devlin worried that, one day, she might glance in a mirror and see no reflection. The thought terrified her.

As the weeks passed, Devlin became more and more aware of how her friends worried. They watched what she ate. Even though they didn't say much, they noticed when she didn't eat. When she wasn't in court, or meeting with a lawyer or her court-recommended therapist, Devlin slept. In her dreams, she could undo the events of the past two years and live them again the way she wanted to live them. Only in her dreams did Devlin find some measure of happiness, so she clung tightly to them. She found she had to drag herself out of bed in the morning, reluctant to wake up.

Devlin's biggest concern was the stress her continued presence had on Mary and her baby. Mary had already begun her maternity leave. The baby was due in less than a month. While Devlin looked forward to the birth, she didn't want to become dependent upon Mary and Kenneth. They had their

own lives to live. She knew Mary would urge her to stay, afraid Devlin couldn't survive on her own.

Devlin had given much thought to survival. Money wasn't an issue. She had plenty of money. Thanks to the morbid publicity about her aunt's murder, after the police released the house, it sold quickly. Her aunt's bank account had been transferred into her name. Devlin had been in contact with her grandparents' lawyer in Iowa, and she'd agreed to continue the lease arrangement with Mary's brother, Mark. The farm, with its two thousand acres of rich black Missouri River soil, was thriving under his careful management. Regardless of her feelings about the land, it was the only thing that made sense. She was in no position to run a farm.

Grinnell College had been leasing her own home for visiting professors. She instructed the lawyer to donate the home to the college, complete with the furniture. Her family's belongings, however, she decided to keep in the storage unit where they'd been moved after the accident. Devlin's heart was still too fragile to put her hands on the gossamer threads of the lives she'd loved and lost.

Devlin was tempted to walk away, but she feared she would hurt too many people. She had to do something. Beneath the lethargy, Devlin was desperate to feel alive, to feel as though she still existed in her skin. As it was, she felt like she'd become a walking ghost.

There was Jake to think about. He'd stuck around, but he'd been noticeably distant for weeks. She worried she'd asked too much of him, her dependence wearing thin. The only time in recent weeks he'd seemed to really care was when the photographer had shoved her. Then he'd floored the guy and snatched her up so fast and held her so close, she could barely breathe.

Perhaps he'd withdrawn because of that woman, Rebecca Matheson's daughter, the beautiful, statuesque, sophisticated woman who'd been Jake's lover. Despite Mike's explanation, Devlin couldn't help but wonder if Jake resented her because she'd come between Jake and the woman he really wanted. Jake never said a word to Devlin about the encounter in the courthouse. He'd just squeezed her hand. That was the last physical contact they'd had. Two days after the indictments were issued, Jake left for Montana. Mary informed her it was to help his folks with calving. Devlin knew that was the truth. Jake had talked a great deal about his family's

ranch. She knew the cows would be dropping their calves soon. But his presence had filled the emptiness inside her, emptiness that, without him, threatened to overwhelm her.

Devlin couldn't shake the feeling that Jake was running from her. She wondered why. She wondered if it was because she'd said she loved him. Devlin prayed that wasn't it. She knew she should let go of him and move on. She felt vulnerable and afraid, but she also had very little choice. Hiding behind Mary and Ken wasn't a solution. The problem was that, right now, Devlin couldn't seem to wake herself up enough to come up with another plan.

* * * *

The wind blew cold on the ridge. Jake turned his collar up and hunkered down on his horse. The cattle appeared and disappeared in the swirling snow. He, his father, and his older brother were attempting to get the cows moving, to drive them lower. His father and brother had taken advantage of warm weather to move the cows to the open meadows where young spring grass grew. If there was one thing you could count on in Montana, it was a blizzard, or two, or four, in April, and this one had come up fast. An extra pair of hands was always welcome, and Jake knew without being told when to show up. Driving had been rough, a slog on snowy highways for sixteen hours. His mother greeted him with a hug and a hot cup of coffee, then he headed to the barn to saddle up his gelding.

Once he reached his dad, it was slow going. As the snow grew heavier and the winds increased, they discussed leaving the cows to fend for themselves until the blizzard blew over, finally deciding to get the herd to the shelter of the trees on the far side of the ridge. It was tough work, driving them up and over the ridge, directly into the worst of the wind in order to get them out of it.

By late afternoon, as the gray light faded, the three of them felt confident they'd accounted for most of the herd, and they headed for home. The men rode single file, keeping their horses close in the deepening gloom, heads down, eyes peeled for landmarks. By the time they passed the old summer cabin on Wolf Creek, it was full dark, but the snow had decreased

and the wind had softened, giving Jake time to reflect, something he hadn't allowed himself to do much of for the past two months.

Since the indictments, he'd been avoiding Devlin. Mary asked him to give her space. She was concerned the girl was becoming too attached to him.

When Devlin was released from the hospital, Mary had pulled him aside. *"Devlin's been through too much, Jake, to depend upon you and then lose you too. I know there's something...What I mean is, I know there's something between the two of you. Everybody knows it. But she's too young. She may not understand, but you do. I don't want her falling for you and then have to watch you walk away when somebody else comes along. You know exactly what I mean. Besides,"* Mary teased, her voice lightening a bit, *"you've always had a thing for older women."*

Jake felt a rueful smile tug at his lips. It was true. From the first time, he realized that there was more to girls than just playmates and friends. He'd been interested in those who were the most mature. Jake never lacked for female companionship. Like any other healthy red-blooded male, sometimes the girls he wanted were the most mature physically, but often, it was emotional maturity that attracted him.

Mary was a good example. She was six years older than he was, and she was wise beyond her years. Even Janice was two years older. Something about Devlin defied age. Whenever Jake looked into her eyes, he didn't see a seventeen-year-old girl. He saw the woman she would become. Reluctant as he was to leave her, Jake respected Mary's honesty, and he wanted to avoid any misconceptions on Devlin's part. He distanced himself. He sat beside her, he stood beside her, but he'd withdrawn from her emotionally. If Devlin sensed it, she never questioned him. When she'd put her warm hand in his after the scene with Janice in the hallway of the courthouse, he almost forgot his promise to Mary. He was tempted to pull Devlin into his arms and hold her close, brush his lips over hers, and taste her. Jake was almost desperate to taste her. He stopped himself.

It had been torture, hiding his feelings. The photographer who shoved Devlin bore the brunt of it. Jake put everything he had into his fist. If it was up to him, he'd hide her away from the world. When he'd held her against his chest, his heart pounded, out of control. He wondered that Devlin didn't

say something. But he had her pressed so close, it was possible she couldn't breathe. He had enough trouble catching his own breath.

Jake learned to hate the press. After titillating, but patently false testimony from Bitsy Matheson was leaked to the press, some of the tabloids characterized Devlin as jailbait. Photographers hounded her. And she had no idea why.

The reason was clear. Devlin sold papers. One shot of her, one candid shot of those wide aquamarine eyes, the lush lips, translucent skin, and angular cheekbones visible behind a curtain of waving auburn hair was money in the bank.

Devlin didn't have a clue what she looked like. She never wore makeup, she dressed conservatively, and though she'd put on a few pounds, she was still thin. It was as if she never looked in a mirror. Jake was beginning to think she avoided mirrors like the plague, but he couldn't for the life of him figure out why. In his experience, most women checked out their reflection regularly. Janice certainly had.

Jake remembered how floored Mike appeared that morning when he repeated the conversation he'd had with Janice about her mother. Mike grasped the implications, and his grim expression matched Jake's. He said he'd already discussed Jake's suspicions with Shauna. Scott would be checking into Franz's whereabouts the weekend Devlin's family was killed.

The story began to unravel like some film noir murder mystery. The last week in August, William Franz had left for a golf trip in Vail. He met six friends, all of them well-heeled bankers or lawyers. Some of them drove together. Franz came alone. He golfed and drank with his buddies for two days. Then, according to his friends, he claimed he wasn't feeling well, and he decided to head home early. Only he didn't head home. He drove himself to Stapleton, parked his BMW in long-term parking, and bought a one-way ticket on Frontier Airlines to Kansas City. Once he landed, he took a cab to Overland Park, where he rented a 1979 brown four-door Oldsmobile sedan from Rent-A-Wreck.

* * * *

Because of Colorado's grand jury findings, a new forensic report, and new evidence regarding a rented brown sedan, a warrant was issued for

Franz on five counts of murder in the first degree and one count of attempt to commit murder in the first degree. William Franz had done it. He'd, caused the accident that killed Devlin's entire family. As the horror story was revealed, piece by piece, Devlin grew quieter. Jake couldn't even imagine her shock. Her uncle had deliberately and methodically planned the cold-blooded murder of her entire family. The only time she showed any emotion was when she finished her own testimony.

She'd exited the door of the courtroom, her face a study in misery, walking right past Mary as if she didn't see her. As soon as she reached the sidewalk, she bolted down the street like she ran from the devil himself. Mary yelled for Jake. He was fast, but Devlin had a head start

He caught up with her, calling her name as he reached her side, but she didn't respond. Jake grabbed for her arm and slowed his pace, trying to stop her without pitching her face-first onto the sidewalk.

For a moment, Devlin didn't seem to recognize him. She struggled, desperate to break away. Then she collapsed against him as all the fight drained from her. It was replaced by exhaustion and despair. Jake helped her into a nearby coffee shop, convincing her to eat something. An hour later, Devlin was calm and ready to return to the courthouse. Jake noticed a sadness in her eyes he hadn't seen before.

Devlin looked up at him. "It doesn't do me any good to run from him. Wherever I go, I take him with me. I'm not afraid of him, out here, in the real world." Devlin tapped her chest with her index finger. "I'm afraid of him in here."

Jake laid a hand against her cheek, wishing there was something he could do to make her feel better. Devlin closed her eyes, leaning her face into his rough palm, pressing a slender hand over his.

"I love you, Jake McKenna," she whispered, her voice so soft Jake almost missed the words. She leaned close and brushed her lips over his. Then she turned and walked away, leaving him stunned.

Even thinking about her words now, her lips on his, warmed him in the cold air. When he'd heard them, his heart had skipped a beat. When he felt the light touch of her mouth on his, he wanted more. That's what Mary meant. It was why he needed to back off.

Devlin thought she loved him, but Jake figured she was too young to know what she really wanted, what love really was. Hell, Jake wasn't sure

he knew what love was. What was worse, and what was hardest to admit, was that he had feelings for Devlin. That was a problem. Jake would be twenty-five next month. He couldn't have a thing for a seventeen-year-old girl. What kind of disgusting excuse for a human being did that make him?

Then he sat up in the saddle with a jolt, startling Red. Today was April thirteenth, Devlin's birthday. Today she turned eighteen. He'd promised he'd call on her birthday. He'd almost forgotten.

* * * *

Devlin spent her eighteenth birthday wallpapering. Mary looked about to pop, and according to her, she felt that way too. Kenneth arrived home in time to move the new furniture into the baby's room—the crib, the changing table, the dresser. He'd already set a small cradle next to the bed in their bedroom for the baby to sleep in the first few months. Devlin thought that made sense. It occurred to her that, after spending nine months within its mother, it must be very traumatic to be separated.

Devlin and Mary's mother, Delores, stood back, admiring their handiwork. Memories of her mother wallpapering her little brother's room surfaced. Before she was able to thrust them back into her unconsciousness, she shivered. Devlin hugged her arms to her chest. She didn't want anyone to notice.

No one had said a word about her birthday. Devlin hoped they'd all forgotten. This wasn't where she'd expected to be on her eighteenth birthday. Devlin reminded herself that this was her life now. Lately, she'd been feeling like she needed to find another place to live. Devlin still wasn't sure she could return to Iowa, but this wasn't her home.

Delores put an arm around her. "A good day's work, don't you think?"

Devlin smiled a rare smile as she wrapped her arm around Delores' waist. "Yes, a very good day's work. Let's hope little Workman appreciates it."

"Speaking of little Workman," interrupted Mary, an odd note in her voice, "my water just broke." Delores and Devlin rushed to her side.

Kenneth, busy positioning the changing table, without even a glance in her direction, replied in typical doctor fashion. "Impossible. You're not due for two weeks."

"Really? In that case, would you care to get some towels? Something seems to be pooling around my feet."

Kenneth let go of the changing table and came running. "I know I'm a doctor, but what the hell am I supposed to do?"

"Nothing at all at this moment, darling," laughed Mary. "Let's just give Paul the heads-up and wait for the contractions to start."

Mary got up and headed toward the bedroom, laughing all the way down the hall.

"Where are you going?" called Kenneth.

"To take a shower," yelled Mary. "I figure it may be a while before I have the opportunity again. Mom and Dev, can you come pack for me?"

Delores gave the bemused Kenneth a pat on the head and hurried after Mary. Grinning, Devlin ran to the laundry room to grab some clean towels. Just as she passed Kenneth, still on the phone with the hospital, they heard a loud yelp from the bedroom.

Delores flew down the hall. "The baby's coming! Now! Kenny, get in here!"

Kenneth dropped the phone onto the counter and ran like a man on fire. Devlin froze for a moment. Running to the retrieve the phone, she yelled, "The baby's on the way."

"Grab some clean sheets and throw a couple of baby blankets into the dryer to warm them up," he instructed her. "Remind Ken to wash his hands; then you dial 911 and leave the front door unlocked. I'm on my way."

Carrying the load of towels, Dev ran down the hall to Mary's bedroom, grabbing sheets and baby blankets along the way. She found Mary, naked and dripping wet on the bed, any modesty long gone, panting like a dog. Ken hovered between Mary's legs, a panic-stricken look on his face. Without hesitation, Devlin threw a big beach towel over Mary, and Delores covered her. Devlin asked Mary to lift her bottom and shoved a clean sheet beneath her. Devlin grabbed Ken, tugging him toward the bathroom, passing on Dr. Warden's instructions to wash his hands. She tossed the baby blankets in the dryer on warm. Finally, she called the paramedics and unlocked the front door.

Kenneth's voice came from the bedroom. "I can see the head."

Devlin sprinted back down the hall. She had no intention of missing this child's precipitous arrival. She skidded through the open bedroom door.

Kenneth had himself under control now. He directed her to help Delores support Mary as she labored. Mary was groaning.

"It's okay, love," he said in a soothing voice. "The head's already crowning. You can push."

"My God. It hurts!"

"Just wait for the contractions and work with them. You know what to do, sweetie." Kenneth leaned over Mary's tight belly to give her a kiss.

At that moment, another contraction began, and Mary gave Devlin's hand a painful squeeze.

"Push," instructed Kenneth, keeping close eye contact with his wife. "Hold your breath, and push as hard as you can."

Eyes locked on her husband's face, Mary followed his instructions. Devlin could see a silver-dollar sized portion of the baby's head with the push, but it vanished as soon as the contraction ended.

"It's okay, love. You're doing great. Rest between contractions. It's a first baby. It takes time. You're already way ahead of the curve."

Devlin watched, fascinated, as the next contraction began, spreading from the top of Mary's swollen abdomen, along her sides, and then angling down toward her pelvis. Her eyes open wide, holding her breath, Mary pushed harder than Devlin thought it was possible for anyone to push, especially a tiny thing like Mary. This effort exposed more of the baby's head, and Devlin could see dark, curly hair.

"Doing good, Mary, doing good," crooned Kenneth as he supported the head through the contraction.

At that moment, they all heard a commotion at the door. Dr. Warden strode into the room, followed by the paramedics.

"How're thing's going, Ken?" He took a quick look, then headed into the bathroom to wash his hands.

"Pretty good so far."

Mary piped up. "If you all think you're moving me at this point," she called in the direction of the bathroom, "you're fucking nuts! I'm not going anywhere. Ken!"

Devlin watched, enthralled.

Dr. Warden walked to the foot of the bed and stood behind Ken, looking over his shoulder.

"Doing great, Ken. You want me to take over?" He opened a package of sterile gloves. "I need a delivery kit," he said to the paramedics. "Just set it up right there." He motioned to Devlin's side of the bed.

"I'd like to deliver the baby," Ken said, but he added, "Stay right here in case I mess up."

They all watched, breaths held, as the head slid farther out with the next contraction.

"Somebody fetch the baby blankets," ordered Dr. Warden.

Devlin disengaged her hand from Mary's and hurried down the hall to the laundry room. She grabbed three baby blankets out of the dryer and returned just in time to witness the baby's head pop out. She gasped in amazement. She'd never given a thought to exactly how a woman in labor could get such a big head out of such a small space, but apparently, it was possible.

Ken let out a whoop while Mary groaned in relief.

"Move over," said Dr. Warden. He grabbed a blue bulb syringe and suctioned out the baby's mouth and nose. "Mary, pant for a moment, please. Don't push. We've got some pretty big shoulders here, thanks to your husband, I suspect. I'm going to have to wriggle them out. Just hang in there for a minute."

As another contraction started, Devlin watched in fascination as Dr. Warden exerted gentle downward pressure on the baby's head while reaching inside Mary to slip a finger under the baby's arm. Out popped a shoulder. Then he maneuvered the baby's head upward, and out popped the other shoulder.

"Okay, push." He grinned. "Let's see the rest of this kid. Hand me a blanket, will you, please?"

With shaking hands, Devlin reached for the pile of blankets and thrust one in his direction as the baby slid all the way out, squawking loudly. It was a girl. Devlin felt wet tears on her cheeks, though she didn't remember crying. She glanced at Delores and Ken and saw that they were crying too. Mary, on the other hand, wore a grin that stretched from ear to ear.

She reached for her baby, and Dr. Warden obliged, wrapping the child in a warm blanket and settling her on Mary's chest. Kenneth replaced Delores and slipped an arm around his wife. He and Mary studied their child, cooing as they touched her downy head, opened her tiny, perfect

hands, and counted her fingers and toes, utterly entranced. Neither seemed to notice when the placenta was delivered.

Within a few moments, the baby latched onto Mary's breast. Feeling like her presence was intrusive, Devlin slipped away to make coffee for the paramedics and Dr. Warden. Touching her cheeks, she felt more tears. She'd seen animals born, calves, puppies, kittens, goats, foals, but never had a birth been so personal. Mary and Kenneth were a real family now.

Though they made her feel welcome, the birth of this baby reminded her that she was not truly a member of it. She was eighteen. It was time to move on.

Although she'd never really thought about it, Devlin now knew she wanted children of her own. She thought about Ken's whoop of joy at his first sight of the baby, and instead she heard Jake's voice. She had a vision of Jake lying at her side, his arm around her, as they explored their child together. The vision seemed so real, Devlin's legs began to tremble. She grabbed for the edge of the kitchen table to steady herself.

This is just because of everything that's happened, Devlin told herself. *The vision means nothing. It's a figment of my overactive imagination.*

Devlin had just spent nearly two years learning that there was a huge difference between wishing for something and actually getting it. In her experience, wishes seldom came true. Jake was a grown man. He didn't need a girl by his side. He needed a woman.

The sooner I face that fact, Devlin told herself, *the sooner I can move on with my life.*

At the thought of leaving Jake behind, a deep ache started in her chest. In an instant, it spread through her entire body. She felt like she did back in the hospital, unable to catch her breath.

Devlin ran to the counter and grabbed Mary's address book, knowing Mary had the number to Jake's parents' ranch. She thumbed through it, fingers clumsy, searching for the Ms, then stopped, forcing herself to set the book down. She couldn't do it, ask him to save her once again. Save her from herself. He deserved better than that.

Devlin took a deep breath, focusing her attention on the present. She stood in Mary's kitchen. She took in the countertops, the cabinets, the refrigerator. Moving mechanically, Devlin opened the shoebox full of homemade cookies Delores had brought with her. She got out a platter and

filled it, then brewed some coffee and put out coffee mugs, cream, and sugar.

Devlin considered her options. The grand jury had delivered their indictments. Her uncle's girlfriend had plea-bargained and would soon head to a federal prison for five years. Her uncle was unlikely to reappear, unless he wanted to walk straight into the hands of the police and federal authorities. Her aunt was dead.

Devlin could stay here, go to school here, get a job, but she had no real roots in Denver. Jake had kept her grounded for months, but being with him wasn't an option. He'd accepted a job in Missoula. He'd be moving there in May. The last thing he needed was a frightened, helpless little girl tagging along. No, Devlin decided, as the paramedics and Dr. Warden made their way toward the kitchen, the time had come for her to return home.

* * * *

Jake had never been so frustrated. He'd been out of touch for a week. The blizzard had downed power lines, and phone service was spotty. Every day, from before sunrise until long after dark, he spent with the stock. The cows had begun to drop their calves. Shelter and warmth meant the difference between life and death. Jake, his father, and his brother worked themselves ragged, driving the herd to protected pastures, rounding up strays, and hauling feed through heavy snows to stranded cows. His mother practically lived in the barn, nursing several orphaned calves. The horses and the dogs worked as hard as the men. Jake made sure the horses were bedded down dry in the stable every night with plenty of water and an extra ration of oats.

Before he turned in each night, Jake was tempted to call Devlin, but he was dead on his feet. He knew he'd only have a few hours of sleep before it was time to check on the cows again. After he'd missed her that first night, the night of her birthday, he was worried she'd be hurt. He didn't think he could deal with that. Devlin was a punch in the gut.

She'd turned eighteen. He could have her if he wanted and if she wanted. Jake wanted her, but not at the expense of her innocence and his self-respect. Despite the fact that he had genuine feelings for her, she depended upon him. He would be an asshole to take advantage of that. He

only wished his brain knew that when he was asleep. Devlin was killing him in his dreams. He was afraid he'd revert to adolescence. A wet dream at this age would be humiliating.

He'd called the day after her birthday, only to find that she and Delores had gone out to a movie, giving Mary and Ken some time alone with their new baby. Ken sounded like he'd been asleep, so Jake kept the call short. He congratulated him and sent his love to Mary and little Catherine Abigail Workman. Ken said he'd tell Devlin about the call and then signed off. Jake expected her to call back, but she hadn't. Sighing, Jake ran his hands through his hair. Maybe it was for the best.

"Thinking about her, are you?" his mother said.

"Who, Ma?" asked Jake as he turned around, a note of exasperation in his voice.

"The girl. You love her, don't you?"

Jake had never been able to lie to his mother. Even when he was a little boy, no matter how hard he tried, no matter how good the story he made up, she always knew. He gave up trying long ago.

"I don't know. Maybe. She's young, Ma, too young for me."

"How young?"

"Eighteen."

His mother folded her arms. "It's old enough. I married your father at eighteen."

"I'm not talking about marriage, Ma. You know as well as I do that I'm not ready to settle down. And Dev shouldn't even be thinking about it right now. She has her whole life ahead of her."

"Is that her name then? Dev?"

"Eleanor Devlin Barre. She goes by Devlin."

"You've been wrestling with this for months, Jake. I've heard it in your voice over the phone. I hear it in your voice now." She gave him a wicked grin. "You've got it bad, Jake McKenna."

"Ma!" Jake blurted out, surprised laughter in his voice.

Jake's mother reached up and patted his cheek. "It will all work out in the end. Love always does, one way or another."

"Oh," laughed Jake. "And that cryptic remark is supposed to make it all better?"

"You have a great big heart, Jake. I've been waiting for the day you'd find someone to give it to. I suspect you've found her. You're just not sure it's the right time. And probably, it isn't. You're still figuring out what you want to do with your life. Don't be too hard on yourself. You want her. It's written all over your face. That doesn't make you a bad person. That's what you're worried about, isn't it?"

Jake threw his arms around his mother. The top of her head barely reached the middle of his chest. He wondered how she did it, managed to survive with three very large, testosterone-laden men.

"How do you know these things?" He shook his head.

She looked up and winked at him. "Easy. I'm your mother. I know my boys and pay attention. Besides, you've been touchy, on edge, like a stallion who's caught scent of a mare in season."

"Jeez, Ma! Do you have to be so graphic?" Jake could feel his face turning beet red.

"We live on a ranch. I married your father." She laughed. "What do you expect? Now let me go. These calves won't feed themselves."

Jake kissed his mother's brown curls and released her. As she walked toward the stalls, she turned back to look at him.

"Young or not, she must be something very special to catch your heart."

"She is," replied Jake. "She most definitely is."

Chapter Seven

August 10, 1984

Devlin gripped the arm of the seat as the plane hit some turbulence. Normally she loved to fly. Today she was nervous. She was on her way to Denver. Three months ago, Beth had asked her to be a bridesmaid. Thrilled that Mike was finally making an honest woman of her after all this time, Devlin agreed without hesitation. Then it occurred to her. Jake would be Mike's best man. She hadn't seen him in over four years. Four long, eventful years.

She thought back to her eighteenth birthday. He never did call. He'd made a break, let her down easily. It hurt that he hadn't given her an explanation, didn't say good-bye, and never tried to get in touch with her. Devlin accepted it, tried to get past it, but it still hurt. She missed him. Not a day went by that she didn't think about him or scan a crowd of people for his face. It was like a bad habit. She'd walk down a crowded street and scan the approaching faces, searching for Jake's. She expected to catch a glimpse of him in movie theaters, restaurants, museums, airports.

She made sure she wasn't obvious, and she didn't mention it to anyone, but the hope that she'd see him again, that he'd find her somehow, never went away. The biggest problem of all was in her bed. Jake was smack in the middle of every relationship she'd had since Denver. A long, hard, hot presence hogging up too damn much space. Now she would see him again in the flesh. Tonight, in fact.

Devlin had no idea how she'd react. She'd been back a number of times to visit Mary and Ken, and her energetic goddaughter Katie. She'd spent a lot of time with Mike and Beth, but Jake was never around. She didn't know if that was by design or by accident. She knew he lived in Missoula and worked for the Bureau of Land Management. He continued to volunteer for

the mountain search and rescue with the sheriff's department. Mike mentioned he'd bought four thousand acres near Stanley, Idaho and he planned to build a cabin. Devlin tried to be happy for Jake. He was born to live in the mountains. She avoided the topic of his love life like the plague, and so did everyone else. The only thing she knew for certain was that he hadn't married.

Devlin wasn't the same lost girl who'd flown away from him four years ago, all her possessions stowed in a backpack. She'd invented a life for herself. It was a good life for the most part and getting better all the time. When Devlin had arrived back in Omaha four years ago, the first thing she'd done was take a taxi to Walnut Hill Cemetery in Council Bluffs to see her family's gravesite. She'd only been there once. Her aunt had taken her after she was discharged from the hospital, right before they left for Denver. Her aunt had pushed Dev up the hill in her wheelchair. She couldn't get the chair over the grass and Devlin couldn't walk, so she had to look at the graves from the sidewalk, a dozen or so yards away. At that time, the graves had been littered with dead flowers. When Devlin arrived in mid-April, they were littered with dead leaves.

On this visit, Devlin had reached down to touch the earth above her family. The soil had been cold and wet. When Devlin pressed her palms to it, all she'd felt was death. Yet when she'd cleared the leaves, she'd seen green, the pale green of Irish moss, the emerald green sprouts of young spring grass, even the forest green tips of irises pushing through the loose dirt. Devlin had recalled a lecture she'd attended in Grinnell. She could hear her mother's voice as clear as if she sat in the lecture hall.

"The ancients believed life and death to be circular, with no beginning and no end. Endless cycles of time. Everything repeated. In death there is rebirth. In birth, there is already death. I suppose you can look at time and space the same way. Circular. If you could travel in a straight line faster than the speed of light, would you end up at your starting point? Or would you never move at all? Is our universe infinitely circular, or is it ever expanding? Does time move linearly? Or does it double back upon itself? These are the questions you'll ask yourself for the next few years, possibly for the rest of your life. Physics and religion are a circle. Sometimes it's hard to tell where one field begins and the other ends. They ask the same questions and sometimes arrive at similar conclusions."

"I have a lot of questions, Mom," Devlin sighed, "but no answers. I wish time would come around again, because you could tell me what to do. It only seems to do that in my dreams."

She'd risen with care, unwilling to disturb the new growth over the gravesites. The wind had picked up. Devlin had slung her backpack over her shoulder and headed farther up the hill. She'd unzipped the pack and lifted out the jar carrying her aunt's ashes. Standing with her back to the wind, she emptied the jar. The ashes swirled in random eddies around weathered granite monuments before vanishing into the trees.

"Ashes to ashes, Aunt Carolyn. I forgive you." Devlin had turned away, stuffed the jar into her pack, and headed to the cab without a backward glance.

She had met with the lawyer, Charles Petrakis, in Council Bluffs. He apprised her of all her holdings, how much was in land, how much in investments, the life insurance payouts and her parents' retirement benefits, which had been assigned to her. She listened in silence. After deciding upon a reasonable monthly allowance for herself, she left the remainder in his capable hands, including the money she'd earned from the sale of her aunt's house in Denver. Her grandparents had obviously trusted Mr. Petrakis, and she had no reason to doubt that he would do his best for her. At that point in time, she had no idea what she would do with the money anyway.

She had called Mary's brother Mark from Mr. Petrakis' office and asked him to meet her. Devlin had already decided that if he wanted her grandparents' farm, she'd sell it to him at a very fair price. If she thought he'd accept, she'd have given it to him outright, but Delores and Mary not only insisted he'd never accept, they'd told Devlin Mark would be insulted.

Mark arrived with his wife, Angela, wrapping Devlin in a great big bear hug. Devlin was delighted to see him. Like every other little girl in the county, she'd had a crush on him when he was captain of the high school basketball team. He was no longer the tall, wiry string bean Devlin remembered. Mark had grown into a handsome man. He'd filled out, his voice had deepened, and he already looked like a farmer with his clean, faded blue jeans, neatly tucked-in flannel shirt, worn work boots, and the fine lines etched into the corners of his eyes by wind and sun and cold weather.

He had agreed to Devlin's proposal. When their business was done, Mark turned to her. "Where are you staying?"

"I haven't made any plans."

"You'll come home with us," insisted Angela.

At first, Devlin declined. She wasn't sure she could handle that, but then she'd abruptly changed her mind. She wanted to see the farm.

"Why not?" She shrugged. "I'd love to spend some time there."

So, Devlin had gone with Mark and Angela. Gazing around her at the house, the barn, the exposed wet black earth in the tilled fields, Devlin felt she had finally come home.

The next day, her old friend Jason, Mark and Mary's younger brother, appeared, two horses in tow. She'd run from the house, leaped into his open arms, and he'd twirled her around the yard until they both fell, dizzy and laughing, into the greening grass. Jason pinned her to the ground, tickling her as he'd done when they were kids. Devlin felt a brief moment of panic at being restrained. She'd reminded herself that this was Jason. They'd known each other since they were in diapers.

"God, you're a bag of bones." He grinned a little nervously, rolling off her. "You need to fatten up, girl."

"Yeah, thanks," said Devlin, grinning back. "What's that old saying—you can never be too skinny or too rich?"

"So, I guess you're both now, huh?" he teased.

Devlin punched him in the arm, hard.

"Ow!" Jason yelped, pretending to rub his upper arm. "You hurt me!"

"Big baby. C'mon, let's go."

She had stood up, then reached a hand to Jason, pulling him to his feet. They brushed the dirt off their clothes, and Jason pulled a few dead leaves and twigs from Devlin's long hair. She combed it through with her fingers, tying it back in a knot.

The two old friends had ridden bareback all over what was soon to become Jason's brother's farm and the adjoining Lyman property. The sun came out when they stopped at their old tree house for a picnic. Jason had packed a backpack with fried chicken, potato chips, apples, and two bottles of Coca-Cola. They sat in the doorway of the weathered tree house, legs dangling in the warm sunshine, leaning companionably against each other.

Neither said a word. It almost felt like old times, almost. The day was bittersweet. Devlin knew that no day would be like old times again.

Later, after the real estate contracts were signed, Jason had driven her to the DMV so she could get a copy of the driver's license she'd lost in the accident. Then they headed to the local Toyota dealership, where she bought a brand new, two-door, five-speed black Toyota Celica. Jason thought it looked sportier than the Corolla. Devlin paid cash. She'd never done anything like that before in her life. She'd never even imagined it.

Driving away from the car dealership, Devlin had felt a half smile on her lips as the image of the girl she had been floated before her eyes, the girl everyone swore would make her parents old before their time. She owed it to her family to make the most of herself. To make the most of what they'd taught her and do the right thing with all they'd left behind.

Two days later, with a promise to keep in touch, Devlin had kissed everyone good-bye and tossed her backpack into the passenger seat of her Celica. Mark tried to insist that she take her grandfather's shotgun, for her own protection, but Devlin didn't want to drive with it in the car. He agreed to ship it to her, along with some photos, when she had a place of her own. She headed east on Interstate 80 and didn't stop until she hit the exit for Highway 146, for Grinnell. Devlin pulled off onto the highway, but after a sudden change of heart, she made a quick U-turn. She merged back onto the freeway and continued on to Chicago.

As her dad used to say, "*Who'da thunk it?*"

She ended up following a college class around the Museum of Natural History. Before she knew it, she had taken over the lease of a town house on Lakeshore Drive in Chicago from two senior students. She was now a graduate of the Art Institute, with a double major in art history and graphic design.

Just last week, Devlin had learned she'd been accepted into a prestigious two-year internship in textile design with a fashion house in Paris. Jason and his girlfriend had agreed to sublet her town house in September, when he was set to begin law school at the University of Chicago. All she had to do now was close up her home in Grinnell. But she had time. She wasn't expected in Paris until late December.

Devlin was glad she'd have a few weeks of winter in Grinnell. Winter was her favorite season. After her sophomore year, she'd purchased a two-

bedroom farmhouse twenty minutes outside town. It sat on twenty-five acres of pastureland. Behind the house was a large natural pond, surrounded by a thick grove of tall oaks, lacy elm, and fat mulberry. In the spring and fall, the pond made a convenient rest stop for migrating geese and ducks. A pair of golden eagles nested in the tallest oak. In the two years she'd lived there, they'd successfully raised two chicks before they, too, headed south.

Because of school, Devlin spent most of her time in Chicago, but as holidays, vacations, and free weekends neared, her anticipation would grow. Mary worried about the isolation, but Devlin preferred the quiet. She no longer dreaded being alone with her memories, determined not to live in fear of her uncle.

Devlin loved to walk the empty fields in the cold, winter sunshine, searching for rabbit and deer tracks in the snow, sometimes finding those of a fox or a coyote. Every day the animals laid new tracks crisscrossing the old. Following them always filled Devlin with a feeling of renewal. It seemed to her as though life was laid down new again every single day, just like the animal tracks. There were still times when Devlin still felt like that proverbial tree falling in the woods. There was no one to hear. She belonged to no one, and no one belonged to her. When she saw her tracks beside those of the animals, she knew she was real. The tracks made a sound. It was just a very quiet sound.

Devlin allowed her nearest neighbor to use a portion of her acreage to grow corn and hay for his livestock. In exchange, over the past two years, he'd reroofed her house, painted the exterior, and helped her install a woodburning stove.

She'd bought an old pickup truck to keep at the house, using it to haul furniture and fixtures she discovered at flea markets and garage sales. She'd remodeled as much of the interior as she could, sanded and stained the hardwood floors, hired a local contractor to modernize the kitchen and bath, used the walls as her canvas, changing textures and colors depending upon her mood or current project. She'd designed and sewn her own curtains and slipcovers. Her home had a warm, comfortable feeling, but at the same time, she managed to create an iconoclastic, kitschy, secondhand look that her friends from Chicago adored. She loaned the home out to anyone who wanted to get away from the city for the weekend. With the help of her neighbor, she'd even insulated and wired the small barn and set up a studio.

Devlin didn't dare use space heaters, the fire risk was too great, but on days above freezing, she could usually be found there sketching designs or dyeing, waxing, bleaching, or painting fabrics.

* * * *

Another hard bump jolted Devlin out of her reverie. She searched the airplane cabin for the flight attendants, to see if they were strapped in their seats or if they were still passing drinks. From their relaxed behavior, it appeared this was only slightly greater than normal turbulence near the front range of the Rockies.

Glancing at her watch, Devlin figured they'd be landing in twenty minutes. Stomach churning, Devlin thought about Jake. There was no person on this planet she wanted to see more than Jake McKenna, yet she was more nervous than when she'd flown to Paris in April for her interviews. If Devlin kept her distance, if she never saw him again, she could console herself with dreams of what might have been. Once she came face-to-face with him, she worried there would be no more pretending. In the brief time she'd known him, Jake meant more to her than anyone on Earth. From the moment she opened her eyes, he had been able to read her like a book. She wondered if he still cared. If Jake was expecting to find the same broken young girl, if he wanted to fix her, he'd be disappointed. Over the past four years, she'd managed to patch her own holes. Maybe she did a half-assed job at times, Devlin mused, and maybe things didn't always turn out exactly as planned, but she was still standing.

The pilot announced the final descent into Stapleton Airport. Checking her seat belt, stomach fluttering, Devlin took a deep breath. She could no more control her reaction to Jake McKenna than she could stop the world from turning.

* * * *

Jake paced in front of the gate. He was very early. He had flat out told everyone, Mike, Beth, Mary, and Ken, that he was meeting Devlin's flight, alone. They could all butt out. He'd spent enough time without her. Four long years spent thinking about her every single day, dreaming about her

almost every night, seeing her face in every young woman he passed. The very idea of her had ruined every relationship for him. He tried, oh how he had tried, to put her out of his mind, but she never stayed away for more than a few hours. If he was with a woman, no matter how much he enjoyed her company, after a time he'd simply drift out of her life. Jake knew he hurt them, but it came down to the fact that he didn't want any anyone else. His heart was set on Devlin Barre, and he felt he'd kept his distance long enough. Four years was a long time to love someone in utter silence.

Beth had nodded her agreement. Mike had slapped him on the back, shoved him toward the door. "Go for it," he'd said. "It's about time, you stubborn ass."

Mary had spoken up. "Devlin has made a good life for herself. She's put the past behind her. I'm worried that seeing you might stir up all the old memories."

Ken had disagreed. "I'm sorry, Jake. I forgot to give Devlin your message four years ago. By the time I remembered, I figured it was for the best."

"I told him to forget about it," said Mary.

If Mary hadn't been eight months pregnant with her second child, and if it hadn't been for the fact that he knew she was right, Jake might have said something he'd regret later. He had to be honest with himself. Things would never have worked with Devlin back then. He hadn't been ready to settle down, and she was too young, utterly unprepared for a serious relationship. She'd been through too much trauma for either of them to consider it.

Four and a half years ago, he'd torn up the roads getting back to Denver after leaving the ranch. He had wanted to lay his cards on the table, find out what Devlin was thinking, see if they could come to some agreement about how to keep in touch. He hadn't planned to force her to do anything. Jake had already talked to her about the ranch, and she seemed interested. His parents had agreed she was welcome to stay with them as long as she wished. All his dad cared about was that she was competent on a horse and good with a rifle. If she met those criteria, she was all right with him. Jake's mom had simply said he had to do what was best for Devlin, do whatever Devlin decided. Well, apparently she'd gone ahead and decided what was best, and whatever it was, left him out of the picture entirely.

When Jake had knocked on Mary and Ken's front door, he hadn't known what to expect. Though he'd hated to admit it, he was hurt Devlin hadn't returned his phone call, but he'd figured as busy as they'd all been with the new baby, she probably hadn't had time, or maybe it had slipped her mind.

Ken had answered the door, a cloth diaper thrown over his shoulder, a squalling bundle in his arms. He'd ushered Jake in, then kicked the door shut behind him and with a big grin, handed the screaming baby to Jake. Jake was a sucker for an infant, and all his friends knew it.

As if he was born to hold a baby, Jake had pressed little Katie against his chest, swaying back and forth, humming in his low voice. Within two minutes, her little fist wrapped tight around Jake's thumb, she had closed her big blue eyes and fallen fast asleep.

"Thank God you got back!" whispered Ken with a soft laugh. "I don't know how much more of this colic I can take!"

"You have to warm up their bellies." Jake had continued to rock the baby back and forth. "If nothing else works, try the football hold."

He'd repositioned Katie to illustrate the football hold to Ken. She hadn't stirred. Jake had been babysitting his older brother's two kids for years.

"Keep your hand on her belly, and let her head rest on your arm, in the crook of your elbow," he'd explained. "With a colicky kid, you gotta keep moving. That's the secret, just like a colicky horse." Jake had paused in his explanation to look around the living room for a sign of either Mary or Devlin.

"Mary's in the shower," said Ken, noticing Jake's look. He had reached for his baby, attempting to position her as Jake had shown him. "Devlin's gone."

"Gone where?" Jake figured she was out running errands.

Ken had glanced at him. "Gone, gone. Back to Iowa, I guess. I'm not real clear."

Despite the shock he felt, Jake had tried hard to keep his voice low and under control. "What the hell are you talking about? She took off? Just like that? When's she coming back?"

"I don't know." Ken had looked a little flustered. "All I know is that a couple days after the baby was born, she announced she was leaving. She

packed up her stuff and took a cab to the airport. She caught a plane to Omaha."

"Jesus Christ!" Jake hadn't bothered to keep his voice down. "Nobody tried to talk her out of it? Do you even have a fucking clue where she is? What if her uncle shows up?"

"Sorry, buddy. She turned eighteen. She can go where she wants. Mary tried to convince her to stay with us, at least for another six months or so, but she'd made up her mind. Look," said Ken with an exhausted sigh, "I have my own kid and my own wife and my own medical practice to worry about. I don't have time to watch over Devlin. It's nothing personal, man. She made her choice. I just stood back and let her. Maybe you should too."

Jake was speechless. He'd groped for the nearest chair and had practically fallen into it.

"Look, I'll go get Mary. She might have some answers for you. I'm sorry I'm not more help." Ken had headed toward the hallway, his daughter in his arms. "As long as this little munchkin's asleep, I'm gonna catch a few winks."

"Ken," Jake had called, "hold up." He joined him near the doorway. "Congratulations. She's beautiful." Jake drew his calloused palm across the baby's fuzzy head. Leaning his lanky body down, he'd kissed her gently. "God, I love that baby scent."

"Yeah, me too," replied Ken, adoration on his face as he'd gazed at his sleeping child. "When she was born, wow. I can't explain the feeling. It was simply overwhelming. Guess you'll have to find out for yourself someday."

"Guess I will," agreed Jake. "Do me a favor. Give my love to Mary, and tell her I'll come by later this week. If you two need anything, anything at all, you know how to find me. Take care of this little angel."

Ken had put his free hand on his friend's shoulder. "You know me. I've never been the most tactful person. I'm sorry if I was blunt, but I think you need to let her go. She's not ready for you, Jake. Even if you don't know it, she does. You can't fix her heart, my friend. Devlin has to figure out a way to do that herself."

* * * *

Jake checked his watch. Her plane was due in thirty minutes. He thought about grabbing a cup of coffee, but he wasn't sure his stomach could handle it. He felt like a teenager out on his first date. Jake wondered what she'd think of him now. Had he changed much? Would Devlin like the changes? Would she even care? Had she found someone else, someone she was serious about? He was pretty sure she hadn't, but he'd never had the courage to come right out and ask. Jake grinned. To think that a woman had him sweating like this. No woman had ever gotten the better of Jake McKenna, at least not until a mere slip of a girl named Devlin Barre came along.

Janice had tried to get the better of him one more time. She failed in spectacular fashion. He'd gone to his apartment after leaving Mary and Ken's, tossed his duffel bag on the bed, and headed to the nearest bar. Jake wasn't generally a drinking man, but Devlin's abrupt departure seemed to require something in the way of a mind altering substance. He had been pretty far gone by the time Mike found him four hours later, sprawled over the pool table with a bloody lip. Mike's face hovering above the eight ball was the last thing he had remembered until the next morning when he woke up in his own bed, his head pounding, clothes tossed carelessly on the floor, horrified to find an equally naked Janice at his side, pretending to be asleep.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" he'd yelled, holding his head in both hands. "Get up, and get the hell out of my bed!"

He'd shaken her arm, and she'd opened her eyes slowly, trying to look innocent.

"What are you yelling about, Jake? Last night was amazing, darling. Just like old times."

"I don't know what you're up to, but it won't work. Get your clothes on, and get the hell out of here!"

"But Jake, don't you remember what we did last night? You really don't remember?"

"I may be hungover, but I'm not stupid. Whatever you're trying to imply, forget it. I did not screw you last night. I would know."

"Would you, Jake? Would you really?"

"Yeah. Hell yeah. We didn't fuck. I can't smell it. I smell nothing but Scotch. Get out of my bed, now. Before I call the cops and have you arrested for breaking and entering."

"You would, wouldn't you! Just like you did to my mom! Mr. Nice Guy, Jake McKenna, sends his girlfriend's mother to prison!"

"You're not my girlfriend, and I didn't send your mother to prison. She sent herself. She aided and abetted a murderer. Now get out, Janice. If you think you're going to punish me somehow, it's not gonna work. Get out of my house, and stay the hell away from me!"

Jake had woven his way wearily to the bathroom and slammed the door behind him.

Her voice had come through the door. "How do you know we did it in the bed?"

Jake had puked his guts out for what seemed like twenty minutes. When he finally opened the door, Janice was nowhere to be seen. He'd pushed his hair out of his eyes and dialed Mike's number.

"Why the fuck was Janice in my bed this morning?" he asked the second Mike picked up.

"What the hell you talking about?"

"Janice. Naked. In my bed. This morning."

"How the hell should I know?" Mike had sounded confused. "I got a call from Ed that you were at Sam's, threatening to break some asshole's nose with a pool cue. When I got there, you were passed out. Ed and I carried you to my car. We brought you home, let you in, you said you'd be okay, and you shut the door behind you. What do you mean Janice was naked in your bed?"

Jake had taken a deep breath. "I gotta puke some more."

Jake had slumped in the shower, both hands propped against the wall for support, letting the water run over his aching head and shoulders. He'd brushed his teeth three times, but he could still taste everything he'd puked up. He'd searched his memory until the water turned to ice, but for the life of him, Jake could not remember doing anything besides sleeping. He'd vaguely remembered Mike's partner, Ed, at the bar. He'd thought he remembered Mike saying something as he'd pulled his shoes off at the door but that was it, everything else was a blank. He'd never been that drunk. Jake was pretty sure that, even if he'd wanted to, he wouldn't have been able to get it up to save his life. Jesus, for all he knew, she was pregnant again and wanted to pass the kid off as his. Just to get back at him.

Jake had dried off and brushed his teeth again, then searched his medicine cabinet for a bottle of aspirin. He'd popped three in his mouth. Wrapping a towel around his waist, he had headed out to get a glass of water when he smelled coffee. He'd hoped to God it wasn't Janice again, because this time, he really would call the cops, after he dumped her outside on her lying little ass. It was Mike, sitting at the table, spooning sugar into a cup of coffee.

"I knew we shoulda locked your door." Mike shook his head. "That's how Janice got in, you know. Damn it. Walked right in. How do you know you didn't screw her?"

"I'm ninety-nine percent certain I didn't screw her." Jake had grabbed a cup for himself.

"Yeah, well, it's not the ninety-nine percent you have to worry about. It's the one percent. I can't believe she did that."

"Believe it." Jake had set his coffee down on the table and reached for a chair. "The only thing I can figure is she knew I was passed out drunk. That's the only thing that makes any sense. If I'd been awake and sober, I'd never have let her within fifty feet of me. Janice is no dummy. And she is one pissed-off woman."

"How pissed off?"

"Out for some sort of twisted revenge, I guess."

"Revenge against whom?"

Jake had rolled his eyes. "Who do you think? Me."

"Maybe. I'm thinking more, uh, something along the lines of Devlin."

"Shit. Hell no!" Jake had shoved his coffee cup away. "I can't see her blaming Devlin for the mess she's in. Me, yes, not Devlin."

"You don't think she's pissed off enough to maybe go talk to her mother and find out where William Franz might be hiding? And maybe send him a little note?"

"That's the cop talking. I thought you said Rebecca Matheson didn't know where he was."

Mike had looked thoughtful. "That's what she claimed, but you never know. And you can't be too careful. Maybe we should keep a close eye on Devlin, or maybe it would be better if she got out of Denver altogether."

"Too late. She's already gone. She left last week while I was at the ranch."

"You're kidding! When did you find this out?"

"Yesterday."

Mike had leaned back in his chair. "So that explains the drunk last night. Where'd she go?"

"Iowa."

"She coming back?"

"No."

Mike had whistled through his teeth. "Shit. You gonna go get her?"

"No."

* * * *

Waiting by the gate, Jake recalled every word of that conversation. He wondered, not for the first time, if he should have gone after her. What would he have done if he'd found her? Demand that she return to Denver to live with Mary? Force her to accompany him to Montana? Other people had controlled her life for too long. Mary and Ken had been right. He had needed to let her go. Let her figure out for herself what she wanted to do, who she wanted to be, and where she wanted to be. But now, four and a half years later, he had to know if there was a chance for them. He had to know one way or the other.

Staring out the plate glass window, Jake wondered if he should tell Devlin about Janice, about how Mike was right and she got herself pregnant, then tried to play the old "*Who's your daddy?*" game.

It hadn't worked. Jake's blood type was O negative. Janice was A positive. He'd come back from Montana for the birth and demanded a blood test, insisting upon reading the results himself. Her baby boy was B positive. There was no doubt. It wasn't his child.

He had felt bad for the kid, he even offering to help Janice out if she needed it for old time's sake. She'd told him to go fuck himself. That was the last he saw of her. He figured the little boy would be three and a half now. It was one of those unpleasant episodes he preferred not to think about. As far as telling Devlin, he thought he'd see what developed first. Besides, it wasn't relevant. As it was, Jake figured he and Devlin would have to spend some time clearing the air, and he didn't think Janice would be a helpful

topic of discussion, especially considering what her mother had done to help William Franz.

Jake had been floored when he arrived in town and saw the dresses Devlin designed for the bridesmaids. They were made of a champagne-colored silk taffeta, not that Jake knew champagne-colored silk taffeta from a hole in the ground. Devlin had not only designed and sewn the dresses, she'd painted a pattern of chrysanthemums on them that somehow appeared to be done in reverse, like the negative of a photograph. The fabric was already pale, and the pattern was so delicate that it added—Jake smiled to himself as he remembered Beth's words—“*an understated elegance*” to the dresses.

Beth had made him stand on the other side of the living room, as she held up a dress in a patch of sunlight. From that distance, the flowers shimmered. Beth twirled the dress in a slow circle. Jake had noticed that, as the dress moved, the flowers seemed to sway. Normally, the only thought Jake gave to a dress was how quickly he could get a woman out of it, but he'd run his hand over the fabric. It'd felt as light as air, yet the bodice, as Beth called it, held its shape. Devlin had even wrapped the wide belts with the same fabric. Beth had demonstrated how the calf-length skirts billowed out when a woman walked, swishing from side to side.

Jake knew Devlin was smart, but he'd never realized she had such artistic talent. Proud of her, Jake had pictured Devlin in the dress, and then, unable to stop himself, he'd imagined removing it. His cock had swelled in an instant, forcing him to move behind a table to feign interest in wedding gifts. He was so engrossed in his fantasy that he'd almost missed Beth's next statement. She said Devlin had accepted an internship in textile design in Paris. It was as if she'd just thrown a bucket of cold water over his head.

Watching the jets take off and land, Jake reminded himself that he wasn't sure Devlin even wanted anything to do with him. Yet he couldn't help but picture her in the dress again, and he felt himself stir.

* * * *

Devlin waited for the aisle to clear in front of her, trying to ignore the butterflies in her stomach. Nobody in the back of the plane moved. Next time, she decided, she'd pay the extra cost for a first class ticket. She'd

traveled so often to Denver recently that it made more sense to have a little space and get right off the plane. Devlin assumed Mary would be meeting the plane. What if Jake came with her? Devlin had no idea how she'd react. This snail's pace was killing her. The sooner she got off this plane, the sooner she could deal with her uncertainties.

Finally, the row in front of Dev emptied, and she was able to grab her hanging bag and make her way down the aisle. Smiling at the flight attendant, she exited the plane and headed up the ramp. Mary was nearly eight months pregnant. She shouldn't be too hard to spot, thought Devlin with a grin. And she'd have Katie with her. Devlin always looked forward to spending time with her energetic, happy-go-lucky goddaughter.

Trying to spot Mary over the stream of travelers, she saw him standing alone by the desk. Leaner, harder, more man than he'd been four years before and more striking than any man she'd ever known in her life. He stared right at her with those chocolate brown eyes.

As Jake approached, Devlin watched the muscles of his thighs contract through his faded blue jeans, and her breath caught in her throat. She froze right where she was, her feet rooted to the floor. She couldn't have moved an inch if her life depended upon it.

Jake stopped right in front of her, his face expressionless. He extended his hand. Devlin thought at first he was reaching for her arm, but instead, he ran his palm along the side of her neck and closed his eyes, as if savoring the feel of her skin. His fingers skirted her jaw and moved beneath her chin. Devlin shut her eyes and groaned aloud, everything forgotten but the touch of his hand. She couldn't help it. That simple skin-to-skin contact was what she had imagined for four long years. Jake's touch was electric. She was surprised sparks didn't shoot from his fingertips and she didn't burst into flames.

"Dev," he said in a husky whisper, "look at me."

Her eyes flew open. His eyes burned hot beneath dark brows.

"Dev," he repeated, and she almost came at the sound of his voice.

Tugging her chin forward, Jake lowered his mouth to hers. As their lips met, she knew he had her. He could lay her on the floor, strip her naked, and thrust inside her in an airport full of complete strangers, and she wouldn't utter a single word of protest. His lips were soft and full, his mouth warm and demanding. He nibbled on her, teasing her lips apart. Devlin dropped

her hanging bag to the floor and gave him complete access. His tongue danced about like fire. She threaded her hands in his long hair and pulled him closer, sucking his tongue, meeting his thrusts with her own in a slow, sensual mimicry of sex.

Nothing she'd experienced before had prepared her for the strength of her desire for Jake McKenna. Nothing.

Jake let go of her chin, wrapping his strong arms around her, sliding his hands down to the small of her back, bringing her hard against his erection. She couldn't help but press herself along his thick, rigid length. She felt a low rumble as Jake moaned into her mouth, deepening the kiss. Devlin thought she might actually be in danger of swooning her knees grew so weak. Jake's arms alone kept her upright.

"Excuse me."

From a great distance, Devlin thought she heard a voice.

"Excuse me."

The voice came again, louder and more persistent.

"Sir. Miss. Excuse me. I'm sorry, but this is a public place. For God's sake, there are children here!"

Jake broke off the kiss abruptly, fire in his eyes, panting as if he'd just run a race. He looked around, a dazed expression on his face, trying to locate the voice. Devlin felt light-headed, giddy, worried she might burst into giggles at any moment. She stumbled backward a few paces, and Jake grabbed her shoulders to steady her. Right behind Jake stood a dignified elderly gentleman wearing a tweed suit, leaning on a cane. Disapproval written all over his face, he tsk-tsked at them.

Devlin couldn't hold it in any longer. She exploded with laughter. She watched Jake sling her hanging bag over his shoulder, then, still whooping uncontrollably, he grasped her arm, tugging her away from the waiting area. Clinging to each other, they ran down the long corridor to the escalators that led to baggage claim.

"Which one is yours?" asked Jake, scanning for something that matched the hanging bag.

Devlin could only point as her suitcase came around the carousel. Jake grabbed for it and hoisted it up as if it was weightless. He shot her a wolfish grin that said, *Come with me*, and through her laughter, she thought, *Yes. Yes, I think I will.*

* * * *

Jake never expected to lose control like that. He never lost control. Especially not in public, in an airport, of all the damn places. He'd almost ripped their clothes off right there in the waiting area. He knew Devlin was behind him as he headed to the parking garage, but he didn't dare turn around. The minute he looked at her again, he was a goner. The moment he'd seen her step through the doorway, her long legs encased in tight denim, white sandals on her slender feet, wearing a tight white tee over bare breasts, her nipples barely disguised by a sheer overshirt, every feeling he'd bottled up inside for four long years had spilled out. Jesus, he was as hard as a rock before he even touched her. He was still hard. All he could think about was burying himself inside her, in the heat between her legs, in her sweet mouth. Lord, he ached to feel that mouth on him. She tasted like honey. He knew without a doubt that the rest of her would taste just as sweet.

No one had told him she'd cut her hair. For years he'd pictured her with that unruly waist-length auburn hair. Night after night, he'd imagined how it would feel sliding over his body as he pulled her on top of him, or how it would look spread dark and thick over his pillow, when he lay above her and kissed her full red lips, easing himself into the heat of her willing body. Her boyish cut intrigued him. He couldn't wait to wrap those curls around his fingers. It was startling how large her eyes looked now. He loved the way the cut framed her delicate face, emphasizing her high cheekbones and showcasing those lush lips. The lips that had driven him crazy in his dreams.

Devlin had changed in other ways. She was taller than he remembered. Jake was six feet, one inch, and he was sure Dev was at least five-eight. She'd stayed slender. He suspected she'd always be thin, but she walked like a woman now, with an unconscious sexy sway to her shapely hips. Her breasts were small but perfectly rounded, with the pert, constantly erect nipples he remembered, the nipples he'd had such a hard time keeping his eyes off of four years ago. He ached to expose them, rub them with his thumbs, his fingers, put his mouth on them and suck until she cried out his name.

Hell, he thought, his jeans growing more uncomfortable, if he didn't stop picturing everything he wanted to do with her, he'd come in his pants. Only Eleanor Devlin Barre, with her sparkling aquamarine eyes, her lips that demanded kissing, her infectious laugh, her keen mind, and her long, lithe body, had the power to do that to him. He just hoped he could hold out until they got to the hotel. Making love to Devlin for the first time in the backseat of his Jeep was not what he had in mind.

* * * *

Devlin thought it was just as well she walked behind Jake. She wasn't sure she could keep a straight face if he looked at her, and she knew she wouldn't be able to keep her hands off him if he was by her side. She had been laughing so hard when they stood at the baggage carousel that she couldn't speak, merely point, when her suitcase came around. Though Jake tried to hide it with her hanging bag, it was pretty hard to ignore the bulge in the front of his jeans. She just hoped everyone else was in too much of a hurry to notice. She felt a twinge of jealousy at the thought of another woman feeling what she'd felt when he pressed her against him. She didn't even want them looking at what she'd felt back at the gate.

Devlin wasn't inexperienced. She and Jason had been an item for a year and a half. They tried hard to make it work, but their close friendship got in the way, and both of them discovered they felt more comfortable with each other when they no longer shared a bed. She'd dated several men she'd met at school, and while she'd found the sex to be satisfying for a while, she'd never known anything, any man, like Jake. One look from him, one word, one touch, and she melted like butter left out in the hot summer sun.

Devlin had long legs, and she matched him stride for stride, admiring the flex of his tight buttocks as he walked six feet in front of her. Her stomach flip-flopped once again as she imagined those firm buttocks naked, moving beneath her hands, as Jake thrust into her. The picture was so vivid that her steps faltered, and she came to a complete stop.

Against her will, a soft moan escaped her. Jake stopped in midstride. Devlin knew she had betrayed herself, and her cheeks warmed. She covered her face with her hands, embarrassed that her desire for Jake was so

obvious, so close to breaking free. She was afraid she'd humiliate herself by jumping him in his car.

Suddenly she felt Jake directly in front of her. Her luggage dropped to the pavement, forgotten. He pried her hands away from her face, threading his fingers through hers and holding them to her sides. He kissed her then, hard, as if staking a claim. There was nothing Devlin wanted more than to be claimed by Jake McKenna. She moaned into his mouth, making no effort to hide her need for him. He let go of her hands then, moving them to her waist. In agonizingly slow motion, Jake tugged her tee shirt free of her jeans. His warm palms pressed against her bare belly. Dev pulled her mouth away from Jake's. Tossing back her head, she gasped at the skin-to-skin contact. His left hand moved to the small of her back, supporting her as she arched toward him, feeling his right hand slide upward, toward her breast. Jake's palm felt wonderfully rough against her sensitive skin. Her nipples burned for his touch, and Devlin thought she would explode if he didn't reach them soon.

Then his hand was there, covering her naked breast. Holding it, kneading it.

"Oh. God. Jake," was all she could manage as his thumb flicked across her nipple. He pinched it, and Devlin almost screamed. She would have if Jake hadn't backed her into a nearby pickup truck and taken her mouth with his. Devlin was out of control now as Jake thrust against her, each movement of his hips pressing the length of his stiff cock along her aching slit. She was so far gone she didn't realize he'd unzipped her jeans until she felt his strong fingers slip between her folds and rub slow circles around her clit. Jake released her mouth and buried his face in her neck. The fingers of one hand twisted her nipple while he moved his other hand lower and slid a finger inside her. His teeth were on her neck, and he bit down, hard. That was all she needed to push her over the edge. Devlin rode Jake's finger as she came, crying out his name over and over again. Her orgasm seemed to last forever. When it ended, she collapsed against him, spent. They leaned together, breathing heavily for a long time.

Jake gently, almost reluctantly, it seemed to Devlin, moved his hands from beneath her clothing, holding her against him, murmuring in a low voice. Devlin could feel the soothing vibration of his words in her chest, but she couldn't understand him, not yet anyway. She had just experienced the

most exquisite orgasm of her life. She couldn't imagine what it would be like to take him inside her, to feel him move inside her. She wondered if it was possible to die of pleasure.

Opening her eyes, Devlin found Jake looking back at her. He smiled the smile she'd come to love four years ago, the smile she felt all the way to her toes even then. The corners of his eyes crinkled, while his eyes themselves sparkled as if with private amusement, only now she knew they sparkled for her, because of what he'd just given her. She watched him bring the finger he'd had inside her to his lips. His pink tongue flicked out, and he licked it. Then he put it in his mouth and sucked, as if savoring her essence. He buried his hands in her hair and kissed her. She tasted herself on his tongue.

"I knew you'd taste sweet," he said in a rough voice, pulling away from her mouth. "Like nectar."

"Jake McKenna," Devlin answered, stroking the side of his face with her hand, running a thumb along his sensuous lips. "You leave me speechless."

"That was part of the plan," he said with a chuckle. He held her hand and turned it over to kiss her palm.

Devlin felt like she was moving in slow motion, so Jake helped her straighten her clothing. He slung her bags into the back of his Jeep and opened the door for her. As Dev climbed in, she thought that if this was only part of his plan, how on earth would she survive the rest of it?

Chapter Eight

As he drove them to the hotel, Jake allowed himself a small self-satisfied smile. He wasn't as satisfied as he would be once he'd come inside her and calmed this raging hard-on, but he knew he'd just given Dev more pleasure than he'd ever given a woman. From her response, he guessed it was more pleasure than she'd ever experienced in her life. Devlin, coming apart in a parking garage merely from his touch, made him feel more man than any woman he'd ever met. He almost laughed, but he stopped himself because he didn't want to embarrass her. He thought it was a beautiful thing, feeling her come, hearing her. He would have watched her face, but he couldn't. It would have been impossible to control himself. He figured the security tapes would be interesting enough as it was.

She was silk, everywhere. Her skin felt as satiny as it looked. One touch had his cock straining painfully against his zipper. He imagined her nipples. They would look like ripe raspberries. But they were firm, so firm to his touch. They had always been that way. Even when she'd worn bras four years ago, you could see her nipples through her shirts. It bothered him then that men looked when she walked by, especially when he'd tried so damn hard not to.

When Jake had unzipped her jeans, opened her pussy to run his fingers through her and into her, he found molten honey, so soft, sweet, and slick. It was almost impossible to remain upright when she came against his finger. My God, he thought, so this was what it was like to make love to Devlin Barre. The next few days might just kill him.

Jake doubted she realized it yet, but by the time this wedding weekend was over, she would be his, body, heart, and soul. He would make certain she knew that there was no one else out there for her, nobody who could make her feel the way he could. He was already hers. His heart had

belonged to her since she opened her eyes on that gurney four years ago and entrusted him with her name.

“So, Jake,” said Devlin, interrupting his thoughts with a crooked grin, “how have you been?”

Four years of restraint fell away as Jake began to laugh unabashedly. She’d always had a way of disarming him.

He coughed. “Just fine, Dev. How about you?”

“Oh, fine, just fine,” she answered through her own laughter.

Jake dropped a hand from the steering wheel and reached for one of hers. They sat that way in comfortable silence, all the way to the hotel.

* * * *

Mike had been waiting for Jake in the lobby, wondering if Devlin’s plane was late. He hoped to go over some details with his best man about the rehearsal schedule and the rehearsal dinner he had planned for tomorrow. After waiting nearly four years to propose, he wanted to make sure everything was perfect for Beth. When he came right down to it, he knew early on she was the one, but it took him a while to admit it. He waited until he had a sizeable down payment for a nice house with a lot of bedrooms and a big, fenced-in yard in a quiet, safe neighborhood. He wanted his kids to go to good schools, play in open parks with a horde of neighborhood kids. Because Mike wanted a horde of kids of his own.

Well, he’d saved enough money and they’d bought it. Right now, Beth was showing it off to her folks. Tonight was a cocktail party and buffet dinner for his coworkers, the out-of-town guests, and the wedding party. Mike no longer drove a black-and-white. He’d moved up last year to Homicide.

As he watched the front entrance, Devlin appeared with Jake right behind her. He saw her turn to say something in Jake’s direction. Jake stepped up to her back, leaned his head over her shoulder, and kissed her. Mike grinned when he saw Devlin wiggle around to face Jake, thread her hands into his hair, and kiss him back, just as eager. It was about damn time, he thought. Mike could have made himself scarce, but he knew Jake had already spotted him. He decided the occasion demanded a little best friend harassment. He waited for them to come up for air.

"Hey Jake, Dev, where the hell you two been? We have some business to attend to." He tried to keep a straight face.

"Later, Mike," Jake said, trying to steer Devlin beyond Mike toward the elevator.

"Jake!" exclaimed Devlin, punching him in the arm, her face turning a pretty pink with embarrassment. "Mike, you look wonderful." She gave him a hug.

"So do you, babe." He tugged on her short curls. "I like the hair."

"Thanks. Where's Beth?"

"At the house with her folks." Mike turned to Jake. "Hey, buddy, we need to go over the rehearsal schedule and talk about the dinner tomorrow. You got an hour or so? Maybe Devlin could check in and meet up with us later, at the party."

"No," said Jake.

"What do you mean no? You're my best man. We need to get this right."

"It's fine," said Devlin. "I can check in and meet you later."

Jake glowered at both of them.

"You're already checked in," he told her, ignoring Mike's telltale grin.

"No, obviously I'm not," insisted Devlin. "Give me my bags, and I'll go take care of it. You two can go do whatever it is you need to do." She looked at her watch. "No hurry, it's early. I don't need to get ready 'til late this afternoon. I can kill some time shopping or something."

Jake glared at her, then at Mike. Mike's shoulders shook with suppressed laughter.

"Really, Jake, it's okay. I'm fine on my own." Devlin attempted to reassure him with a half smile.

"You're already checked in," Jake repeated, daring Mike to interfere. He tucked his hand under Devlin's elbow and escorted her to the elevator.

Mike threw his hands up and called after him, "Well, okay then. I can always get me a new best man."

Dev started to protest, and she turned around, but Mike shot her a mischievous grin and mouthed the words, *Have fun*.

Mike watched the two of them get into the elevator, Devlin trying to discuss the situation with Jake while Jake did his best to avoid conversation.

He waved to them cheerfully as the door closed. Mike stuck his hands in the pockets of his jeans and looked in the direction they'd gone.

"It's about time," he commented aloud. "About damn time."

* * * *

As the elevator doors closed behind them, Devlin turned to argue with Jake.

"You know as well as I do that I haven't checked in." She put her hands on her hips.

"Yes, you have. I checked in for you."

"Yeah?" she asked. "Then what room am I in?"

"Mine."

Devlin burst into incredulous laughter. "Yours?"

"Mine," Jake repeated with a straight face. "Room 708."

"Jake McKenna, you don't own me. You could have asked."

Jake leaned forward and hit the emergency stop button.

"You're right," he said, "I should have asked. But I didn't want to give you the opportunity to say no. Especially not now, after what just happened between us."

Devlin blushed, but she said nothing, her eyes glued to his intense face, issuing a challenge.

"I stayed away for over four years. Four years of wet dreams about you. Hoping that someday I'd have you, that we'd have an opportunity to be together. Like this. Like we can be right now. But if you want your own room, we can go back down to the lobby, and you can get your own room. You're right, I don't own you."

Devlin saw the pain in his eyes, his worry that she might reject him. But she had to ask a question before she gave him her answer.

"Why the fuck didn't you call me on my eighteenth birthday?"

"I did. You just didn't get the message. Ken forgot."

After a moment of utter silence, she said his name, and Jake was there, holding her, kissing her. He picked her up off the floor, and she wrapped her long legs tight around his lean waist, touching him, his face, his neck, his chest. Devlin struggled to get as close as possible to this big, hard, intelligent, passionate, gentle man who'd haunted her since she'd opened

her fever-clouded eyes on a gurney in the back of Kmart. She didn't care that the elevator alarm was blaring. She didn't care that the elevator door might open and someone might find them. She didn't care what her future held in store for her, as long as her present, as long as this very moment, held Jake.

"God, I want you." His voice sounded raw with desire.

"Then take me."

"Not here," he panted. "Not in an elevator."

"Why not?" Devlin reached down and unbuttoned his jeans. She lowered the zipper, freeing him. Pressing her hand against his erection, running her fingers along his length, Devlin gasped at her first real touch of Jake. He was hot silk over thick steel. She wanted to feel him push inside her. Now.

* * * *

Jake groaned. He was at her mercy. If he didn't get inside her, he would explode in her hand. He realized Devlin had lowered her legs. She began to remove her shirt. He stood there, watching, unable to catch his breath, his cock free and painfully erect, arching toward her. She kicked her sandals into a corner and pulled off the rest of her clothes. She was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. Jake drew her toward him, leaned her over his extended arm, and closed his mouth on one of those nipples he wanted so bad. He sucked hard at the tender rose-colored tip. She trembled against him, moaning appreciatively.

"I'm sorry, baby," he said, mouth against her breast. "I can't be gentle. Not this time."

"Who's asking you to be gentle?" Dev threaded her hands in his hair. "Just fuck me, Jake. Please."

She didn't have to say another word. Jake pulled her back into his arms and lifted her legs around his waist, the entrance to her body poised above his straining cock. He rubbed himself back and forth in her moist heat while she clung to his shoulders, crying out his name. She was wet. She was hot against him. He knew she would be tight. So tight, he doubted he could hold on for long.

He wrapped his hand around the base of his cock and thrust into her, seating himself to the hilt.

Devlin gasped, “Oh God! Yes!” She came the instant he entered her. Her body contracted around him over and over again, milking him. Damn, he’d never felt anything like her. She was so incredibly responsive to his touch, his every movement. Before her orgasm ended, he began to move his hips, thrusting in and out, backing her against the elevator wall to get more leverage. He heard Devlin whimper, and for a brief instant, he was afraid he’d hurt her, but one look at her and he realized she whimpered in ecstasy. She looked right back at him, her aquamarine eyes wild, sparking gold, half closed with pleasure.

He heard Devlin murmur, “Yes, Jake. Yes. Oh my God,” and Jake knew she was coming again.

He crushed his mouth on hers, and he pumped his hips harder. He felt her second orgasm begin, and as her slick, silky body grabbed his cock, he thrust hard into her, joining them as close as was humanly possible. There wasn’t a single thought in his head. Everything about Jake, his entire consciousness, was buried deep inside Devlin. At that moment, his seed exploded from him into her very core, hot and vital, four years of dreaming about this moment ending in one indescribable, world-shattering orgasm. He groaned low in his throat, his lips pressed against hers, while she thrust her tongue into his mouth, gentle now. Jake leaned both hands against the elevator wall, legs shaking, cock still twitching, deep inside the woman he loved.

* * * *

Conscious thought returned by degrees. Devlin recognized that she still had her legs wrapped around Jake’s waist. He was still seated deep inside her. She didn’t want to let him go. Somehow, she had known that if they ever managed to get together, the two of them would be incendiary, but imagining something and actually doing it were very, very different. She had underestimated the earth-shattering power of making love to Jake McKenna. She thought of how he looked just before he came. Like a wild stallion, eyes on fire, primitive, violent, possessive, virile, yet protective all at the same time. She shivered as she pictured him making love to her from

behind. Devlin wondered if she'd lost her mind. How fast could someone go from zero to sixty? Because when she walked off that plane, she was at zero velocity. Now it felt more like she was moving at terminal velocity, and damn, but she didn't want to stop. Ever.

Jake ran his hands over her breasts, down her sides. He withdrew from Devlin, taking care not to hurt her, lowering her legs to the floor. She sucked in a breath as he did so, groaning out her disagreement. Jake smiled. He adjusted himself and zipped up his jeans.

"There's more where that came from, baby," he whispered in her ear. "But right now, I think we better get you dressed and out of this elevator before they send the cops. I just realized that someone has been buzzing us on the intercom. Probably listening to every single word we didn't say."

Devlin laughed.

* * * *

Jake helped her on with her clothes, running his fingers up the inside of her thighs as he pulled on her panties, feeling for himself the wetness they'd created between her legs. Devlin responded to his touch immediately. He thought about making her come again, but he forced himself to stop. They needed to get to the hotel room before somebody really did call the police. He loved her body. Her legs were long and leanly muscled, still coltish, as they'd been when she was younger. Though he knew Dev was self-conscious, he'd never minded the scars she carried on her thighs from the accident, when they'd had to screw together both her shattered femurs.

She had a neat patch of dark amber curls at her woman's mound. They glistened now with his semen, and he could feel himself growing hard again at the sight. Her hips were narrow, but still just rounded enough not to be boyish. He loved her flat stomach, the muscles tight, her skin pure velvet. He could see the tan lines left from what was obviously her bikini, and he hoped she'd brought it with her. He touched the slight blemish over her rib cage where her uncle had battered her and broken three ribs. He followed his fingers with his mouth, wishing he could take the mark away, the memory away, but if he did, he would never have met Dev in the first place.

Devlin had perfect breasts, Jake thought, as he helped her on with her shirt. His brother used to say when they were growing up, "*More than a*

handful is a waste.” She had two lovely, sensitive handfuls, tipped by ripe, rosy nipples that, as far as he could tell, were constantly erect, and he rubbed his palms over them one more time before her tee shirt covered them. Like her legs, her arms were lean, and he could feel the muscles ripple beneath her skin. She was scarred there too, with a large scar on her left shoulder and another on her right forearm, slicing from her wrist all the way to her elbow. Though he couldn’t see it now, he knew about the worst scar of all on her lower back, where the surgeons had fused three vertebrae. The bone grafts had left her with thin scars on both hips. He knew because he’d seen every one of them when he examined her years ago on the floor in the stock room of the Kmart. They were seared into his memory.

He reached a big, rough hand to Devlin’s neck, caressing the tiny butterfly scar in the hollow of her throat. Her hands fluttered up to cover his, her eyes searching his, questioning. In answer, he leaned down and kissed her there. Then he punched the emergency stop button again, and the elevator moved upward. Devlin retrieved her sandals in silence while Jake grabbed her bags.

“We have four hours,” Jake said with a wink. “What would you like to do?”

Devlin grinned wickedly. “Talk? We’ve got four years of catching up to do.”

“Not on your life,” replied Jake, challenging her with an equally wolfish grin. “Talk is the last thing on my mind.”

* * * *

Janice was irritated. Even from her office in the corner of the ICU, she could hear Dr. Workman chatting with Amy. Apparently Mike Jones was getting married this weekend, to that mouse he met four years ago during the William Franz episode. The incident that put her mother in prison. Dr. Workman and his wife and Amy and her husband were invited. That meant Jake would be back in town. Probably that Devlin girl too. Janice knew that it shouldn’t bother her anymore, but it did. It bothered her a lot.

Janice still considered herself an attractive woman. She was only thirty-one. Her pregnancy hadn’t changed her figure much at all. She worked hard to keep herself in good shape. It was just that one year when everything

happened that she fell apart. She hadn't had a drink since before Trevor was born. She'd kicked herself for a while, for endangering her child like that, but she was lucky. He turned out to be a good-natured, healthy little boy.

He meant the world to her. In fact, he was her one constant. Two years ago, at her father's urging and with his financial backing, the hospital had opened an on-site daycare center. After her promotion to ICU charge nurse, and her switch to day shift, she took advantage of it. Whenever she had a break, she could spend time with her son.

It was almost funny. Janice was able to enroll her son in an on-site daycare center because her father had remarried three years ago. Her stepmother, Cindy, was a surgical nurse only a year older than Janice. They'd gone to nursing school together. Now Janice had a half brother younger than her own son. The one good thing about the arrangement was that her father seemed happy, he adored his little son, and to her surprise, he adored Trevor.

Yes, Janice thought, it was almost funny. Janice had Cindy to thank for her father's change of heart. He'd disowned her when he learned she was pregnant and had no clue who the father was. But when Cindy began dating him, she convinced him that Janice had been through a difficult time and deserved a chance to pull herself together. He'd taken her in and for the first time in a long time, behaved like a father. Once Janice was back on her feet, he helped her get her old job back at the hospital, and last year she'd gotten the promotion.

There was no question about it. Things were improving. But now she had to listen to Ken Workman and Amy Connor extol the virtues of Mike Jones and that mousy little teacher. Every single word they said reminded her of Jake McKenna, the man she had wanted to marry, and that stupid runaway Devlin Barre. The two people who'd put her mother in prison. Janice found it hard to get beyond that fact.

Her mother was due to be released soon. Her sentence had been shortened for good behavior. When she was last there, Janice tried to discuss plans for the release day. She was supposed to come stay with her and Trevor, but her mother's response had been vague. She seemed distant and preoccupied, even a little divorced from reality. Janice, of all people, understood. Everyone, her former husband, her two sisters, all her friends and acquaintances, had abandoned her. Janice's father had never been to the

prison. Not once. Janice was her only visitor. At first, after Trevor was born, her mother seemed to look forward to their visits. Lately, she appeared withdrawn. Janice planned to see her next week. She'd made an appointment with the prison psychiatrist to ask if he'd evaluate her mother and make some recommendations.

Her mother shouldn't even be in this horrible situation. Janice was convinced she'd been duped by William Franz. He was off somewhere in Asia, while her mother was stuck in a cell. Just like she herself had been duped by Jake. She knew why he'd come by that night. It didn't take a genius to figure it out. She'd seen his truck parked across the street from her house. She knew Jake well enough to guess he'd come by because he was pissed off about something and he wanted to screw somebody. But he'd apparently thought better of it and driven off. The next thing she knew, he was standing on her front porch. Her heart had pounded. Despite her anger, she'd still wanted him. Despite what he did, she still wanted him. That made it even harder to forgive him.

Janice tried to put Jake out of her mind. She had a schedule to make, census figures to pull together for the administration, and staff evaluation forms to fill out. But no matter how she tried, listening to talk of Mike's wedding ate at her. After all this time, Jake's rejection still ate at her. Maybe he'd get in a car accident while he was here in Denver and end up in her ICU. Or maybe the entire wedding party could come down with food poisoning. She almost laughed aloud at the thought. She doubted she'd ever have the opportunity to mess anything up for the great Jake McKenna. Janice had to admit it was just plain pathetic that the mere thought of him brought back all the old feelings. Maybe someday, if she met someone else, someone who could wipe the memories of Jake right out of her mind, she'd be able to put him behind her once and for all. Unfortunately, it hadn't happened yet.

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Devlin followed Jake to the room. He shifted her bags and swiped the key card. She was perfectly capable of carrying her bags herself, but he insisted. As he opened the door, she stepped around to hold it for him and gaped. He'd reserved a suite.

"What did you do, Jake? This is the most beautiful hotel room I've ever been in."

"Well," he said with a grin and a shrug, "I figured we could use the space."

"Oh my God!" she exclaimed, peeking into the bedroom. Devlin sat on the king-sized, super soft bed and began bouncing up and down. Her own movement caught her eye, and she glanced up at the ceiling.

"A mirror?" she cried and began to giggle. "Jake, there's a mirror on the ceiling."

Jake set her bags down on a luggage rack and joined her on the bed. His bounce flipped her onto her back. He loomed over her with a big grin.

"Just thought it might be fun." He leaned over to kiss her. Suddenly Devlin remembered her dresses and pushed him away "I almost forgot. I need to hang my clothes to get the wrinkles out."

Jake lay back on the bed, his hands behind his head. . Devlin tackled the hanging bag first. Out came a backless emerald green silk cocktail dress. It was covered with a delicate, very elegant pattern of Japanese fans.

"Did you paint that?" Jake rose to his feet. He held the material in his hands. Just like the bridesmaid dresses, the fans were not painted on, but rather, color had been removed to make the design.

"Yes."

"How do you do this?" Jake asked. "It's like looking at a shadow."

Devlin spread the dress over her palm, explaining, "I use a dilute bleach solution to fade the fabric. I have to be careful. If the bleach is too strong, it not only ruins the design, it ruins the silk. I have to admit, though, sometimes my mistakes can be very interesting."

She pulled out a turquoise blouse with a much paler blue pattern of roses.

"This was a mistake. I spilled some bleach, here." She pointed to a rosette in the very center of the back, which was just perceptibly lighter than the others. "I didn't want to throw the silk away, so I had to use a stronger solution. I think it turned out rather well."

Devlin blushed at her words. Jake took the blouse from her and hung it up. He ran a hand through her hair, teasing the curls, mussing them around her face.

“You should be proud of what you do,” he said. “I am. Beth showed me the dresses you designed for her. I know nothing about women’s clothes, but I know something beautiful when I see it.”

Jake rubbed the back of his fingers along her cheekbone. Devlin closed her eyes and covered his hand with hers exactly as she had four and half years ago, the day she told him she loved him. Just then, her stomach growled, and she laughed.

“I need to finish hanging this stuff up,” she said. “And then I need something to eat. I’m starving.”

“So am I,” answered Jake, his voice a whisper as he reached for her.

“Jake McKenna!” she exclaimed. “You are a very, very bad man.”

“Always have been.” He leaned over to nibble on her neck.

He swept Devlin up in his arms.

“Where are we going?”

Jake looked down at her, grinning. “You need a bath.”

Devlin smacked her palms against his hard chest.

“What do you mean I need a bath? Are you saying I smell?”

“Yes.” He bit her earlobe, inhaling deep. “You smell like I just fucked you, and that reminds me I’m ready to do it again.”

“Oh, God, you’re insatiable.” Devlin laughed, her body shaking against his. She wrapped her arms around his neck, tilting her head and biting his earlobe in reply.

“Ow!” Jake yelped, whipping her around into the bathroom. “You know, I can play rough too.”

“I’m counting on it.” Jake set her on her feet. “Whoa!” she exclaimed, gazing around the bathroom, stunned. “This is the Honeymoon Suite, isn’t it?”

Jake laughed as he turned the big handle and water splashed into the oversized whirlpool tub.

“You like big things, don’t you?” he asked wickedly.

Devlin looked into his face, her eyes on fire.

“Yeah,” she answered. “You’ve figured me out at last, Jake McKenna. I’m quite fond of big things.”

* * * *

Dev sat between Jake's legs, leaning back against his hard chest as he squeezed more body wash into his hands. He'd turned her into melted butter. His hands roamed her breasts, kneading her nipples, pinching them into peaks. His lips slid along the curve of her shoulder. Jake moaned, the sound a low rumble in his chest, and she felt his erection press rock hard against her back. If she'd been capable of movement, Devlin would have climbed on him, but Jake's big, calloused hands were working all the kinks out of her muscles. He had her so relaxed, she was immobile. Devlin drowsed against him.

She felt more than heard Jake say something. It sounded like, "Stand up."

"Hmmm?" she murmured, half asleep.

"Stand up," he repeated, his voice hoarse.

Devlin reluctantly rose from the tub, hot water running down her skin. She started to turn toward Jake, but he reached up and grabbed her hips to stop her.

"Close your eyes," he commanded.

She did so without a word, her breath quickening.

She felt him slowly run his hands up along her legs, from her ankles to the top of her thighs and back down again. His touch startled her. It was almost delicate. Goose bumps formed in the wake of his fingers. A groan escaped Devlin's lips.

"Shhhh," whispered Jake. "Just feel."

Suddenly his hands were on her bottom, kneading her, running his fingers along the cleft between her buttocks.

"God, you are so beautiful," he said.

Her knees grew weak. She reached out to the side, searching for something to steady herself, but there was nothing. Except for Jake. He slid his thumb inside her, all the way inside her. With one hand on her hip to support her, he slid his thumb in and out, again gentle, delicate, so delicate Devlin was tempted to scream. She held it inside, concentrating on his every movement.

It sounded as if Jake had risen to his knees behind her. She could feel his mouth on her back, kissing her scar, nipping at her bottom, his thumb still moving rhythmically inside her. Jake pressed his chest against her while he wrapped his other arm around her belly, his hand sinking lower until he

found her clit. Devlin's breath came in ragged gasps. She rubbed herself against his fingers, seeking her release.

"Don't move," he said, his breathing as ragged as hers. "Let me do it for you."

Oh God, Devlin thought. She wondered what Jake McKenna had in store for her. Just then Jake bit down on her hip, holding her in place, his thumb still moving in and out of her, his fingers rubbing circles around her swollen nub. Devlin was strung so tight, she would have fallen without his support. Jake seemed to feel her climax building despite the fact that she held herself perfectly still. He moved his fingers faster, pressed harder.

Devlin's control vanished. "Jake," she cried out, and she came helplessly against his fingers. Without any awareness whatsoever, she found herself turned around, her legs spread. Jake had his mouth on her, his tongue pressed inside her, catching her tremors. Within seconds, she came again and then again. Devlin begged Jake to stop. It was indeed possible, she decided from a far-off place, to die of an overdose of pleasure.

Jake lowered her into the water, guiding her onto his erect penis. Devlin's eyes flew open just as his closed. She whispered his name in a low voice, and he groaned deep in his throat. Devlin pressed her mouth to his full lips and thrust her tongue inside, meeting each thrust of his cock with a thrust of her tongue. She rubbed her nipples against his chest as he began to pound into her, out of control now. She held on, reveling in his wildness, in the contrast between what he'd just done to her and what he was doing to her now.

"Come again for me, baby," Jake mumbled against her mouth. "Come for me."

"Yes," Devlin answered him, and she did, his words kicking her into another orgasm. She rode him shamelessly, feeling his thrusts deepen. He slanted his mouth over hers, and she swallowed his groan as he thrust into her one last time. Jake pressed against her chest. Devlin felt his heat spurt inside her. Heart pounding, she knew nothing. For a time, it seemed they were both senseless. The cooling water finally roused them.

"Food," mumbled Devlin, leaning her weak head against Jake's shoulder.

Jake began to laugh heartily, bouncing Devlin up and down.

"Double chocolate milkshake? Grilled cheese sandwich? French fries?" he asked, still laughing as he climbed out of the tub and helped Devlin into an oversize bath towel.

"All three. And make the milkshake chunky. And lots of those little bottles of ketchup."

Jake pulled her close and kissed her. Wrapping his own towel around his waist, he sauntered out of the bathroom. Devlin sighed. Jake was so much man. There were so many pieces of him that Devlin was unfamiliar with, his life, his career, his plans, his relationships over the past four years. Yet on another level, a deeper level, she felt as if she knew everything about him that mattered. She had loved him for years, first the idea of him, now the reality. But she was afraid to say the words aloud. She would be devastated if he didn't reciprocate. Yet she had to ask herself, how could Jake possibly make love to her with such passion, such selflessness, such abandon, if he didn't care? He'd been making love to her practically every moment since she exited the ramp at the airport. She stood still for a minute, pondering her options, listening to his voice talking on the phone to room service.

Devlin shook her head. She decided to ignore her own musings. She needed to pee, get a drink of water, put some food in her stomach, and dress for the cocktail party. In that order. For now she'd simply enjoy every single moment she had with Jake. She'd worry about the rest of it when the weekend was over. If she survived it, that is.

* * * *

Jake hung up the phone and pressed his palms against his thighs to stop them from shaking. He'd just had the most powerful orgasm of his life. He'd come, twice now, inside the woman he loved. It suddenly occurred to him that he hadn't used a condom either time. The thought of putting on a condom had never even entered his mind. He'd always been careful. It didn't matter to him if a woman claimed to be on birth control pills. Jake always wore a condom. He didn't want any accidental McKennas running around. Until now. He wouldn't mind an accidental McKenna with Devlin.

He wondered if she was on the Pill, then dismissed the thought from his head. He doubted it. He'd heard from Mary that she and Jason had broken

up nearly two years ago. It had bothered him when Mary first told him Devlin and Jason were living together. He couldn't bear the thought of another man bedding down with her at night and waking up with her in the morning. Touching her intimately, knowing her as Jake did now. But, Jake reminded himself, he didn't have the right to object. If he had been with her then, they might not be here, together, in this time and place. Mary was right. Devlin had needed her space. And so had he.

The problem was, Jake didn't want his space anymore, unless Devlin shared it with him. He wondered about the internship in France. Mary didn't bother to disguise her pride in Dev's achievements. Devlin had done well for herself. He knew she was one of two applicants chosen.

He didn't want to ask her to give it up, but he hated the thought of being apart for two years. He could visit her, but he couldn't live there with her. He was responsible for a lot of people and projects, and he wasn't prepared to make such a drastic move.

Besides, what would he do in Paris? He was a country boy. He had a cabin to build, and his father needed his help with calving as much as ever. Jake had the money to take time off, but he loathed the idea of idling in Paris with nothing to do, aside from drive Devlin crazy. He chuckled as he imagined how annoying he would be.

Jake felt a chill. He turned the air-conditioning down, grabbing the two plush terrycloth bathrobes from the closet. He headed to the bathroom to see if Devlin was finished so he could have a turn. He hadn't taken a piss all day, and he felt like he could use a drink. He stopped at the minibar and reached for a bottle of orange juice. He downed it in one swallow.

"Dev," he called, "you want anything to drink?"

"Oh yeah," she said, opening the bathroom door, holding the oversized towel around her. "Hey, it's cold out here."

"I just turned down the air. You want orange juice? Apple juice? Pop? Perrier?"

"Apple juice." She held out her hand. "Thanks."

Jake handed her the bottle of ice-cold juice and watched her tilt her head back to drink. He thought she had a lovely neck. She downed it quickly and asked for another one. Jake handed another to her. He should have been paying more attention, he admonished himself. Devlin had never been a big eater, but he should have seen to it that she at least had something to drink

today. However, from the moment he laid eyes on her at the airport, he'd had only one thing on his mind, getting inside her. He stirred at the thought, telling himself to knock it off.

"Here." He removed her towel and helped her into the robe, taking care to avoid brushing his erection against her. He turned his back and pulled off his own towel, flipping on the robe quickly.

"You're suddenly shy?" Dev laughed. "After what we just did, one would think neither of us had any modesty."

Jake felt himself blushing. Only Devlin could make him blush. This was the person Devlin was meant to be, before her uncle got hold of her. His heart jumped at the notion that she'd overcome that monster and everything he did to her. She'd somehow managed to come to terms with the loss of her loved ones and made a life for herself. She had a future. Jake wanted to be part of it. He turned to face her and saw pure joy in her eyes.

"No," he said, teasing. "It's just that there are a lot of things I want to do to you, and I'm trying hard not to do them all at once."

Devlin burst into laughter and fell into his arms, rubbing herself shamelessly against him. She was still giggling ten minutes later when the food arrived, while he was still uncomfortably erect. She had to answer the door.

Chapter Nine

Impatient, Mary waited for Devlin and Jake to arrive. She and Ken had come early so Ken could deposit a case of wine with the bartenders. Though the cocktail party was hosted by Mike's friends from the department and Beth's friends from the high school where she taught, Ken had recently attended a week-long medical seminar in San Francisco, and he offered to bring back a case of wine. Mary looked around for her husband, anxious. She heard from Mike earlier that he'd run into Devlin and Jake in the hotel lobby. He said they seemed to have reconnected. Mary wasn't sure how she felt about that.

Devlin was like a little sister, and she was very protective of her. When Dev lived with Jason, it was easy to keep tabs on her. It had grown harder over the past couple years. Mary urged Devlin time and time again to get a big, mean dog to keep with her on the property near Grinnell. The thought of Devlin out there alone made her very nervous. Despite the fact that there had been no sign of William Franz in over four years, you never knew what could happen to a young girl living alone. Woman, Mary corrected herself with a sigh. Dev was a young woman. She had her own life to live, her own choices to make.

Mary worried about Jake too. She'd known him a long time, and he was one of her closest friends. Tough as he appeared on the outside, inside he was vulnerable. Mary knew how much it cost him to leave Devlin alone. What if things didn't work out for him? What if Devlin no longer felt the same? What about the internship in Paris? It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for Devlin. If they became involved, would Jake insist she give it up? Mary loved them both, and she didn't want either of them hurt. Devlin had been through too much already, while Jake had kept his distance from her for over four years, exactly as Mary had asked him to. She didn't know if he could be patient for two more years.

Ken brought her a glass of ginger ale, teasing her about her preoccupation.

"They're fine," he said.

Mary knew he'd admitted to Jake that he'd forgotten to relay his phone message to Devlin years ago. Well, now she could only wait and see. It was out of her hands.

* * * *

Jake and Devlin were fashionably late. They didn't plan to be late. It simply took them both a while to get ready. Watching Dev devour her meal gave Jake great pleasure. She wasn't much of a meat eater, but she voiced no complaints about his double cheeseburger, rare, with the works. Between the two of them, they finished the milkshakes and two orders of fries. Jake was pleased that he only ate a quarter of Devlin's grilled cheese sandwich. She ate the rest. After they set the tray in the hallway, the scene felt almost domestic.

They shared the sink as they brushed their teeth. Jake watched Devlin apply moisturizer while he shaved. She even felt relaxed enough around him to do her makeup. He'd never before paid attention to any woman putting on makeup. But Devlin's technique fascinated him.

She asked his opinion. She said, "Which do you want me to emphasize? My eyes or my lips?"

He looked at her, confused by her question. She laughed.

"I don't usually wear makeup. I think it makes me look like a clown. But when I do, I like the focus to be on one feature, either my eyes or my lips. Which do you prefer?"

"Lips," replied Jake, staring at hers and licking his own, his cock instantly at attention.

"I think so too," she said, and she went to work with color and a brush.

Jake had no idea watching a woman apply makeup could be such a sensual experience. He sat on the edge of the tub, transfixed, as Dev bent close to the mirror. He was tempted to lift her bathrobe and make use of that delectable little ass extended in his direction, but he resisted and kept his hands to himself, enjoying the feel of his arousal, imagining how he would sate himself with her later.

In mere minutes, Devlin had finished. She was right. His eyes locked on her lips. If he knew she wouldn't have to take the time to do it all over again, he would have kissed her senseless. She brushed her hair back from her face.

"You like it?" she asked with a smile.

"That would be an understatement," he replied, rising from the edge of the tub with his hands clasped in front of him.

"Really? Let me see how much you like it."

She wrapped her hands around the lapels of his robe and pulled it apart, her aquamarine eyes focused directly on his. His erection jutted toward her. Devlin moved her hands down his sides and his body responded, arching forward, seeking the touch of her hand. He felt her long fingers brush the tip of his cock. Jake closed his eyes, and a moan escaped his lips. Devlin's hand pressed against his mouth. She thrust a finger past his teeth. He licked her. He sucked her fingertip, and he heard her groan in response. Then her finger was gone. His eyes still closed, Jake felt her open her own robe and slide her bared body down his muscled chest and tight abdomen. He knew what she was about to do, and he wanted it. But he was afraid for her. Devlin had never divulged the entire story of William Franz's assault, but Mary told him she suspected that he'd not only raped her, but he'd forced himself upon her in other ways.

Jake reached down to stop her, but she pushed his hands away.

"No, let me." She licked him as if to reinforce her words.

"Devlin, God knows I want this, but..."

In answer, she took him into her mouth. Jake groaned, enveloped by her moist heat and softness. He threaded his fingers appreciatively through her curls. He didn't press on her head or hold her. He was a big man, and he wanted her to decide how much of him she could take. He wanted Dev to feel in control. Jake soon discovered that she was very much in control. She gripped the base of his erection with a firm hand, her lips and tongue moving along his length. Her other hand caressed his scrotum, holding it, kneading. She sucked him, milking him, caressing him, using her teeth along the ridge at the tip. The sensations she evoked were so intense he thought he might die of pleasure.

As Jake neared his climax, he cried out her name. He tried to push Devlin away, reluctant to come, but she clung to him, almost humming with

him deep in her mouth. He could feel the vibrations throughout the length of his cock. He wanted to stop himself from moving, but he found he had no control. With a groan, he thrust into her warm, willing mouth. Devlin sucked him, hard, and he came just as hard, helpless. Jake's knees nearly buckled.

"Oh God, Devlin."

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After a moment, she removed her mouth from him. Licking her lips, she looked up at him. Jake was beautiful in ecstasy. She'd watched him come, and he amazed her. Devlin had never done this with a man before, not willingly. Not since *he* made her do it. She pushed the thought away immediately. Jake was not her uncle.

Devlin knew from the beginning she could trust Jake. Even with the most intimate actions. Even with this. She trusted him not to hurt her, not to degrade her, not to force her. She was aware that he'd let her control the pace, until he lost his own control. She'd done that to him, made him lose control. The thought made her smile. Jake was silk over steel, and he tasted wonderful. Salty, tangy, and most definitely like himself. She was so aroused by what she'd just done that she'd almost come the moment he did.

Jake lifted her to her feet with his strong hands, and he kissed her.

"I'll get you for this," he teased, whispering in her ear, "later."

"Oh, really?" she asked grinning against his shoulder. "Three times in one afternoon isn't enough for you?"

Jake pulled her back and leaned his forehead against hers. He gave her bottom a feeble swat. "You'll be the death of me, girl."

* * * *

Jake McKenna entered the room with a striking woman on his arm. She was tall and willowy. "Leggy" would best describe her. And the short, backless emerald green silk sheath dress she wore showcased the length of her legs very well. Only Shauna noticed the faint scars on both thighs, and she realized that Devlin Barre had returned. Apparently, she was with Jake. There was no mistaking the possessiveness in his hand on the small of her

back, the protectiveness in his stance, and the challenge in his eyes as he gazed around the room. His very walk dripped testosterone. Shauna had worked closely with men long enough to recognize a man who'd gotten exactly what he wanted.

She realized years ago that Jake McKenna wanted Devlin Barre. It seemed Devlin wanted Jake equally as much. She smiled to herself as she thought of the ribbing she would give Jake. But she decided she'd wait and catch him alone. Devlin had been a favorite of hers since she first saw her fighting for her life in the ICU. Shauna would never give her a hard time. She'd find an opportunity to talk to her later, to find out how she was doing.

Shauna also had no intention of letting Devlin know that, after four and a half years, her uncle's name had surfaced barely a month ago. A copy of his passport turned up during a raid on an illegal child-brothel in Bangkok, although no one matching his description was arrested. If Devlin was lucky, he'd gone back into hiding. If she was luckier still, he was dead. Yes, Shauna mused, dead would be a very good thing for William Franz.

She hoped Mike hadn't said anything yet. She'd find an opportunity to talk to him before the evening was over, make sure he kept quiet. Monday would be soon enough to tell Devlin. Shauna would find out where Devlin was staying and meet with her later. Let her enjoy the weekend. Shauna doubted Franz would have the balls to set foot in the States again. He'd have to be crazy or a fool. So far, he hadn't given any indication that he was a fool.

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Devlin and Jake entered the hall. Devlin's steps slowed. This was the first time she'd been in the same room with so many people who knew what had happened to her. She felt Jake's eyes on her. Glancing up, she saw his concern.

"I can do this."

Jake smiled and laid a warm hand securely on the small of her back, letting her know with one touch that everything would be all right. He would be with her, just like he'd been there for her before. Devlin reminded herself that tonight was not about her. It was about Beth and Mike. The guests were unlikely to mention her past.

Mary and Ken were waiting. Devlin greeted each of them with a hug.

"You look gorgeous, honey," said Mary, standing back to admire Devlin's dress. "While I, on the other hand, resemble a beached whale."

"Are you kidding?" exclaimed Devlin. "You are the prettiest pregnant woman I've ever seen! Look at you, still tiny, all baby." Devlin assessed Mary's belly. "It's a boy."

"And how do you know that?" asked Ken with a grin.

"Easy. Mary looks like she swallowed a basketball. My mother always said, 'If you carry high and in front, it's a boy. If you carry low and wide, it's a girl.' This one's a boy for sure. My mom looked just like this when she was pregnant with David." Devlin caught herself and stopped speaking.

Mary put an arm around Devlin's waist, changing the subject. "You are still so thin. Let me get you something to eat."

"You are such a little mother. Actually, Jake and I just ate." Dev glanced over Mary's head at Jake. He winked at her. "And I'd like to find Mike and Beth. I got to see Mike this afternoon, but Beth wasn't with him. Come with me." She took Mary's hand, and they headed off together.

* * * *

"Well?" asked Ken, eyebrows raised. "You don't look too shabby."

"Thanks," said Jake.

"That's not what I meant."

"Me neither." Jake grinned. "You've been extolling the virtues of that wine for days. What do you say we go get some?"

* * * *

Mike Jones toasted his fiancée, very satisfied. He was finally making a commitment to Beth, the woman who'd captured his heart, the woman who completed him. He felt like he'd played the matchmaking role of his life this weekend in bringing Jake and Devlin back together. He was the one who suggested to Beth that she ask Devlin to be a bridesmaid, not that Beth needed much convincing. She adored Devlin and was happy to include her in the wedding party. Beth had always believed Devlin and Jake were meant for each other. She agreed with Mike—it was about time somebody threw

them together. Then they could sink or swim. It looked to Mike like they'd spent the afternoon swimming.

Four years ago, Mike knew there was something special between the two of them. Even from what little Jake told him, the connection seemed stronger than ever. The distance and the years apart hadn't changed a thing. But they were older now. The way Mike saw it, the timing couldn't be better. There was nothing more romantic than a wedding for proposing another one.

* * * *

Jake knew he had to do something. He'd spent the greater part of the evening watching nearly every man in the place eye Devlin. She was striking, graceful, and that laugh of hers could bring an angel to his knees. He couldn't ignore the open looks of admiration she got. What did he expect? The length of her legs, made even longer by black stiletto heels, was merely the first thing a man noticed when she walked into a room. The backless dress didn't help matters. It revealed more than enough of her satiny skin and her slender neck, baring her almost to the scar at the base of her spine. And those peaked nipples. They never seemed to tire, standing perfectly erect against the thin material below the scooped neckline.

He got a hard-on just looking at her from across the room. He could only imagine what the rest of the men were feeling and didn't like it one bit. Devlin seemed completely oblivious to the fact that every one of Mike's friends wanted to get in her pants, or under her dress. The later it got, the hotter Jake grew. He was like a furnace, practically smoking beneath his shirt and tie. It wasn't that he thought Devlin had any interest. He felt more like he needed to mark her somehow. Let every man in the room know she was taken, off the market, unavailable, his. As if just by staring at her, he could burn the *MCK* brand onto the front of her dress.

When she turned and left the room, walking toward the kitchen, Jake set his drink down on the nearest table and followed her. It was time he made his intentions perfectly clear. Searching the kitchen, he didn't spot the green dress among the white aprons. There was a door leading to the courtyard in the back of the building. There were no lights in the back. He hoped Devlin hadn't ventured out alone, but there was no other exit from the kitchen. He

opened the door. After a quick scan of the courtyard, he was about to return to the party, thinking she'd doubled back. As Jake turned to go, his peripheral vision caught a flicker in the shadows. The tiniest movement, but it was enough to tell him that she was there, in the farthest, darkest corner. Had he not been looking for her, he would have missed her altogether.

Jake approached, walking softly. He didn't want to startle Devlin, but neither did he want her forewarned. She leaned out over the rock wall, fanning herself a little, her drink set off to the side, forgotten. She didn't realize he was there until he spoke. By then it was too late. His cock strained against his zipper, and his breathing was ragged. He would be inside her, right here, right now, while she wore this dress. He would make her his tonight, and she would say the words.

* * * *

"You know what I want, don't you?" Jake said, the sound a low rumble against her back.

He pressed against her to make sure she didn't miss the point of his question.

"What?" she whispered, holding very still, knowing exactly what Jake wanted but waiting to hear him say it anyway.

"You. Right here. Right now. In this dress."

The breath escaped Devlin's lungs in a whoosh as he pressed his erection against her once more, this time a little harder. She knew she should protest that this was not the time or the place. But just now, it seemed exactly the right time and the right place.

Devlin felt his hands on her shoulders, weaving their way beneath the straps of her dress. He slid the silk down slowly, his hands trailing along her upper arms. This dress slipped below her breasts and her nipples, exposed to the cool night air, grew painfully erect. His hands brushed them, once, twice, sliding down to cup the underside of her breasts, running the pads of his fingers along the soft, sensitive skin.

Devlin purred, "Mmmmmm," as she closed her eyes and gave herself over to his touch.

Her dress lifted from behind. Jake's fingers grazed her bottom beneath her bikini panties. In agonizingly slow motion, he drew her panties down to

her ankles. She stepped her high-heeled feet out of them, and Jake tossed them aside.

“I like the high heels,” he murmured in her ear. “Spread your legs.”

Devlin’s breathing grew ragged. Her nipples ached for his touch, but he denied her. His entire being seemed to be focused on her bottom and the folds between her legs. She knew how wet she was—embarrassingly so. She’d turned into a wanton and didn’t care. She wanted him to take her now, hard, without any preliminaries, without any words of endearment. She wanted him to take her here, with everyone a mere fifty yards away, telling them she belonged to him. That she’d been his since she first laid eyes on him.

Devlin heard his zipper move, and she felt his big cock rub against her, along her, brushing her clit hard and then entering her, just far enough to make her beg for more. She knew he must be holding himself, because he pulled out and circled her clit again and again and then entered her. But he held himself back. He only gave her a few inches.

“Do you want me, baby?”

Devlin sobbed in response.

“Tell me, baby. I want to hear you say it. Do you want me?”

“Yes,” she breathed. “Oh God, yes.”

“How bad do you want me?”

He rubbed her clit again with the tip of his cock and pressed against her opening. God, he was big. She didn’t know how she would handle him from behind.

“How bad?” he demanded, his breathing rapid and uneven.

“V-Very b-bad,” Devlin managed to stutter. Her breasts were on fire, and she was ready to come.

“Then say it,” he hissed through his teeth. “Say it, darlin’. And I’m yours, all yours. Forever.”

“Oh God, Jake!” Devlin cried again, “I need you. I need you inside me.”

“That’s not what I want to hear,” he crooned, his lips soft against her neck. He rubbed his cock through her swollen folds, torturing her. “I want to hear you say it. Tell me.” Jake hesitated for a moment. “Tell me that you love me.”

Devlin suddenly felt suspended above space and time as she realized what he was asking, what he was admitting to her with his question. She

gasped as he reached around her body and pinched her nipple between his thumb and forefinger, calling her back to the present.

Devlin's eyes welled with tears as she said, enunciating each word, "Jake McKenna, I love you. I've loved you from the moment I met you. Now fuck me."

"With pleasure," he laughed, and he thrust his entire length inside her in one stroke.

Devlin was rocked forward, crying out at the incredible feeling of fullness, the feeling of Jake moving inside her, hard and insistent. He covered her belly with his palms to cushion her from the solid wall as he thrust in and out. Withdrawing all the way, impaling her slowly over and over again, until tears of pleasure ran down her cheeks. She heard herself call his name and the words "I love you" as she lingered on an orgasm that wouldn't quit while he continued to sate himself in her.

"I love you, Devlin Barre. You're mine. You've always been mine," he said just before he bit down hard on her neck like a wild stallion claiming a mare in season. He came, thrusting deep within her, spurting hot against her very center.

A thrill ran through Devlin's entire body at his words, and she joined him, feeling her own tremors grab him, hold him inside her and milk his seed from him. She thought she must have gone mad, to give herself to Jake with such abandon. But then, as he leaned against her, nuzzling her neck where he'd bitten down, kissing her ear, murmuring sweetly as he had to her years ago, she didn't care. She'd rather be mad than lose a single moment in Jake's arms.

Still hard, Jake held himself within her as he asked, his mouth close to her ear, "Do you know what you said?"

"Yes."

"Did you mean it?" he asked.

"Yes."

Jake withdrew from her and zipped up his pants. He turned her toward him, pulling the straps of her dress up, brushing his palms over her peaked nipples as he did so. He held her face in his hands and kissed her, his lips soft and full, his mouth sweet. He smoothed the curls from her face and looked into her eyes.

"I love you, Devlin, and I want you to marry me." He put a finger on her lips. "I know we need to talk about it. I know we both have plans. But we have time. We have all the time in the world. Will you think about it?"

Devlin could hear the hope in his voice, mingled with the fear that she might reject him, the fear that she might walk out of his life as she'd done four years ago, but he didn't need to worry. This one day had made her his, body and soul. This one day had been all she'd dreamed about. She'd given her heart to him long ago. She never expected to get his in return. Not like this, not with such overwhelming passion and trust and conviction.

"Yes."

"Yes, you'll think about it?"

"Yes, I'll marry you."

Jake smiled.

The world was a beautiful place when Jake McKenna smiled.

* * * *

Devlin found herself thrown over Jake's shoulder as he spun her around the dark courtyard, howling into the night.

"Jake!" she shrieked, laughing and crying at once. "Stop! You'll fall and drop me on my head!"

He spun her again. "I won't fall, darlin'. I have excellent peripheral vision," he teased, laughing so hard her stomach shook up and down.

"Well then stop because my bare ass is up in the air, and somebody's going to come out here and see it!"

"So it is!" he noted, interested now. A big hand roamed up and squeezed her. Then he nipped her naked hip.

"Ouch!" Devlin yelped, slapping his butt with both palms. "Put me down, Jake, and use your excellent peripheral vision to locate my panties."

Jake slid her down his body and thrust a solid thigh between hers. "How will I find them?" he asked, rubbing against her. "They're black."

"I don't know," Dev answered, feigning annoyance as she backed away to tug down her dress and run a hand through her hair in an attempt to repair the curls. "Get down on your knees and look."

"Anything you say," replied Jake, and he abruptly dropped to his knees at her feet. Devlin began laughing. He felt for her hand with both of his and

pressed something into her palm. Jake closed her fingers around it. Devlin's breath caught in her throat. There was no mistaking the object he'd just given her.

Devlin's legs wobbled, and she slumped toward the flagstones. Jake caught her and held her close.

"Uh-uh," he said, "no scraping up those pretty knees."

"Jake," she whispered, "Do you...Do you...You're sure about this?"

"Baby, I have never been more sure of anything in my life. Well, that and I'm very sure I like the feeling of your naked little ass in my hands."

"Oh, you are so bad, Jake McKenna!" Devlin cried, slapping his hard chest, unsuccessfully attempting to tuck her dress beneath her with one hand. He pushed her hand away.

"Leave it. I like the way you feel." Devlin looked down at her palm, running her fingers over the warm metal and cool stone. It was too dark in the courtyard to see the ring.

"Can we go inside? I want to see what it looks like."

"And put it on?" Jake asked.

"Yes, and put it on."

Jake helped her to her feet, wrapping his sport coat around her. "Does it cover enough?"

"Yes, thanks. I may be tall, but not this tall. It's longer than my dress."

Jake chuckled. "That's what I was counting on."

Jake ushered Devlin inside, and they stood together in the kitchen. The couple was oblivious to the bustling caterers. Devlin opened her hand and gazed down at the ring. She sucked in her breath. Her heart turned over in her chest. This wasn't just any ring. It was obviously an heirloom. Formed of platinum, the band was narrow, delicate. It resembled lacework done in pale white metal. The diamond in the center was multifaceted and absolutely breathtaking. Even beneath the fluorescent lighting in the kitchen, it reflected rainbows. It sat on a crown of platinum filigree, surrounded by at least ten smaller diamonds. Devlin turned it over and over in her palm, speechless.

"Aren't you going to try it on?" asked Jake, slipping his hand beneath hers.

"Jake," Devlin began, close to tears, "it's just so, so beautiful. Can you...Can you put it on?"

“Here,” he said, reaching for the ring. “Give me your left hand.”

Devlin held out her hand. She could see how it trembled. Jake held her hand firm to steady her. He slipped the ring on her finger, and to her great joy, it fit perfectly. She held it out to get a better look. Jake slipped behind her, wrapping his arms around her waist. He pulled her back against him and rested his head on her shoulder, looking at the ring on Devlin’s slender finger.

“It was my grandmother’s,” Jake said. “My mother set aside two rings. My brother’s wife wears my dad’s mother’s ring. This ring belonged to my mom’s mother. She saved it for my wife.”

His wife. Devlin didn’t even try to disguise the tears rolling down her cheeks. She turned to face Jake. She tried to speak, but ended up with her face buried in his chest.

“It’s okay, baby. Marrying me is a good thing.”

“I know,” Devlin replied, her voice quivering. “It’s just unexpected.”

“Unexpected?”

“It’s hard to explain,” Devlin began. “If there’s one thing I’ve learned over the past five years, it’s that you can’t always get what you want. I’ve wanted you for so long.” She paused for a second. “I-I hoped, but I never expected to have you. Never.”

“Well,” Jake said, “you’ve got me now, darlin’. I’m yours.”

“But what about...”

“No buts tonight. There’s plenty of time to talk about the buts. Okay?”

Devlin could only nod her agreement. She felt exhausted, and she didn’t want to talk at all. She wanted to return to the hotel, fall asleep in Jake’s arms, and wake up with him in the morning. Then it would be real to her. If Jake was still there in the morning, Devlin would know he was real.

* * * *

When Devlin fell silent, Jake knew she’d had enough for one day. He’d pushed her hard to get what he wanted. Now she needed to sleep on it. She needed time to come to terms with the fact of him, the reality of him, and the strength of his love for her. He could feel exhaustion rolling off her in waves, and he decided to get her back to the hotel as quickly as possible and put her to bed. Let her sleep in his arms. He steered her out of the kitchen,

shielding her as they threaded their way through the last of the partygoers. He waved to Mike and Beth and told Mary not to worry.

He opened the passenger door of his Jeep and helped Devlin inside. She sat so still that he reached around her and fastened her seat belt.

"Thank you."

"You all right?" Jake asked, beginning to feel a little concerned.

"Yes, fine."

He pulled away from the curb. Dev was asleep within two minutes. She turned her face toward him, resting her cheek on folded hands. Jake thought she looked like an angel. He drove smoothly, reluctant to disturb her. Keeping her carefully wrapped in his jacket, he strode through the lobby and hit the elevator button. In a few moments, he reached their room. When Jake laid Devlin on the bed and pulled his jacket away, she didn't stir. He gazed at her, innocent, looking very much like the morning he first saw her. Her face was pale tonight. Just as he remembered, her thick lashes cast dark shadows against her cheeks. Devlin was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. Four years ago, she'd told him she felt like a tree falling in the forest. She'd wondered if anyone could hear her. Jake heard her. She just didn't quite believe it. But she would soon.

Jake removed her shoes and the dress. Thanks to him, that was all she wore. He laughed aloud as he pictured the gardener finding a pair of black silk panties in the morning. Jake tried hard not to move Dev any more than necessary, but the very feel of her skin inflamed him. She lay helpless in sleep, naked and exposed beneath his intense gaze. He looked, God how he looked, but he didn't touch. Jake could feel his cock throbbing. He wanted her again, and if she stirred at all, against his better judgment, he knew he would take her. Devlin lay still, so he covered her with the sheet and headed to the bathroom to make himself ready for bed.

When he finished, he tossed his clothes over a chair and climbed into bed beside her. Wrapping an arm around Devlin's shoulders, Jake pulled her against him. She made a soft noise, snuggling into his chest. Jake smiled in the dark. He reveled in Devlin's warmth, her kitten softness, the way she molded her body against his. *This is the first night I'll spend with the woman I love*, Jake mused, growing drowsy as he listened to her quiet, regular breathing. He looked forward to many more.

Chapter Ten

Devlin stretched like a kitten too, Jake learned, when she woke up in his arms. And she made delightful little mewling sounds when she did it. He pulled her closer, reminding her where she was. Without a word, she turned toward him, her hands roaming his chest and stomach as if making certain he really, truly existed. Then Devlin smiled. She put her lips on him, showering him with light butterfly kisses. Tasting him, inhaling him, rubbing her sensitive lips against his equally sensitive bare skin. She slid on top of him, propping herself up on his chest, her legs spread on either side of his narrow hips, his morning erection cradled in the very center of her body.

“So you’re still here,” she said with a grin, her blue eyes sleepy, curls tumbling over her face.

“I’m still here,” Jake agreed, matching her grin with one of his own, sliding his erection between her legs.

“Payback time,” Dev teased. “Spread your legs.”

“Mmmmm, I like it when you’re forceful.”

Devlin laughed as she lifted herself up and slid her body onto his length. He groaned and spread his legs beneath hers while she pulled hers together, holding him even tighter within her warm body.

“Oh God,” Jake moaned, running his hands up and down her arms. “You feel so good.”

“Really? Are you sure you like it? Because I can stop anytime.”

“No,” Jake breathed, moving his hands lower, over her satiny thighs. “Don’t stop. Whatever you do, baby, don’t stop.” He thrust upward.

Dev sucked in a breath. “Uh-uh. Don’t move. Let me do the work.”

“Whatever you want,” Jake replied, his voice hoarse.

He concentrated on holding his lower body perfectly still beneath Devlin while she rode him, urgently. Her lovely breasts with their tightly puckered nipples thrust above him. Jake couldn’t resist playing with them,

hearing Dev moan her appreciation. Jake loved the soft noises she made when he touched her. Feeling her inner heat press close along his cock and hearing her cry out his name brought him close to orgasm, but Jake bit his lower lip. He wasn't quite ready yet. He flipped her over onto her back, spread her legs with his knees, and thrust hard. He needed to bury himself deep within her. Devlin didn't protest. She came. Jake followed soon after.

* * * *

The two of them, ordered breakfast, put the Do Not Disturb sign on the door and spent the morning playing. They never moved beyond the confines of the suite.

After breakfast, Devlin pushed her plate away and poured them both some juice. She looked at Jake over her glass. He grinned, that wolfish, predatory, sensual grin of his. Dev felt it all the way to her toes. Jake McKenna was a very dangerous man. She couldn't resist him. Devlin decided an overdue conversation was in order.

"Jake, there's something we need to discuss." She paused. "Actually, there are a lot of things we need to discuss, but I think we should begin with one."

She had Jake's complete attention.

"I'm...I'm not on birth control pills."

Jake smiled that smile of his. "I figured."

"And?"

"And nothing. I have no problem with the fact that you're not on the Pill."

Devlin rolled her eyes at him. "Don't play innocent. You know exactly what I'm talking about."

"C'mere, darlin'." He crooked his finger at her.

Against her better judgment, Devlin rose to her feet and approached Jake's chair. He pulled her onto his lap, nuzzling her neck.

"Don't borrow trouble," he told her. "We'll cross that bridge if we come to it."

"It doesn't bother you?" Devlin persisted. "I think we've been terribly irresponsible."

“No, I think you love me. And I think you find me irresistible,” laughed Jake. “Dev, I’m as guilty as you. I’ve never done it without a condom before. Even when I was a teenager, I used a...Well, that’s not entirely accurate. Once, a long time ago when I was very stupid and very young, I didn’t use a condom. But that was the only time.”

“So, you’re saying you find me irresistible too?”

“Yes, darlin’. I do. Utterly irresistible.” He wrapped his arms around her.

“What’s this about sex when you were a teenager?” Devlin teased. She knew Jake was experienced. She accepted it. Nonetheless, a tiny part of her was envious of every other woman who had known him as she did now.

“Jealous?”

Devlin attempted to glare at him, but she had a feeling she just looked cross-eyed, because Jake burst out laughing. He pulled her tighter.

“You”—he paused, taking a breath—“have absolutely nothing to be jealous of. Yes, I’ve been with other women. But practice makes perfect, right? They were all practice for you, Dev. I have never, ever considered asking a single one of them to marry me. It never even occurred to me to get married until the day I met you. But, baby, you were seventeen years old and had a lot to deal with. And I was nowhere near ready to settle down. I had to wait until I was ready and then hope against hope you would be available.”

“But what if I wasn’t available?”

“Then I would have waited as long as I had to. Or I would have left you alone. If you made it clear you didn’t want me, I’d have walked away. It would have broken my heart,” Jake said. “But, I would have walked away.”

“Jake, I just spent the better part of four years wanting you, looking for you, hoping for you, hoping for this. Yes, I had a lot to deal with. I still do. None of that has disappeared. It may be easier to live with, but it’s still inside me.”

Devlin smiled as Jake tilted her chin up, looking into her eyes. “I know, honey. I know. But now you don’t have to live with it alone,” he said. “Are you ready for me? Are you ready for this?”

“Yes, I am.”

“What about Paris?”

"I was going to Paris because you didn't appear to be an option. It's an amazing opportunity. I won't deny that. But I have ability. I've made a lot of connections in Chicago. I can work on my own. Besides, after wanting you for so long, how could I possibly walk away? I love you. And God knows I can't show up in Paris pregnant."

Devlin held up both palms as if they were a scale. "Let's see. Paris. Jake. Paris. Jake. Paris. Jake. Hmmm, I can't decide. Change places with me, and we'll see how much you weigh," she said with a grin.

"Oh, you are a very bad girl," laughed Jake.

Devlin winked at him.

Jake glanced at the clock. "We have a couple hours before we need to pick up the ice for the barbecue and get to the rehearsal. What would you like to do?"

Dev giggled. "You need to ask?"

"Apparently not." Jake tilted her head back and brushed his lips over hers. "But we do need to discuss a couple things."

"Now?" asked Devlin.

"Later."

* * * *

Devlin and Jake dozed in the warm sun. The morning had become afternoon. They both knew they needed to get ready, but neither felt like moving. Jake was the first to stir.

"It amazes me how quickly you fall asleep," he commented, gently tucking a stray curl behind her ear.

"Oh, this isn't typical for me," said Devlin, somewhat embarrassed. "I guess I'm just making up for lost sleep. I don't normally sleep very soundly. I haven't for years," she answered, "not since..."

"Not since William Franz," Jake finished for her.

Devlin looked at him. "Not since William Franz."

"Yet you live alone," said Jake.

Devlin considered her words for a moment. "Yes, I do. I live alone to prove to him—to prove to myself, I guess—that, despite him, I'm still standing. I don't want my fear of him to control me. That's always what he wanted, you know, to control me. If I live in fear, then he wins."

"I'd feel better if you had a big, mean dog."

Devlin mumbled, "Yeah, you and just about everyone else."

Jake raised his eyebrows.

"I haven't been able to get a dog. Dogs weren't allowed in the town house in Chicago, and up until recently, I haven't stayed at my house in Iowa longer than a few months. Besides, I guess it's a moot point now, isn't it? Anyway, I keep a loaded gun next to my bed. It was my grandfather's shotgun."

Jake whistled softly.

Devlin grinned at him, propping herself up on an elbow. "I told you a long time ago, I know how to shoot. So what happens now, Jake? We haven't really had a moment to talk about it."

"Yeah, we've been kinda busy." He smiled. Turning toward her, he toyed with the ring on her finger. "When did you plan to fly back?"

"Wednesday. I wanted to spend a couple days with Katie and maybe help Mary out a bit."

"Can you reschedule? I'd like you to come meet my folks and see the ranch. We can do some riding, fishing, swimming, whatever you want. My mother wants to meet you. She's the one who told me to go after you four years ago."

"She did? Did you listen to her? Go after me four years ago, I mean?" Devlin asked.

"Yeah, I did," Jake confessed. "But you were already gone."

"Sorry. I'm really sorry. I shouldn't have left without an explanation. What did you do?"

"Got stinking drunk, that's what I did. Woke up with a nasty hangover." Jake looked for a moment as if he wanted to add something. Then he shook his head. "We need to get dressed, or we'll be late for the rehearsal." He kissed her and started to climb out of bed.

Devlin pulled him back down. "Jake," she said, "tell me about your plans. Mike said you bought some property in Idaho. That you're building a cabin."

"Yeah," he answered. "I've got four thousand acres in the Stanley Basin, in the shadow of the Sawtooth Range. You'll love it, Dev. It's the most beautiful place I've ever been. Miles of open grassy meadows, year-round running streams. Rugged mountains right in your backyard."

Devlin could hear the excitement in Jake's voice.

"I haven't started building the cabin yet. All I've got out there is a trailer. And the place won't be on the grid for a couple more years, so right now, it's kerosene lanterns and a generator. But the grass is thick, the water's sweet, and my dad and my brother and I have talked about splitting the herd. They'll give me two hundred head to start. I've got the plans drawn up for the house and the barn. I need to drill a well and put in a septic system. Could take a while. In the meantime, I was thinking I could remodel the summer cabin on my folks' place."

Devlin hated to interrupt, but she needed to ask him. "What about my house? It's all remodeled. It's perfect for two people."

"It's in Iowa," Jake said.

"What's wrong with Iowa?" Dev bristled. "You can work in soil conservation in Iowa as well as you can in Montana. Better."

"No mountains. And it would be a damn long drive to Idaho to work on the cabin. I'm not a farmer, Devlin."

Devlin laughed. "I'll tell you what, let's go meet your folks, and you can show me the summer cabin. We need to take this one step at a time, Jake McKenna."

He flipped her onto her back and loomed over her, a big grin on his face. "You're willing to consider it?"

"I'm willing to consider just about anything, provided you smile at me like that."

Jake's grin widened. "I'll have to keep it in mind."

"Have you seen animal tracks on your property in Idaho? In the winter?" Devlin asked. "Rabbits and deer and foxes?"

"Yes, darlin'." Jake kissed the tiny scar at the base of her throat. "And cougar tracks and bear tracks and coyote tracks and moose and elk."

"In that case, I guess I maybe could live there," she said. "You're sure you've seen tracks?"

Jake looked into her eyes and grinned. "Very sure."

* * * *

Beth made a beautiful bride, and Devlin had never seen Mike so happy and content. The bridesmaid dresses were a big hit with the female and male

guests alike. As was Devlin's ring. Before the ceremony, Mike gave her a big bear hug.

"Welcome to the family, sis!" Clapping Jake on the back, he said, "I have dibs on the job of best man."

"I think you should postpone any plans for a wedding," Mary interrupted, playing the role of Devlin's big sister. "What about the internship in Paris?"

Devlin didn't answer. Instead she picked up Katie and whisked her away on the dance floor, leaving Jake to argue their case with Mary.

"Are you going to marry Uncle Jake?" asked Katie in her most serious voice.

"Yes, I most certainly am." Devlin hid her grin, trying to sound equally serious.

"Good," said Katie. "Then I don't have to keep his secret no more."

"What secret, sweetie?"

"That he's going to ask you to marry him, silly. He told me a long time ago that he was going to marry you. He told me when I was just a little girl."

"When you were just a little girl, huh? How old were you?"

Katie held up her fingers. "Three," she replied. "Mommy says girls shouldn't get married until they finish medical school. Are you done with medical school?"

"Why, yes." Devlin laughed out loud. "I believe I am finished with medical school."

"Well, then I guess it's okay. I'm going to marry a very handsome man like my daddy, or like Uncle Jake. I think my daddy is the handsomest man I ever seen. But mommy told me not to tell him because it will just go to his head."

"Oh," urged Devlin, "I think you should tell him. Every man wants to know how handsome he is. Daddies especially like to hear it from their little girl."

Katie stuck a finger in her mouth. "Should I go tell him, Auntie Dev?"

"Absolutely." Devlin lowered Katie to the ground. "Go tell him right now. I think he'll be very happy. And he'll probably ask you to dance." She patted the top of Katie's head. The child ran off grinning from ear to ear.

"May I have this dance?"

"With pleasure." Devlin turned in to Jake's arms. She molded her body against his. Everyone and everything in the room vanished. Jake was warm, he was strong, he was vital, he was hers, and she gave herself over to him completely for the rest of the night.

* * * *

The next day, the newlyweds joined Jake and Devlin for lunch at the hotel. They were scheduled to leave for their honeymoon late in the afternoon, and Jake had arranged to drive them to the airport. Tonight she and Jake were invited to dinner with Mary, Ken, and Katie. Tomorrow, she and Jake would check out of the hotel and head to Montana. Devlin asked Jake to drop her at a nearby shopping mall on the way to the airport. She wanted to pick up a few gifts for Katie and her little brother or sister. Jake pulled the Jeep up to the curb in front of the main entrance. He helped Devlin out the passenger door. Beth and Mike got out of the back. Devlin hugged them both.

"You two be good," she said.

"Hey," said Mike, "I'm always good. Just ask Beth."

Beth winked at her. "What can I say?" She laughed. "He's right." She kissed Devlin on the cheek.

Mike helped Beth into the front seat, then climbed back into the rear of the Jeep.

"Hey, Jake!" he called. "Let's get a move on! I've got a honeymoon to get to!"

Jake waved him off. He pulled Devlin into his arms, grinning as she slid her hands into the back pockets of his jeans to squeeze his ass.

"I'll be back in an hour," he said. "Meet you right here?"

"Yeah," she answered, "I won't be long."

Jake kissed her, hard, while Mike hooted in the background. Then he patted her bottom and strode around the front of the Jeep. Devlin waved as they pulled away from the curb. When they were out of sight, she turned toward the entrance to the mall and headed inside.

* * * *

Janice waited in the shade near the entrance to the mall. Trevor slept in his stroller. She'd decided to play hooky today and was meeting Cindy and baby Christopher for lunch and some shopping. As she waited for Cindy's minivan, she saw a Jeep pull up alongside the curb. The driver hopped out. Janice gave an involuntary jerk. It was Jake McKenna. Of all the people, she thought. She moved farther into the shadows as Jake opened the passenger door. Janice recognized the girl immediately. Damn. She was older, taller, and very beautiful.

Janice watched, hidden, as Mike and his new bride hugged the girl. As Jake kissed the girl, Janice ground her teeth. Even from where she stood, she could read the possessiveness in his stance. It made her sick.

Staying very still until the girl passed, Janice pushed Trevor's stroller out of the shade and entered the mall right behind her. She was careful to stay close enough to keep an eye on her, but not so close that she attracted any attention. Janice didn't even know why she followed her. She should wait for Cindy, but she couldn't seem to help herself. She just wanted a good look. She wanted to know what it was about this skinny young thing that kept Jake wound so tight.

The girl entered Nordstrom and headed straight to the children's department. Janice eyed her as she thumbed through racks of infant clothing. That's when she noticed the large diamond glittering on the girl's ring finger. Janice couldn't seem to help herself. She was livid.

As the girl concentrated on a rack nearby, Janice stepped forward and faced her from the opposite side.

"Nice ring."

The girl didn't even look up. She glanced at the ring, as if admiring it herself.

"Thanks," she said, "it was my..." Her voice trailed off when she lifted her head.

"Hello, Devlin," said Janice, speaking aloud the name she'd tried so hard never to say. "It's nice to see you again."

The girl stared at Janice's face.

"I don't suppose you remember me."

The girl cleared her throat. "I remember you very well. Excuse me, I'm shopping for a gift, and I don't have much time." She started to walk away.

"Wouldn't you like to meet my son?" Janice asked. "Don't you want to see him? His name's Trevor."

The girl stopped. "How nice for you," she said. "I'm sorry, but I'm in a hurry." She turned her back to Janice.

"Don't you want to know what your kids are going to look like?" Janice taunted her now.

The girl turned again. "I beg your pardon?" She was angry, her voice clipped. "What are you talking about? I have no interest in you, in your son, or in your son's father. Your life is none of my business, and my life is none of yours." She started to walk away again.

"His name's McKenna," Janice called, "Trevor Matheson McKenna."

The girl stopped dead in her tracks. Then she whirled around, her face white.

"You're lying." Her voice shook.

"What? Do you mean to tell me Jake didn't mention us?" Janice really pushed it.

"That is not Jake's child," claimed the girl, looking hard at the dark-haired boy in the stroller.

"Really? Jake must have forgotten to tell you about him. I guess he didn't mention that Trevor spends every other weekend with him. All the excitement of the wedding, I suppose." Janice paused. She could see the girl was trembling. "It must have slipped his mind. You know," Janice continued, "we were together long before you showed up. We were most definitely together. Whose bed do you think he ran to after you took off? After you left without a word?"

The girl's eyes glistened with tears as she repeated, "You're lying."

"Am I?" asked Janice. "You know, Jake told me I wasn't invited to the wedding. He even ordered me to stay out of sight for a week or two. But, oh well, the best laid plans..."

The girl ran past her, toward the escalator.

"Ask him," Janice called after her. "Feel free to ask him."

Janice started to laugh. She laughed until she cried. She'd done it at last. She'd gotten back at Jake McKenna, finally. She'd hit him where it would hurt the most. She wished there was a chair nearby so she could sit before her shaking legs gave out. It took her a few moments to notice that Trevor was crying. He looked up at her, confusion in his eyes. Janice suddenly

realized what she'd said in front of her own son, and she was horrified. She didn't know how long he'd been awake and how much he might have heard. How much he understood. She cringed as she replayed the conversation in her head. Why had she done that? No matter how angry Janice was at Jake, no matter the hurt she felt, the girl didn't deserve it. She was innocent in all of this.

Janice picked Trevor up, patting his back, appalled at her own behavior. Trevor was a big boy, three and a half years old, and he'd started asking who his daddy was. "Sweetie, it's okay. Mommy's not mad at you. It's okay."

"Why did you yell at that lady?" Trevor asked in a tearful voice. "Why are you mad at that lady?"

"Mommy's not mad at that lady. In fact," Janice said as she set him in his stroller, "Mommy needs to go find the lady and tell her she's sorry. Do you want to go do that?"

Trevor nodded, two fingers in his mouth. "Can we buy her some ice cream?" He sniffed.

"Sure, Trev, we can buy her some ice cream."

"Is Jake my daddy?" Trevor asked shyly.

Janice flinched as if she'd just been struck. "No, he's not your daddy. He's just an old friend."

"But you tol' that lady Jake's my daddy," came his reply.

"I know I did, but I didn't mean it. I was just teasing. I'm sorry."

Trevor sat back in his stroller, sucking his fingers. "The lady dint know," he said.

"Didn't know what?" Janice asked, pushing the stroller after Devlin.

"That you was just teasing."

* * * *

Jake pulled up to the curb, eyes peeled for Devlin. He didn't see her, but he wasn't in any hurry. He figured she'd found something interesting and lost track of time. Jake headed toward the mall entrance, planning to wait on a bench, when Janice appeared, pushing a stroller. This was the first he'd seen of her and her son in over two years.

"Crap."

Of all the people to run into, especially when Dev could be coming any minute. Jake scanned the doorway for Devlin because he knew Janice's presence would make her uncomfortable, to say the least.

Janice pushed the stroller straight toward him, her face pale and drawn. She was crying, and the little boy's face was tear-streaked as well. Jake wondered what the hell was up and hoped to God Janice hadn't done anything stupid, again. She stopped dead in front of him.

"Jake, I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry. I didn't mean it. It just came out."

"What just came out? What are you talking about?"

Janice's answer made no sense. "She took off." The little boy began screeching.

"What did you do?" Jake was afraid of what Janice would tell him.

"Devlin," she sobbed. "She ran off. She's gone."

"What did you do?" yelled Jake, grabbing her by the arm. "What did you do to her?"

The little boy's screeching grew louder.

Janice began to shake. "Stop, Jake. Stop. You're hurting me."

Jake dropped her arm like it was a hot coal. "Where is she?" he demanded. "What happened?"

"I-I-I don't know where she is." Janice continued to sob. "She-She took off, out of the store."

She was crying so hard now Jake could barely understand her.

"Jesus, Janice! Just tell me what happened."

"I told her, oh God, I can't believe I did it...I told her Trevor was yours. Your son. That his name is Trevor Matheson McKenna."

"My God!" yelled Jake, pacing back and forth, pulling his hands through his long hair. "How the hell could you do something like that?"

"I don't know," she replied. "I don't know what happened. I don't know. I'm so sorry."

"What else did you tell her?" Jake asked accusingly. "Huh? What else?"

"That-That...when she left four years ago, you came running back to my bed."

"Holy Christ, Janice! Why would you do something like this?" Jake was beside himself. "For God's sake, why would you do something like this to her?"

"Because," Janice sobbed, "because I still love you."

Jake stared at her like she was insane.

"I've got to find her." He headed toward the entrance.

"No, Jake, she's not here," Janice called after him, desperation in her voice. "She ran out. I saw her. She's not here."

"You better hope to God she's all right," Jake yelled at her as he sprinted to the Jeep. "Call Mary," he ordered her. "Call Mary and tell her exactly what you told me. If you're lucky, that's where she went."

"But what if she's not there?" Janice called after him.

Jake didn't answer.

Chapter Eleven

Beth sat sideways in the uncomfortable plastic chair, leaning against Mike's shoulder. Their plane to Hawaii had been delayed by bad weather in Dallas. She was trying to read a magazine, but she was distracted, keeping an eye on the board for departing flights, watching for updates. Suddenly she did a double take. Devlin rushed by their gate, her face streaked with tears.

Beth jerked upright. "Mike." She shook him out of his doze. "Mike. Devlin just ran by. She looked really upset."

"That's not possible," replied Mike, stretching. "She's with Jake."

"No," insisted Beth, jumping to her feet and tugging on his arm. "I know it was her. She was crying." When he didn't respond right away, she stomped her foot at him. "I'm going to look for her. Are you coming?"

Beth slung her carry-on bag over her shoulder and took off at a fast pace.

Mike grabbed the other bag, sprinting after her.

"Wait up," he yelled. "Which way did she go?"

"She's over there." Beth pointed. "She turned in to that gate down there. Gate sixteen, I think."

Mike ran past Beth, dodging travelers. Beth tried to keep up. She could see Devlin now, in a line of travelers who were rapidly boarding. She looked like she'd been crying. Mike didn't stop until he was right beside her.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Devlin turned toward him. Beth could see her face was grief-stricken. She looked as if she'd lost her best friend.

"Get away from me."

"What the hell is going on?" Mike shouted.

"Keep your voice down," Beth said. "Security is looking our way. Devlin, what are you doing here?"

“What does it look like I’m doing? I’m going home.”

Mike reached for her arm, and she pulled away from him.

“How dare you?” Devlin hissed. “How dare you all pretend you didn’t know? How dare you keep it from me?”

The line moved forward, the three of them blocking the entrance to the ramp.

Mike shouted again. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“Jake’s kid,” she said. “With Janice.” Devlin took off down the ramp at a run.

“Devlin!” Mike called. “Devlin, wait! Devlin, stop!”

He headed after her, Beth following close on his heels, but the security guard stepped in front of them.

“Sir, ma’am, this line is for ticketed passengers only. You’ll have to step back.”

“But I’m a cop,” bellowed Mike. “I need to speak with that passenger.”

“You’ll have to show me a badge and give me a legitimate reason, sir. In the meantime, step back now, or I’ll take you into custody.”

Beth put a hand on Mike’s arm. “Let’s go, honey it’s all right, Officer. That passenger is a friend of ours, and we’re worried about her, that’s all. We’ll make some phone calls and work it out. I’m sorry if we caused a disturbance.”

* * * *

Mike let Beth pull him away. Why the hell had he left his badge at home? He took a look at the sign above the desk. Devlin had just boarded a plane to Omaha. Mike strode rapidly down the corridor to a bank of pay phones.

“Mike, what is she talking about?”

“It’s a long story. As soon as I get a hold of Jake, I’ll fill you in.” Mike glanced at Beth’s face. She was as pale as Devlin. “No, sweetheart, Jake does not have a kid with Janice Matheson.”

Mike searched the phone book for the number to the hotel.

“Shit. I don’t have any quarters,” he muttered, feeling around in his pockets.

Beth ran to the nearest snack bar to get change. As soon as he had a quarter, Mike rang the hotel.

"Front desk."

"Jake McKenna's room, please."

"Mr. McKenna just entered the elevator, sir. Would you like to call back, or do you want me to ring you through to his room?"

"Ring me through."

* * * *

She was nowhere to be found at the mall. Jake decided not to take Janice's word. He looked everywhere. He had her paged three times. When he called Mary from a pay phone, she said she'd already heard from Janice and given her holy hell, but she hadn't heard a word from Devlin. Jake's only other recourse was to return to the hotel to see if Devlin had gone there, to see if her stuff was still in the room. He hoped to God she'd be in the room, ready to slug him or scream at him or throw a lamp at him. Tell him she hated him and never wanted to see him again. Anything would be better than this feeling of helplessness that threatened to overwhelm him. If Jake couldn't find her, he couldn't correct the damage Janice had done.

Jake left his Jeep at the curb in front of the hotel. As Jake approached his room, he could hear the phone ringing. He quickly checked his pockets. Goddamn it! Where the hell was his key card? He finally found it lying at his feet. He opened the door and ran across the room to the phone.

"Devlin," he practically shouted into the phone.

"No, asshole, it's me," came Mike's voice. "What the fuck is going on? Devlin showed up at the airport ten minutes ago and hopped on a plane. She refused to talk to me."

"A plane to where?"

"Omaha."

"Wait for me. I'm on my way."

* * * *

Devlin stared out the window of the airplane. Against her will, her eyes filled with tears. She refused to let them spill over. Nothing seemed real.

She felt as if she was standing outside herself, watching. Watching as she ran from Jake all over again.

I must be in shock, she mused, because I can't feel a fucking thing.

Her chest was a block of ice. It had frozen the moment Janice spoke those words. “*Jake’s kid. Ran right to my bed. Ask him. Go ahead and ask him.*” It wasn’t as if Devlin expected Jake to be celibate. She knew he’d had his share of relationships over the past four years. It wasn’t even that he had a child. She could accept a child, especially Jake’s child. She recalled him saying just two days ago—was it only two days ago?—that he’d forgotten to use a condom once. Well, she thought, once was apparently enough. She also remembered that when she asked what he’d done when she left, he said he’d gotten stinking drunk. What he’d left unsaid was that he’d run to another woman’s bed. She could accept that too.

What Dev couldn’t accept, what turned her blood cold, was that he’d done it with her. With the daughter of the woman who helped William Franz. Dev choked back a sob. How could he do that? How? How could Jake climb into bed with the woman who hated her? Who loathed her. Who tried to excuse the fact that her mother was an accessory to murder, the murder of Devlin’s entire family. Jake conveniently forgot to mention it. What did he do? Swear everyone to secrecy? Even Mary?

Maybe Mary didn’t know. Devlin couldn’t believe Mary would be a part of this charade. Mike, maybe, he was Jake’s best friend, but not Mary and Ken. Mary watched over her like a big sister. If she’d known, she’d have told Devlin long ago. She would have opposed the engagement for all she was worth unless Jake came clean. No, Devlin thought, Mary was as much in the dark as she had been.

The flight attendant came by and asked Devlin if she’d like a drink. Devlin had bought a first class ticket this time. It was all she could get at the last minute. She was glad. First Class was almost empty. Devlin had the row to herself. She asked for a Scotch on the rocks, and she paid extra for the premium Scotch. If she was going to drink, Devlin figured she might as well do it right. She wondered how much she could down in an hour.

Then she remembered that she’d have to rent a car in Omaha. Her own car was in long-term parking at the airport in Des Moines. She hoped they’d let her leave the rental car at the airport there. If she was drunk, they

wouldn't let her drive. She set the Scotch aside, afraid she'd smell of liquor. Dev was desperate to get home.

Drinking herself into oblivion would have to wait.

* * * *

Jake strode into the airport, his face set, his mouth determined. He would meet up with Devlin and make things right with her. He should have told her. He knew that now. He should have brought it up when she gave him an opening. Was it just two days ago? But he was embarrassed at being caught off his guard, humiliated that Janice had made him look like a fool. Her action that night made him feel like a victim, almost like the victim of a crime, and he'd been reluctant to admit that to anyone. He felt as stupid as shit for thinking it was honorable to protect Janice's privacy. Janice had no honor and no privacy to protect. No more secrets from Devlin, ever.

Jake found Mike and Beth waiting by the United Airlines ticket counter.

"Buddy, I tried to stop her," said Mike.

"It's okay." Jake put a hand on his shoulder. "She was determined to get far away from me."

Beth spoke up. "Mike told me about Janice. What happened? How on earth did Devlin get the idea that her child is yours?"

"She got it straight from the horse's mouth. After we dropped Dev off at the mall, she ran into Janice. The only reason I know is because Janice was stricken with a guilty conscience and met me at the entrance when I went to pick Devlin up. She admitted what she did."

Mike was furious. "What did she tell her?"

"That Trevor's full name is Trevor Matheson McKenna. That I ran straight to Janice's bed after Devlin left. She said I told her to keep out of sight during your wedding weekend. It couldn't get much worse." Jake paused. "I don't think Devlin cares who I slept with over the past four years. I don't even think she'd be all that shocked if I had a kid but..."

"Not with Janice," Mike finished for him. "Anybody but Janice Matheson."

"You got that right."

"So what will you do?" asked Beth. "Try to catch her in Omaha?"

“No, she probably couldn’t get a flight to Des Moines, so she figured Omaha was the next best thing,” commented Mike. “I suspect she’ll either fly out of Omaha or try to rent a car if she can’t get a flight.”

“So I guess I’ll try to get a flight to Des Moines and catch her there,” said Jake. “Do either of you know what kind of car she drives?”

Mike thought for a minute. “A Toyota, a black Toyota Celica.”

“I need to beat her to Des Moines, if I can,” said Jake.

“Jake, there’s one more thing. I meant to tell you, but I forgot—you know, the wedding.” Mike fidgeted. “A copy of William Franz’s passport turned up in a brothel in Bangkok last month. He wasn’t there. I’m not sure that it means anything, but I think you should know.”

Jake felt a muscle tense in his jaw. “I’ll find her. You two need to get going. You’re supposed to be on your way to Hawaii. What happened?”

“Our flight was cancelled,” said Beth, “There’s bad weather in Dallas, and that’s where the plane originates. It’s okay, Jake. I couldn’t leave now anyway. I need to hear that Devlin’s safe.”

“Yeah,” said Mike. “Why don’t you give us your keys? We’ll take the Jeep and head home. We can pick you and Devlin up tomorrow, or at least, we can drop your Jeep here. I’ll stick the key under the floor mat.”

Jake looked at his friends gratefully. “Thanks,” he said. “Do you mind hanging around until I get a flight? That way, you can let Mary know what’s up. Tell her I may call her later. If I have to rent a car, I’ll need directions to Devlin’s house. If Devlin calls, do everything you can to convince her to stay at the airport.”

Jake learned there wouldn’t be another flight to Des Moines until midnight. He couldn’t wait that long. The ticket agent suggested he catch a flight leaving for Chicago in twenty minutes and then connect with a flight to Des Moines. He’d have twenty-five minutes between flights. That would put him in around nine o’clock. The only seats available were in First Class. Jake pulled out a credit card and tossed it on the counter. Snatching up the plane ticket as soon as it was printed, he handed his keys to Mike and gave him the location of the Jeep in the long-term parking garage. Jake sprinted toward his gate. He made it just in time. The flight attendants closed the cabin door right behind him.

Jake would bring Devlin back. He had no other choice. Devlin had captured his heart years ago. Now that he’d made his feelings known to her,

now that he'd made love to her, there was no way he was living without her. She could fight him. She could slap him, she could cry, she could scream at him, and he wouldn't blame her, but it wouldn't make a damn bit of difference. Jake would never let her go. He belonged with her, and she belonged with him. He would do whatever she asked of him, whatever she wanted. He'd leave his job and go to Paris. Sell his property in Idaho if he had to. Move to Iowa and become a farmer. He was prepared to give up everything to keep her. He couldn't lose Devlin, not now.

Jake sat back in his seat and ordered straight whiskey. He tossed it down in one swallow, the liquor providing the burn he craved right now. The flight attendant offered to bring him another drink, but he declined. One was enough to take the edge off his anger and his worry. Drinking himself sick, though tempting, would be the worst thing he could do. He'd need a cool head to get through the next four hours. Jake hoped he was lucky enough to make it to Des Moines ahead of Devlin. He'd camp out in the parking lot all night if he had to. This time, she wasn't getting away from him.

* * * *

After spending thirty minutes arguing with the rental car people at Eppley Airport in Omaha, Devlin felt numb with fatigue. She practically had to sign over the mortgage to her home in order to convince them to let her drop off the car with the rental agency at the airport in Des Moines. As she drove away, heading back toward Iowa over the same bridge where her parents, her brother, and her grandparents had died, she broke down. She recognized the Madison Avenue exit in Council Bluffs and pulled off the freeway. The Walnut Hill Cemetery was only three or four miles away. Devlin made her way through town, sticking to streets she was familiar with.

The hills appeared very green in the late afternoon light. A soft breeze blew in through the open windows of the car as Devlin drove through the gates and climbed the steep brick road to the very top. She parked along the curb and hiked across the thick grass down to the gravesites. Though she'd paid the caretaker extra for upkeep, she hadn't been back since she returned from Denver four and a half years ago. She tried to live her life pretending the dead still existed, somewhere, just out of sight.

Devlin recalled her friend Jason saying on more than one occasion, “*A little denial goes a long way.*” A little denial was a luxury she couldn’t afford right now. They were gone and weren’t coming back. Devlin once again felt like that tree falling in the forest. Her family wasn’t around to hear her. Neither was Jake.

Just as she did when she’d returned four years ago, Devlin sat down beside the graves. She deadheaded the violets the caretaker had planted at her request. Violets were her mother’s favorite flower. More than anything, she wished she could ask her mother for advice. Devlin wondered what she would do in this situation. She looked up at the clear blue sky, half hoping to hear a voice descend from heaven. Her mother’s, her father’s, the voice of one of her grandparents, even her little brother’s would be fine. Devlin laughed at herself. The dead didn’t speak, except in the movies.

Devlin stretched out in the warm grass beside the graves. The August sun warmed the side of her face. She had no idea what she would do, but for the moment, she simply wanted to be here with her family. Growing drowsy, Devlin watched the long rays of the sun filter through the birch trees bordering the green hillside. Their leaves seemed to tinkle like coins as they fluttered back and forth in the gentle breeze. Devlin listened to the calls of robins and meadowlarks. She saw a flash of red as a cardinal flitted from branch to branch. The cardinal was the last thing she saw before she fell asleep.

When Devlin woke up two hours later, the sun had nearly set, its last rays burnishing the hills with copper. She sat up, blinking at the sudden light. Somehow, while she slept, her unconscious mind had considered the facts and come to a conclusion. Janice was lying—that was clear now. Devlin had let her fear of loss overrule her better judgment. She’d been so afraid of losing Jake, so terrified he’d vanish from her life, that she’d done exactly the same thing she’d done the last time. She fled from him without giving him a chance to explain.

Devlin looked down at the diamond ring she still wore on her left hand. It sparkled in the fading light. She closed her eyes for a moment and remembered clearly what he’d said to her, what he’d done to her, what he’d forced her to admit. After everything they’d shared this weekend, Devlin knew without a doubt Jake would have told her if he had a child. Even, Devlin shuddered, if his child’s mother was Janice Matheson. Jake had

never lied to her, never manipulated her. He'd always protected her and put her first. Devlin remembered how he sat at her bedside when she nearly died of pneumonia, holding her hand, murmuring to her in that deep voice of his, hour after hour. He didn't even know her then.

Jake alone had called her back to this life. He was the reason she'd returned, the only reason. Devlin realized she had indeed heard a voice from the other side, Jake's. He'd called to her loud and clear when she hovered near death. Back then she had listened and come home. To him.

Well, Dev thought to herself, it was time she started listening to him again. She may not make a sound in the forest, but she assured herself that Jake McKenna certainly did. Devlin rose to her feet, brushing the grass from her clothing. She bent over and kissed the still-warm headstones, then looked around for some loose rocks. She'd learned a couple of years ago in one of her religious studies classes that it was a Jewish custom to leave a pebble on the grave of a loved one, to show that they were not forgotten. It took some time to find five smooth, flat pebbles, but she did. Devlin laid them on the gravestones.

"I'll be back. I promise," she said. Then she searched for a sixth stone, tossing it into the meadow beyond the graves for her Aunt Carolyn. She ran to her rental car, searching her memory for the quickest route to the interstate. Devlin knew she could return to the airport in Omaha and try to get a flight back to Denver, but she just wanted to go home, to Grinnell. As soon as she got there, she'd call Jake and apologize. She only hoped she'd be able to find him.

She had a two-hour drive ahead of her. Devlin figured she might as well make good use of the time. As Devlin drove east, the sun dying behind her, she imagined herself knocking out all Janice's perfect white teeth. Giving her two black eyes. Breaking her nose. The images made the time pass.

* * * *

Jake was exhausted by the time they landed in Chicago, but he didn't have time to think about it. It was fortunate he'd been seated in First Class because his plane was forced to circle O'Hare several times, and he had to sprint to his connecting flight. Once again, the flight attendants closed the door immediately behind him. Jake had hoped to have time to call Mary. He

wanted to find out if she'd heard anything from Devlin, but that would have to wait until he arrived in Des Moines. His plane out of Chicago left half an hour late. At least it was a short flight. The problem would be finding Devlin. He had no idea whether she'd be flying into Des Moines, driving in, or staying in Omaha. She might even hide out with Mary's family in Treynor. Jake sighed. He'd get directions to her house from Mary. He'd camp out on her front porch indefinitely if that's what it took to get her back.

When Jake disembarked in Des Moines forty minutes later, he searched for a pay phone. All he'd brought with him were the clothes on his back and his wallet. He needed change. Most of the vendors were closed for the night. There were very few passengers about, but he found a rental car agency open near the baggage claim. He got change from the attendant and checked the hours of operation. If Devlin didn't show up, he'd need to rent a car.

Mary answered on the first ring. "Devlin?"

"No, Mary, it's me," replied Jake. "I take it you haven't heard from her?"

"No, nothing," said Mary, distress obvious in her voice. "I phoned my mom and all my brothers just in case, so they know to be on the lookout for her. I told them what happened. I hope you don't mind. I figured if she shows up they can set the record straight."

"It's fine. I don't care who knows what anymore. Look, sweetie, you must be exhausted. Give me directions to her house, and I'll let you go to bed." Jake looked around for something to write on. He realized he didn't have a pen or a pencil, let alone a piece of paper. "Hold on a minute," he said. "I gotta find something to write with."

The only place Jake could think to look was the rental car agency. He hated to leave Mary hanging on the phone, so he told her he'd call her right back. He'd nearly reached the baggage claim area when he heard Devlin's voice. Jake stopped in his tracks. He spotted her leaning over the counter at the rental car agency, practically shoving a set of keys into the young attendant's face. He could hear her trying to explain why she wanted to drop the car off here instead of driving it back to Omaha.

Jake took a deep breath. The last thing he wanted to do was scare her off. Jake was sure he could catch Dev if she started running from him, but he didn't want it to be that way. He could hear the anxiety in her voice as

she tried to convince the attendant to accept the car. While she was distracted, he walked right up behind her. Jake stretched a big arm on either side of her, placed his hands on the countertop. He pressed his body against her back, trapping her between himself and the desk. He felt Devlin jerk, and she fell silent. From over Devlin's shoulder, Jake saw surprise in the young man's eyes. He could only imagine what this must look like.

Jake lowered his head. Putting his mouth close to her ear, he murmured, "Devlin, don't run from me. Please. We need to talk."

He felt her breathing quicken. He slid a hand over hers and held her wrist. Her heart was racing. She turned in his arms and stared up at him, her beautiful eyes brimming with tears.

Devlin whispered, "Jake," before her eyes closed, and she slid down his body toward the floor. Jake caught her up in his arms and carried her to the nearest row of seats.

Jake laid her across his lap, cradling her against his chest, rubbing his hand over her smooth cheek. "Dev, it's okay. Wake up, darlin'. C'mon, Devlin, wake up."

"Can I help with anything, sir?" asked the young man as he hurried from behind the desk. "Should I call an ambulance?"

Devlin began to stir.

"No, I think she'll be all right," replied Jake. "Do you have any juice or pop or something? Even a glass of water would be good."

"I'll be right back." The young man took off at a run.

Jake continued to speak quietly, rubbing her cheeks and her arms. Her skin felt cold to his touch. She'd left Denver with only the clothes on her back. She wore a sleeveless shirt, and the air-conditioning felt like ice in the airport. Jake wished he had a jacket to cover her with, but he didn't, so he snuggled her close to his chest. If he knew Devlin, she probably hadn't had a thing to drink or eat since lunch.

The young man returned with a plastic cup of orange juice.

"C'mon, baby, wake up and drink something," Jake coaxed. Devlin began to wiggle in his arms, and her eyes fluttered open.

"Jake," she said. Her voice had a husky sound, as if she'd been crying.

"Jake," she repeated, "how...? What are you...?"

"Shhhh." He lifted her upright and showed her the cup of juice. "Drink this," he ordered. "Then we'll talk."

Dev obediently took the cup and sipped. She made a face.

"No, drink it all."

Devlin drank the juice. The young man hovered nearby and asked her how she felt and if he could bring her anything else. Devlin thanked him and told him she was fine, just tired.

"I'll be behind the desk when you're ready to check in the car," he said politely. He walked down the corridor a little farther than he needed to in order to give them some privacy.

* * * *

Devlin decided to take matters in hand. She climbed off Jake's lap and stood on shaky legs, facing him.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "I shouldn't have run off. I'm sorry you had to chase me all the way to Des Moines."

"Devlin, I..."

"No," she said, taking his hand and pressing it to her lips. "I know he's not your child."

"How?" asked Jake, confusion in his eyes.

"By the time I left Omaha, I knew she was lying. Maybe I hadn't figured it out completely, but my subconscious mind knew. It suddenly became clear. Jake, if you had a child, you wouldn't hide him away, no matter who his mother was. You would love him with all your heart. And when you met me at the airport in Denver last week, you would have been carrying him in your arms. I'm sure of that."

Devlin watched relief flood Jake's face. She felt the emotion as if it was her own. Jake rose to his feet and wrapped her in his strong arms. His heart pounded against her chest. Devlin tilted her head back, a half smile on her lips, inviting him in. Jake didn't disappoint. He moved a hand to either side of her face and slanted his mouth over hers. Jake's lips were velvet, and his tongue tasted of whiskey, slightly smoky, as it tangled with hers. Devlin found the taste very arousing. She whimpered beneath Jake's kiss and wrapped her slender arms around his neck, pressing herself against his long length. Jake broke contact with her mouth. He looked into her eyes.

"Don't ever scare me like that, ever. I don't want to lose you."

"You won't. I'll never run off again. You're stuck with me, Jake McKenna."

"Where's your car?"

"In the long-term lot, but I need to..."

* * * *

Jake left her standing, bemused, by the bank of seats while he headed to the desk. He picked up the keys Devlin had dropped and called the young man over. Jake reached into his back pocket, pulled out his wallet, removed a hundred-dollar bill, and handed it to him.

"Will this take care of the inconvenience?"

"Well, yeah, I guess," the young man replied, surprised. "I just need to check out the car."

Jake handed him another hundred-dollar bill.

"Consider it checked," said the young man. "You two have a nice evening."

Jake strode back to Devlin. He tucked her arm beneath his and steered her toward the sign pointing to the long-term parking lot.

"Jake," Devlin said, "just so you know, I have a small car."

"I'm flexible."

Devlin's laughter rang out in the night, and Jake smiled. He loved to hear her laugh. Devlin was his, and as soon as they reached her car, he would show her. Jake laughed out loud.

Devlin turned toward him, a question in her eyes.

"You. And airports," said Jake, his big hand roaming over her bottom. "There's something extraordinary about you and airports."

* * * *

Devlin led Jake to her car. He groaned when he saw it.

"There's no way I can fuck you in the backseat of that," he said bluntly, adjusting himself in his jeans.

Devlin caught his movement and grinned. "Fuck me?" she asked innocently. "I thought you wanted to make love to me."

Jake rolled his eyes at her. "How long a drive is it to your house?"

Devlin pretended to consider the idea for a moment, teasing him. "Oh, about an hour and a half, maybe an hour and forty."

"What's the speed limit in Iowa?" he asked.

"Fifty-five," Devlin laughed. "Haven't you ever heard the saying, 'Patience is a virtue'?"

"Feel me," answered Jake, pulling her against him. "This is a virtue."

Devlin gasped. It felt like he had a club between his legs. She became aware of an answering wetness between her own legs and wasn't certain she could hold out another two hours.

"Oh God," was the only response she could muster.

Her eyes on his face, Devlin pressed close as she reached down and unzipped his pants, freeing him. She ran her hands along his steely length, taking care to keep her activities discreet. Devlin heard Jake growl as she backed him around a large cement pillar. The pillar abutted a low brick wall, and the back side faced a dark, empty field. She glanced around. As far as she could tell, they were the only people in the long-term parking lot.

"Dev, stop." He reached down and stilled her hands.

"Why?"

"I want you beneath me when I come. I want to hear you call my name," he answered, his voice low and husky in the night air. "Not here, not now."

Jake pressed his head back against the pillar and tried to control his breathing. He pulled Devlin close and held her, his hands rubbing her back. Now that her hands were free, she continued her rhythmic stroking of his erection.

"God, baby, don't," Jake pleaded.

"Why not?"

"Because, woman," Jake said through gritted teeth as he pulled her hands away, "you're getting me into some very bad habits."

Devlin started to laugh.

"Say that again," she breathed.

"Bad habits?" he asked, reaching between them to zip up his jeans.

"No." Dev chuckled. "Woman. You called me woman."

"Woman," Jake repeated, grinning.

"Oooh, I like it," teased Devlin. "Next thing I know, you'll be saying, 'Damn you, woman!'" Devlin rubbed her hand over the front of his jeans.

"I'm about to say that right now, if you don't stop teasing me." He took her hand and tugged her toward the car. "I'll drive."

Devlin began to argue. "Jake, I'm perfectly capable..."

"If I have to drive," he interrupted her, "I have to concentrate on the road." He grinned that wicked grin of his.

Devlin grinned right back as she dug the keys out of her purse and tossed them to him. "So what bad habits?"

"Like," answered Jake, opening the passenger door for her, "ever hear of foreplay? I used to be pretty good at it, you know."

Devlin began to laugh.

"And once upon a time, I could last more than a minute or two," Jake said. Then he added, "Damn you, woman."

Devlin whooped with laughter, and Jake joined her. They were still grinning like two kids when they paid the parking fee and exited the airport.

* * * *

Devlin directed Jake onto the bypass around Des Moines toward Interstate 80 East. She turned toward Jake and admired his very masculine profile for a moment. Devlin asked herself how she got so lucky. What had she done to deserve this man? Just like the Rolling Stones song, she'd believed for years that you can't always get what you want. Even now, with the evidence right beside her, his hands on the steering wheel, a half smile on his lips, she had to shake her head at this change in fortune.

"My clothes!" Devlin bolted upright as the thought occurred to her. "My clothes are still in the hotel room!"

Jake cleared his throat. "So are mine."

"So you didn't...?"

"No, I didn't check out of the hotel. There wasn't time. I'll have Mary or Ken check out for us." Jake paused, and then he exclaimed, "Shit!"

"What?"

"I left Mary hanging by the phone. I called her from the Des Moines airport, and I told her I'd get change and call her right back."

"We can stop and find a phone," said Devlin, concerned for Mary.

"If I see an all-night truck stop," replied Jake. "We can get something to eat too. Have you eaten since lunch?"

“Was that today?” asked Devlin with a wry grin. “I don’t remember.”

Jake glanced at her. “Yeah, me neither.”

Devlin fiddled with her purse strap for a moment. “So how did you know?”

“What happened, you mean?”

“Yes. What happened.”

“Janice came down with a guilty conscience. After you took off, she came to look for me. She told me what she said to you.”

Devlin turned the diamond on her finger. “It was the ring.”

“Huh?”

“The ring,” Dev replied. “She saw the ring. I think that’s what set her off. The first thing she said to me, before I had a chance to look up at her, was, ‘Nice ring.’”

Jake was silent.

Devlin stared out the window at the road. “Who’s Trevor’s father?”

“I have no idea,” said Jake. “I only know it’s not me.”

“Did you sleep with her after I left?” Dev asked. “Because if you did, I would understand.”

Jake snorted and rolled his eyes at her. “You might understand, but I wouldn’t. No, I didn’t sleep with her.”

“Then why...” Dev couldn’t finish the question.

Jake sighed. “When you left without a word, I ended up at a bar. Mike’s partner, Ed, found me there, passed out on the pool table, or so I understand. He called Mike, and they took me home, alone, and left me at my door. In the morning, I woke up with a nasty hangover. When I sat up, I saw Janice laying there, in my bed. She claimed we’d slept together, but it was obvious to me we hadn’t. I threw her out of my apartment.”

“How did you know for sure? That you didn’t sleep with her, I mean.”

Jake looked pointedly at her. “I would know.” Then he added, “Just to be on the safe side, I insisted on a blood test after her baby was born. According to the test results, there’s no way he could be mine. If there was even the slightest possibility, I would have sued her for custody. I’d never let Janice raise my kid.”

“You should have told me.”

“I thought about it,” replied Jake, “but I couldn’t bring myself to say anything.”

"Why?" she asked.

Jake drove in silence for a moment. Then he said, "Because, I felt so...so..."

"Used?" Devlin finished for him.

"Yes," he answered, grimacing, "used."

Devlin laid a hand on his arm. She understood his feelings very well. Jake turned toward her. She saw that his mouth was set in a tight line.

"Jake," began Devlin, "you're the same man you were before it happened. No one will blame you." She paused. "Did you blame me? For what my uncle did to me?"

"Of course not."

"There's your answer," she said. "That day in the hospital, I was able to tell the police what he did because I knew you believed none of it was my fault. I could only tell the story if you were there. I knew you blamed him, not me. Until I met you, I blamed myself."

"Why would you blame yourself?" Jake asked, appalled.

Devlin considered her answer. "I blamed myself for being weak. I wasn't able to stop him from beating my aunt. I wasn't able to prevent him from forcing himself on me, from raping me. And I got sick, so I couldn't kill him like I planned. If I had killed him, my aunt would be alive. Not a single day goes by that I don't think about it. About what could have been."

Jake reached over and took her hand.

"But if I'd succeeded," she added, "I would never have known you."

Jake gave her hand a comforting squeeze. Devlin saw that his mouth had relaxed.

"Do you remember the afternoon I ran out of the courthouse? I told you that I felt like a tree falling in the forest, and I wondered if I made a sound?" she asked him.

"I remember."

"Do I make a sound, Jake?"

"Yes, Dev, you definitely make a sound." Jake laughed. "Especially when you're coming."

Devlin squealed and punched him in the arm. "You are one bad man, Jake McKenna."

"So I've been told on several occasions by a skinny redhead," he said with a wolfish grin.

"I'm not skinny," grumbled Devlin. "I'm slender."

"There's a truck stop at the next exit," said Jake. He reached beneath Devlin, pinching her bottom. "What do you say we put some meat on your slender bones then?"

"Just for that, I may not eat," she chided him.

"Oh, you'll eat," he teased, wiggling his fingers beneath her. "You need to build up your strength. I've got plans for tonight."

* * * *

Devlin secured a booth while Jake headed straight for the pay phone in the corner.

"What the hell are you trying to do?" yelled Ken when he realized it was Jake. "Kill my wife and baby? Mary's been hysterical for forty-five minutes. She was ready to call the sheriff's department out there!"

"Sorry," said Jake. "I'm really sorry. I spotted Devlin in the airport, and I couldn't let her get away. This is the first chance I've had to call back."

"How is she?" asked Ken, his voice calmer.

"She's fine. Everything's okay. Tell Mary. Let her know we'll call her tomorrow."

"Where are you staying?"

"We're on our way to Devlin's house now. We just stopped to call you and get something to eat."

"Sorry, man, I didn't mean to lose it," Ken apologized. "But this has been really hard on Mary, and I don't want anything to go wrong with the pregnancy."

"No apology necessary. I know exactly how you feel. Give Mary my love, and tell her Devlin's fine. Kiss Katie for me." Jake added, "Would you mind giving Mike and Beth a call?"

"Yeah, I will. Listen, I'm really glad you found her. No more drama, okay?"

"I'll do my best," said Jake. "Hey man, we're talking about Devlin here."

Ken laughed into the phone as he hung up.

By the time Jake made a visit to the men's room and returned to the table, Devlin had already ordered a large fruit plate, a double cheeseburger

with fries, a grilled cheese sandwich on whole wheat, and two extra-thick chocolate milkshakes. The fruit plate arrived first. Dev apologized as she inhaled the strawberries and cantaloupe. Jake didn't care. He was happy to see her eat. He took some grapes and berries and left the rest for her. She skipped the fries this time but ate everything else, downing her milkshake, and asking him if he'd split a piece of peach pie with her. He agreed readily.

Devlin with an appetite was encouraging. It told Jake she felt secure with him. She'd always had an edge to her, more so when she was under stress. It was something Jake appreciated. He found her energy attractive. But in the past, he'd seen her nearly starve herself. When she was under stress, food was the farthest thing from her mind. He was reassured by the fact that, despite the events of the day, she ate.

Devlin leaned back against the plastic bench. "God, that tasted good," she said, stretching her arms above her head and arching her back.

Jake looked at her nipples pressed against her thin tee shirt and grinned.

Devlin noticed his look. "Do you ever *not* think about sex?" she asked with a matching grin.

"I'm a man." He shrugged. "So the answer is no. I never *not* think about sex with you."

Devlin laughed softly. "Good answer."

"Ready to go?"

"After a quick trip to the ladies room."

Jake paid the bill and was leaning against the counter when she returned. Climbing back into the car, Devlin told him which exit to take and instructed him to wake her up when he got off the freeway. Then she made herself as comfortable as possible and promptly fell asleep. Jake shook his head. It amazed him how quickly she could fall asleep, even in cramped quarters. Then he remembered her mentioning that she usually slept lightly, or at least she had since William Franz. From now on, she would sleep securely. He would make certain of it.

Chapter Twelve

William Franz sat in the local tavern nursing his third beer. He'd been by Devlin's house earlier in the evening. She wasn't there. Again. He'd parked his compact car out of sight on a dirt path and walked through the rows of corn, taking care to keep his head down. It wasn't difficult to approach her place. Her closest neighbor, a bachelor farmer, he'd learned, lived over a mile away as the crow flies. From his hiding place, Bill had watched him surreptitiously for the past three days. He saw him pick up her mail, check the padlock on the barn, and inevitably lock her back door as he left.

Where the hell was the little bitch? He couldn't hang around town too much longer without arousing suspicion. And who knew when Ben Matheson would report his credit card missing? That was the fortunate thing about doctors. They didn't have time to pay attention to domestic details like missing credit cards.

So far Franz had been lucky. He'd managed to pick through a few wallets in the surgical locker room. He was surprised at how easy it was. There was no security. All he needed was a pair of discarded scrubs. Most of the doctors didn't even lock up. He'd tried a couple of the cards at fleabag motels in Denver before he left, and they'd already been cancelled.

Not Matheson's. He was an arrogant son of a bitch. Probably hadn't reported his driver's license missing either. The asshole never did pay much attention to what went on right under his nose. Stealing Matheson's credit card was just for fun. He wished he could run up more charges on it, but he didn't want to take the risk. He took the other credit cards to keep it from looking like Matheson had been specifically targeted. He didn't need them. It was the driver's license he needed.

Franz needed Matheson's driver's license doctored with a phony picture so he could visit Bitsy. Sometime over the past four years, he'd lost his copy of the key to the safe deposit box. He needed hers.

He had to give Bitsy credit. She was one devious bitch. She'd hidden the key in plain sight, wrapping it in cellophane and taping it with duct tape to the bottom of her mailbox. He went by in the middle of the night and it was still there. Thanks to her, he'd left the country four and a half years ago with two hundred and fifty thousand dollars stashed in a bank in Hong Kong. She hid another two hundred and fifty thousand in large bills in a safe deposit box at FirstBank in Colorado Springs. They'd taken it out under the names of Rebecca and Ben Matheson, as an insurance policy. She'd paid for five years up front and asked for two keys. She told the clerk she was going abroad, to Switzerland. Of course, Franz laughed to himself, Bitsy always believed the money was for the two of them. As if he'd be seen anywhere with that old bat.

He had to return to the States to get it. There was no way Bitsy could pay a bill for a safety deposit box from a prison cell, and he couldn't take the risk that someone would open up that box and get his money. Besides, he wanted the passport she had left in there. When Bitsy had rented the box, she brought him her husband's birth certificate and Social Security card, and he'd managed to apply for a passport in Ben Matheson's name, using Bitsy's home address. Unfortunately, he had to leave the country before he could get it. He left a copy of his own passport in a brothel in Bangkok when he decided to come back to the States, just to throw the authorities off the track.

The bartender stopped by. "Can I get you anything?"

Franz winked at her, shaking his head. Margie had a horse face, nice body, though, and she became a fount of information once he got her in the sack. Bartenders, especially those in small towns, knew everything about everybody in their community. Even more so when they were single, female, and lonely. All it took was a few minutes between her legs and a steak dinner to get the information flowing.

Franz told her he was working with the college, claiming he was a consultant from a firm in Chicago. He even dropped the name. He said he'd been called in to help out with the endowment. He could talk the talk, easy as pie. She was plenty impressed. Besides, he'd cleaned up in Denver before

he left. A neat haircut, new clothes, a nice rental car with Illinois plates from a small agency in the Quad Cities.

He still had it where the ladies were concerned. In his early fifties, Franz was leaner than he'd been four years ago, harder, tougher, with an air of danger that women seemed attracted to. The past four years hadn't been a complete waste of time. He had a nice setup in Thailand. All the young girls money could buy. But he had some unfinished business here. Devlin Barre. Not a day passed in over four years that he didn't think of her and how she'd fucked up his life. If it wasn't for her, he'd be home free, living the high life. He wouldn't be on the run looking over his shoulder all the time. Without Devlin, the stupid cops never would have figured out that he had a hand in the accident. And it was Devlin's fault he had to shoot Carolyn when he did.

Devlin was a monkey wrench thrown into the works, but by the time Carolyn had wheeled her into the house in Denver, he had it all planned out. He figured she wouldn't be any more of a challenge than Carolyn was. All he had to do was show her who was boss, threaten her and threaten her aunt, and she'd cave quickly enough. Once she turned eighteen, she'd sign the money and property over to him, and then she'd vanish without a trace. He and Carolyn wouldn't even bother to file a missing person's report. After all, who was left to care? With his assistance, Carolyn might attempt suicide again, only this time he wouldn't be home to call 911 for her.

Margie came by, and Bill ordered another beer. He eyed her ass as she turned away. He'd work off some steam with her tonight, as long as he didn't have to look at that face. He could do it from behind.

Damn, he should have killed Devlin that night. He almost had. Who would have believed that skinny bitch had the balls to interfere with anything he did? Let alone stab him in the leg with a steak knife? When he'd left Carolyn sprawled on the kitchen floor and dragged Devlin down the basement steps, he was half out of his head. He was determined to show Devlin who was boss, but she was so fucking tight he couldn't get in. He'd changed his tactics and shoved his dick in her mouth. He'd banged against the back of her throat until she begun to gag and retch and he'd realized he might suffocate her. Then there was no way he'd get the money. So he'd spread her wide and viciously rammed himself inside her. He didn't care how much she screamed or how much she bled. He'd wanted to break her so

she'd never cross him again. And if he had to show her over and over until he got his money? He was happy to oblige.

He'd locked Devlin in the basement with the dead bolt and pocketed the key, ordering Carolyn to keep her mouth shut. None of it would have happened in the first place if she hadn't interrupted him and Bitsy doing it in the kitchen. Carolyn was supposed to be running errands all afternoon, but she'd come home early. Bitsy had tried to pull away when Carolyn walked in from the garage, but he wasn't having it. He finished up with Bitsy and told her he'd call her later. Carolyn was as bad as her niece. He'd laughed when she actually waved the steak knife at him. It hadn't taken much to make her drop it. He'd left the house that night and didn't return for twenty-four hours, afraid he'd blow it and kill them both.

He called Bitsy from his office. She'd brought him some bandages and a change of clothes. He and her husband wore the same size. They'd discussed their plans to leave the country once he'd got the money. Bitsy wanted to go to somewhere warm, to the Dominican Republic or Belize. Franz had readily agreed with her. What did it matter? She could believe whatever she wanted to believe. When he got his money, he had no intention of taking her with him. She was brainy, she was devious, she was a tiger in bed, she was quite a looker for a middle-aged woman, and she had the right connections in the banking world. But that was as far as it went. Beyond her connections and her financial acumen, she meant nothing to him. No bitch ever had.

When he'd gone home the next night, he expected to find Carolyn hiding in bed nursing her bruises. Instead, she was dressed to kill, and she'd had her hair done. He had done a double take. She didn't say a word to him. He fished out the key to the dead bolt, intending to see how Devlin had fared overnight and if she'd be more agreeable now. The basement was silent. He'd supposed she'd curled up in a corner. He'd searched the storage rooms and the rudimentary bathroom. She was nowhere to be found. Then he'd noticed the broken window above the washing machine.

He'd pounded up the stairs and yelled for Carolyn, dragging her from the bedroom, demanding to know where Devlin was. Carolyn had looked stunned. She'd said, "*In the basement, where you told me to leave her.*" She'd genuinely seemed to have no idea what he was talking about. Franz believed her. She was too stupid to tell a convincing lie. He'd had to think.

And he'd had to think quickly. Where had she gone? Where would the little bitch go? She didn't have any friends. She didn't know anyone in Denver. He'd made sure of that.

Dropping Carolyn's arm, he'd unplugged the bedroom phone and carried it downstairs with him. He'd gone to his study, locking the door behind him. Reaching into the top drawer of his desk, he pulled out his pistol. *Think*, he'd told himself, *think*. His heart pounding, he could practically hear the police sirens racing down his street.

Wait a minute, he'd thought, his breathing slowing. She'd had over twenty-four hours to go to the cops. If they'd known anything, anything about him at all, he'd already be in handcuffs. Carolyn hadn't gone to the cops either. No, he was safe for the moment. He'd thought about the money. As far as he knew, Devlin was still in the dark. They'd kept the lawyer out of Devlin's hospital room, telling him she was too sick, too traumatized and Carolyn assured him they'd have her contact him when she was feeling better. He'd made sure Devlin never saw any of the letters the lawyer sent her, and he'd had Carolyn forge Devlin's signature on everything that needed to be signed. Bitsy notarized them for him. It would be all right, as long as he kept his cool. If she hadn't already gone to the cops, she would have been unlikely to.

Franz had tried to focus and consider the possibilities. The little bitch could very well have vanished. It was winter. She didn't have any money. She had no warm clothes, no ID on her. He'd seen her backpack and her jacket sitting in the front hallway, where she dropped them the day before. She was thin and sickly. The streets weren't a very pleasant place to live, even in good weather. If he could sit tight, things might just take care of themselves, unless she had gone back to Iowa. Unless she had tried to hitch a ride back there and she told somebody what happened. But he had kept coming back to the obvious—if she was going to tell somebody, wouldn't she have already done it?

He'd wondered if the cops might pick her up for vagrancy. It was possible. She'd never been fingerprinted, so they'd only get her name if she gave it to them. Would she? Or had he scared her into silence? She knew what he'd do to her aunt if she said anything. She'd already kept her mouth shut for months.

What did the police do if they found a body on the streets? Did they put a photo in the paper or just an article and wait to see if anyone came forward? Maybe they contacted only those families who had filed missing persons reports, if the description matched the body. There was no one to identify Devlin, except maybe that teacher. She was the only one he had had to watch out for.

The longer he heard nothing from her and nothing about her, the better his odds of staying out of trouble and getting her money. It was a lot of money, and he loathed the thought of giving it up. Just in case things went bad, he had made a reservation on United for a flight to San Francisco and then on to Hong Kong. He'd paid full price so he could change his dates if necessary. He'd called Bitsy and filled her in. He'd let her know the girl had run off, but not why. He'd asked Bitsy how long someone had to be missing before they could be declared dead. She'd said she'd look into it for him. Then he'd packed a bag and stuck it in the trunk of his car. The next morning, with Bitsy's help, he'd liquidated as many of his assets as he could.

If it wasn't for Bitsy, he'd never have known Devlin had turned up, not until he found himself in the back of a patrol car anyway. Bitsy had called him a few days later to tell him that a runaway girl had been brought into the emergency room. She'd been raped, and the cops were involved. The cops only had a first name. It was Devlin. Bitsy had said she was told the girl was in pretty bad shape. She might die. Franz had decided he couldn't take a chance on "might."

He was on his way to the door when he had seen Carolyn lurking in the hallway. She'd barely ventured from her bedroom for two days, and he'd almost forgotten about her. She was a loose end, a big one. She'd had his gun in her hand, the one he kept in his bedside table. They'd struggled. She'd tried to fire it, but she didn't know how to release the safety. He'd wrestled it away from her in the kitchen and shot her once, in the chest at close range. Blood spattered his clothing. Instead of driving to the airport, he was forced to hurry upstairs and shower, then get rid of the gun and the clothes. He'd shoved everything in a plastic yard-waste bag and tossed it into the creek at the far end of his property. The water was running high and fast after the recent snows. The bag would wash up somewhere, but by then he'd be long gone.

Bill finished his beer. He'd been patient five years ago. He almost snorted out loud. The accident had worked out better than he ever dreamed. They'd all died, except for her. It was almost a perfect plan. He motioned to Margie. He slid her a twenty-dollar bill and his extra room key. She smiled that bucktoothed grin, and he imagined knocking out a few of those teeth. Then he remembered where he was and who he was supposed to be and smiled back. He wanted to check out Devlin's place once more before he headed back to his motel. His patience was at an end.

* * * *

Jake took the exit Devlin had indicated, turning north on the highway. He smiled as he glanced over at her. Dev somehow managed to look peaceful, even scrunched on her side, asleep in the front seat of a compact car. He hated to wake her, but he didn't know how to get to her house. Besides, he wanted her wide awake when they got there. Like he told her, he had plans, if Dev was up for them, that is.

"Dev," Jake said softly. "Wake up, baby."

She opened her eyes and smiled at him. God, she looked like an angel. How did he get so lucky? Devlin stretched, making that mewing noise Jake loved so much, causing him to squirm uncomfortably in his seat.

"I need directions to your place."

"Did you take the exit yet?"

"Yeah. I'm on Highway 146 North."

Devlin looked around. "Just stay on it right through town." She laughed. "It's a little town. My house is five, six miles north of Grinnell. It's pretty dark out there, so I'll have to show you the road. It's a dirt road, and it's not marked."

Jake shot her a look of disapproval. "I'm not sure I like the sound of that. Maybe Mary has a point about you living alone."

"Well," Devlin drawled, reaching over to take his hand, "I'm not alone now, am I?"

"No, darlin', you're not alone." Her hand felt warm in his. "Get used to it."

* * * *

William Franz was fuming. He'd just wound his way back and forth through sticky rows of corn in utter blackness, all for nothing. Her house was dark, her parking area empty. He'd scraped his knees when he tripped and fell against a pipe, but he didn't dare use the flashlight he brought. Damn that bitch Devlin. He'd only managed to accomplish one thing, cutting the padlock off her barn with the bolt cutters he'd bought at the local hardware store. He'd risked a little light once he was inside. It looked like a workroom or studio. It didn't matter what she used the barn for. He just wanted a place to hide, maybe ambush her if he had the opportunity.

Before he left, Bill hung the broken pieces of the padlock through the hook. Even if the neighbor noticed, who cared? So what if he told Devlin somebody tried to break into her barn? Big fucking deal. If Devlin didn't show up by tomorrow night, Franz would split anyway. He couldn't hang around here much longer. The risk of getting caught grew by the day. He'd have to wait for another time. Who knew how long that might be? And that pissed him off no end.

Margie was coming to his room tonight. He couldn't afford to slip up. Franz didn't want to screw her any longer. He wanted to beat the shit out of her. That would take the edge off. On second thought, maybe it would be better if he sent her home, maybe tell her that the company had an emergency and he had to leave early in the morning. He needed his sleep. Yeah, it would be safer that way. The fucking bitch Devlin had ruined another night for him.

Franz looked around, checking to make sure the road was empty before climbing into his car. He backed out of the dirt pathway slowly, keeping his headlights off until he'd been on the road for a few seconds. It wouldn't be smart to make anyone suspicious. He only passed one car coming the other way as he drove to the motel. What a dead-end backwater piece of shit town, he thought. That accident did them all a favor. They were better off dead.

Fuck it, he decided. He had no idea where she was or when she'd be back. He could wait around for weeks, and she still might not show. He supposed he could try to pry the information out of Farmer Brown, but that would probably blow his cover. Threatening the man would definitely blow his cover, and then he'd have to kill him. No, he'd check out early and go by

her place and trash it. Break all the windows, jack off on her sheets, tear up her workroom. Put the fear of God into her. He wondered if she'd know it was him. He hoped she'd think it was him. William Franz laughed out loud. Maybe he'd leave her a note. Wouldn't that be a hoot? Hell, why not burn the place to the ground? There was plenty of stuff in that barn of hers he could use. There was no need to leave a note. She'd know damn well it was him. His bad mood dissipated as he returned to his motel room. Maybe he wouldn't send Margie away after all.

* * * *

Jake turned down the dirt road. Devlin had described it accurately. It was dark, hard to navigate, and surrounded by cornfields. Her isolation made him uncomfortable. They'd only passed a single car coming the other way since exiting the freeway. As far as Jake was concerned, this was not acceptable. Dev was at risk out here. If not from William Franz, then from anyone else who learned she lived alone. Jake determined to remedy the situation as soon as possible. He'd already scheduled himself off for another ten days. His field office could manage without him for a little longer. He wanted to get Devlin packed up and settled with his folks. After the wedding, they could decide what to do with this place.

Jake had a couple of projects to finish up with the Bureau of Land Management. Once he completed them and trained his replacement, he'd have time to focus on updating the summer cabin at the ranch. It would be a good opportunity to check out the stock, and Devlin could get to know his family. Jake looked forward to building a home for himself and Devlin on the property in Idaho. The plans were all drawn up, the materials on order. His brother had agreed to spend next summer with him, building the cabin and barn and putting up some fencing. Jake had recently hired a couple of local carpenters. The surveyors had already completed their work.

Devlin motioned to the left. The headlights illuminated a graveled driveway. He pulled in and parked close to the house. When he switched the lights off, the night became pitch black. Dev turned to him and smiled. He could just make out her features.

"See how dark it is?" She pointed at the night sky. "Don't you love it? Look at the stars. You can see the entire Milky Way."

"Dev, I don't like you living..."

Her lips interrupted him. Her seat belt was undone, and she'd climbed over the console. His arms were around her in a heartbeat, his worries forgotten in an instant. Her mouth was liquid satin. She tasted like chocolate and strawberries, fresh peach pie, and desire. Jake squirmed, his sudden erection uncomfortable as the seat belt tightened against him.

"God," he exclaimed, pulling his lips from hers, "I've got to get out of this car." Jake unfastened his seat belt and bolted out the door.

Devlin giggled. She climbed out after Jake and found him leaning against the car, adjusting the front of his jeans. She brushed against him, once, twice, and he grabbed her by the waist, lifting her easily onto the warm hood.

"Perfect," growled Jake, picking up where they left off. His lips descended upon hers. His kiss was demanding, possessive. He pulled her long legs apart and wrapped them around his narrow waist, thrusting himself against her, wanting her open and spread for him. Right here, right now, beneath the black sky, in the velvety air of this August night. He slid his hands beneath her shirt. Her breasts felt soft and warm against his calloused palms, her nipples beaded into hard points. Unable to resist, he rolled the tempting tips between his thumbs and his forefingers.

Devlin leaned on the hood, arching her back to give him better access. Jake heard her suck in her breath and let it out on a moan. He pressed his erection against her, rubbing her clit through their jeans. Her moans grew louder and her hands clutched at his front pockets, pulling him even closer. She'd slipped off her sandals, and he could feel her heels against his buttocks, pushing him forward.

Jake drew her shirt over her head, and he knew her nipples would grow even harder now that they'd been exposed to the air. He reached a hand behind his neck and tugged off his own shirt. Devlin rubbed her bare chest back and forth across his, reaching a hand up to pinch his own hard bud of a nipple. Jake hissed then, leaned her back over his arm, and unerringly found her breast with his mouth. He sucked her, tasting her with his tongue, running the edge of his teeth along the beaded point. Turning his attention to her other breast, Jake's cock throbbed at the soft noises coming from Devlin's beautiful lips.

“Come here,” he said, lifting his head. He raised her up with one arm, her legs still wrapped around his waist, and lay his shirt over the hood of the car with the other. Then he stood her on her feet and quickly stripped off her jeans and her panties. He set her back up on the edge of the car, on top of his shirt and spread her legs, running his fingers between her smooth, silky folds, finding her opening. Jake slanted his mouth over hers, as he slid a finger inside her. He growled into her mouth, his tongue tangling with hers, while he explored her, languidly with his finger. Devlin’s breathing quickened.

She reached up and laid a hand on each side of his face, kissing him as though his mouth was a life preserver and she was drowning. His thumb reached her clit, his touch making her gasp. Jake began to rub slow circles around the swollen nub. Crying out against his mouth, Devlin tried to break off the kiss, but Jake used his free hand to hold the back of her head and anchor her mouth to his. He swallowed her cries.

He exposed her on the hood of a car beneath the stars, her legs spread in the warm night air, his mouth on hers. Devlin’s skin felt hot beneath his hands, like she was burning up. His finger slipped in and out, circling her, carrying her close to the peak, retreating, only to bring her back and retreat over and over again.

“Jake,” Devlin begged, “let me come. Please. God. Let me come.”

“Patience, baby, patience.”

Jake unzipped his jeans. He pressed hard against her. Despite her pleading, Jake didn’t enter her. His fingers continued moving. He wanted her close to the edge.

“I want to feel you come,” he whispered, “with my fingers and my cock. Come now, baby. Come for me.”

His words seem to shake off her last remnants of control. Jake thrust his cock inside her, slipping his finger in along his own length. Screaming now, Devlin came against both, her inner muscles trembling, her body almost jerking off the car. Jake wrapped an arm around her waist and held her steady, thrusting in and out of her in a gentle rhythm, until her orgasm subsided and she lay panting against his chest.

“My turn,” Jake rumbled. He took her hand and spread her fingers, bringing them to where their bodies joined. “Feel this. Feel us. Feel how soft you are.”

"You mean how hard you are," Devlin mumbled into his neck.

"How perfect we are for each other." Jake guided her fingers along his cock, wet with her sweet musk, as he rode her. He pressed her fingertip inside her own body, so she would know how she felt to him.

"Oh, Jake!"

"Yes, darlin'. Yes. Just like that." He thrust hard now, her finger running along the throbbing vein on the underside of his erection.

Jake crushed his mouth on hers, moaning deep in his throat. The word "control" was no longer in his vocabulary. At this moment, Jake's vocabulary consisted of only one word. Devlin. She was his entire world.

* * * *

Devlin tried hard to wait. She wanted to come with Jake, but his thrusts were so powerful, so strong, and so deep that she fought a losing battle. *Oh my God*, Devlin thought. She couldn't stop herself. She tore her lips from Jake's and threw her head back, too overwhelmed to say a single word as she came. She heard him call her name, and she felt him grow even harder, if that was possible. The vein pulsed beneath her fingers, and then Jake buried himself deep inside her, coming hot and hard within her.

The night grew quiet. Crickets chirped. An owl hooted. It was a long time before either of them moved.

"So," said Devlin with a soft laugh as Jake withdrew from her and zipped his jeans, "I guess that qualifies as foreplay."

Jake began to chuckle. He lifted Devlin's chin and kissed her lips. "I hope I lived up to your expectations."

"Yes," she replied, leaning her forehead against his. "Oh, yes." After a moment she added, "Why am I always the naked one?"

Jake's laughter rumbled from his chest. He picked Devlin up off the car and helped her to dress. He pulled the keys out of the ignition. Despite Devlin's shrieks of protest, he swung her over his shoulder and stumbled with her through the dark yard toward the house. He laughed all the way to the door.

* * * *

Just before dawn, Jake dozed off. Devlin rose from their bed. Trying hard not to wake him, she tugged on an old pair of boxers and a cutoff tee shirt. She padded through the house on bare feet, drawing the curtains closed in every room but the kitchen, hoping to keep the August sun out long enough to let them sleep in. After all, she and Jake had nowhere to be, and they'd just spent the night making love. Dev smiled to herself. Her little house didn't have that many rooms, but they'd made good use of them all, including the clawfoot tub in her bathroom. As she passed the front door, she noticed that neither of them had thought to lock it. Out of habit, she flipped the bolt into place. She doubted her neighbor would come in the house when he saw her car in the drive, but she knew how embarrassed he'd be if he inadvertently walked in on the two of them. Devlin returned to the bedroom and pulled the sheet over Jake's naked body before she snuggled against him. He was the most beautiful man she'd ever known. And he was all hers.

* * * *

Janice woke up early. The motel bed was terribly uncomfortable, but she wouldn't have slept well in any case. Not after yesterday. She'd left Trevor with her dad and Cindy and driven to Canon City last night. Sometimes, a girl just needed her mom, even if her mom was a felon. Janice snorted. What a couple of losers they were. At least she had Trevor. Her mom had nobody except for her, and their relationship could be described as strained at best. It didn't matter. Janice wanted to see her mom. After what happened yesterday with Jake and Devlin, Janice decided to take a mental health day. She needed to finalize the details for her mom's release anyway. Janice showered and headed to the nearest diner for some breakfast. She grabbed a newspaper and lingered over her coffee. She had an hour to kill before the prison opened for visitors.

Janice had fixed up her spare bedroom for her mother, and she'd been in contact with her mother's probation officer. For some odd reason, her mother had recently become vague and noncommittal about their plans. Maybe she was simply afraid to come out.

That must be it, Janice thought. Her mother must be afraid to rejoin the world. Her life would be so different. Rebecca "Bitsy" Matheson, a paroled

felon in her early fifties, would have to begin all over again. Janice sighed. When she visited two weeks ago, her mother looked very thin. Her mother was worried about her release—that must be it.

Janice drove to the prison, parked in the designated lot, stuck the identifying number on her windshield, and waded patiently through the check-in process. It was a nice morning, and the guard offered to bring her mother out to the courtyard. Janice waited at a picnic table in the shade. She'd brought her mother several chocolate bars and a new toothbrush, the two items she'd asked for at Janice's last visit, brands they didn't sell in the small prison store.

When her mother appeared in the gateway, Janice was struck by how frail she looked, how much she'd aged in four years. Bitsy had been a striking woman before this happened, similar in appearance to Janice. People often mistook them for sisters. Not anymore. Nobody would mistake them for sisters. Janice sighed as she got up to meet her.

"Where's Trevor?" were the first words out of her mother's mouth.

"He's with a sitter for the day." Janice hedged. She didn't want to bring up her father and his new, young wife.

"Oh," Bitsy replied, lapsing into silence.

"Here, Mom, I brought you the things you asked for." Janice pushed the chocolate bars and the toothbrush in her direction. "How are you doing?"

"Oh, fine." She pulled the items toward her. "Thank you, dear."

"Mom, we need to discuss your release next week. I'll be here to pick you up. In fact, I'll be here early. I've got the bedroom all ready for you. I've unpacked most of your clothes, and we can go shopping for anything else you need."

"Oh," answered Bitsy, looking off in the distance, "that won't be necessary, dear."

"Of course it's necessary, Mom. I can take a couple days off, and we can shop for whatever you want. You're going to need some new things."

"Oh, no, I won't need to stay with you."

"Mom," said Janice, "Mom, you're staying with me. It's all set. I've already spoken with your parole officer."

"Who?" asked Bitsy, confused.

Janice was very disconcerted. Her mother appeared so disoriented.

“Your parole officer, remember? You’ll be on probation for four years. It’s one of the conditions of your early release,” prompted Janice.

“Oh, no, dear, that won’t be necessary,” she repeated. “I won’t be here.”

Janice felt like pulling her hair out. “Mom, you’ll be here. You have to stay here and report to your parole officer on a regular basis. Mom, you have to stay with me. You don’t have anywhere else to live.”

“Yes, I do, dear. I’ll be living with Bill in the Caribbean.”

Janice sat back on the bench. She could not believe what she was hearing. She had to speak with the psychiatrist today.

“Bill?” she asked. “Mom, what on earth are you talking about? Bill who?”

“Why, Bill, dear.” Bitsy leaned her head close to Janice’s as she whispered, “You know, Bill. Bill Franz.”

Oh my God, Janice thought. Her mom had totally lost it. She took her hand.

“Mom,” Janice said, “listen to me. You will not be living with Bill Franz. William Franz is not here. He’s in Asia somewhere. Nobody knows where he is. And if they did know, he’d be in prison.” *Or dead*, Janice thought to herself.

Janice’s mother smiled. It was the first time Janice had seen her smile in months. She patted Janice’s hand and then leaned close. She whispered conspiratorially, “I know where he is, dear. He’s right here.”

Janice felt sick. She looked around, but all she saw were other families and the guards.

“No, dear, he’s not here.” Her mother giggled like a schoolgirl. “He’s in Colorado. He came to see me two weeks ago. He told me he’ll be waiting for me when I get out. He picked up the money we put away.”

“Mom, this is a joke, right?” asked Janice, hoping against hope that her mother was still sane.

“I wouldn’t joke about something like this,” said Bitsy, indignant now. “Bill came to see me two weeks ago. We had a wonderful talk. I’ll be leaving with him when I get out, and that’s all there is to it.”

“Be reasonable, Mother,” insisted Janice. “This is a prison. How could William Franz get in here to see you?”

Janice watched, incredulous, as Bitsy erupted in giggles again.

“Your father,” she whispered. “He pretended to be your father.”

Janice's heart began to pound in her chest. Her father, Ben Matheson, had never been to see her mother, not once, though he'd been cleared and was on her visitors' list.

Janice stood up. "Mom...Mom, can I leave you here for a minute? Will you be okay on your own?"

"Of course, dear, it's a lovely day." Bitsy crossed her legs. Folding her hands, she stared off though the fence.

Janice hurried to the guard who had escorted her mother to the courtyard.

"I need to talk to the warden," she insisted, her voice strained. "It's an emergency. I need to talk to the warden."

"About?" asked the guard.

"My mother," Janice answered. "A visitor she claims she had two weeks ago. This is extremely important. Please understand. I have to speak to the warden. It's urgent."

* * * *

Warden Bruce Jenkins stared at a pile of paperwork. He'd just returned from two weeks' bereavement leave. His father had died suddenly. It took over a week to go through his papers, complete the insurance forms and get his mother moved into his sister's home in St. Louis. Finding it hard to concentrate, he almost felt relieved when he heard a knock at his door.

"Yes?"

"Excuse me, Warden." It was one of the guards, one of the new men. What was his name? Cotter. Evan Cotter.

"What is it, Evan?"

"I have a visitor here. Rebecca Matheson's daughter. She says she needs to speak with you, that it's an emergency."

"Direct her to the unit supervisor," Warden Jenkins instructed him. "I'm sure she can handle it."

"Sorry, Warden, I don't mean to disagree, but she discussed it with me on the way up, and I think you need to hear this."

"All right." He pushed the paperwork aside. "Show her in."

Evan escorted in a lovely, tall, dark-haired woman. She was absolutely breathtaking. The warden rose to his feet. He stuck out a hand.

"I'm Bruce Jenkins," he said, shaking hers. "And you are?"

"Janice Matheson," she replied.

"Have a seat, Miss Matheson." He directed her to a chair. "What can I do for you?"

"Warden Jenkins, do you know why my mother's here?"

He almost laughed. He knew why all his inmates were here, but he kept a straight face.

"Yes," he replied, "I know why your mother is here. She was involved with William Franz. He's suspected in the murder of six people. He raped his own niece, and he stole several hundred thousand dollars from his clients. Your mother helped him hide his money."

Janice spoke without hesitation. "My mother claims she had a visitor two weeks ago. She claims it was William Franz."

"That's impossible." Warden Jenkins laughed out loud now. "William Franz could not get into this prison to see your mother."

"She claims," Janice began, "she claims he signed in as my father."

"He would need to show a photo ID. A driver's license," replied the warden.

"Could you please check?" asked Janice. "Because either my mother's crazy or he's back, and there are people he'll go after. One in particular."

The warden motioned to Officer Cotter. "Could you please pull up all the visitor logs for the past three weeks? Bring them up here as quickly as you can."

* * * *

Janice sat, her mind racing, trying to figure out where Jake and Devlin might be. She wondered if it would be possible to reach Mike, but then she remembered that it looked like he was leaving on his honeymoon yesterday. Mary would know where to find them, but Mary hated her, especially now. Janice didn't know if Mary would even take a call from her.

Officer Cotter returned with the logs. He and the warden began a systematic search, starting with the logs dated three weeks before.

"Here." Officer Cotter pointed. "Right here, two weeks ago yesterday."

Warden Jenkins held up the book. "Would you come over here, Miss Matheson?"

He showed her a signature. It read: *Benjamin Matheson*.

"That's not my father's signature," Janice said without hesitation. "It's close, but it's not my father's. Warden, not only is he my father, I'm a nurse, and I see his signature every single day on charts at the hospital. This is not his signature. Can we call him? Can we call him right now and ask him if he was here? It's his golf day. If we call right now, we can catch him at home. Please."

Warden Jenkins pushed the phone toward her. Janice dialed the number, putting the phone on speaker.

"Hello?" It was Cindy.

"Cindy, it's Janice. I—"

"Oh, hi, Janice. I thought you were going to see your mother."

"I am. Listen, Cindy, this is an emergency. Is my dad still there?"

"Yeah, he's loading up his golf gear. You want me to get him?"

"Yes, please."

Janice heard her dad's voice. It sounded like he was coming in from the garage.

"Hello?"

"Dad, it's Janice. I'm at the prison. The warden wants to speak with you." Janice looked toward the warden.

"Dr. Matheson? This is Warden Bruce Jenkins. I'd like to ask you a few questions."

Her father's voice boomed over the speaker, "What's this all about?"

"Dr. Matheson, were you here to visit your ex-wife two weeks ago?"

"No, of course not. I've never been there. I haven't seen her since she was taken out of the courtroom four and a half years ago."

"But you're on her list of approved visitors."

"Only because my attorney told me it would be a good idea in case we had any difficulties with the divorce. I've never been there." He was shouting now.

"Dad," Janice interrupted, "Dad, listen to me. This is important. Where's your driver's license?"

"My what?"

"Your driver's license."

He hesitated. "I-I lost it. I don't know when, maybe two, three weeks ago. And a credit card too. An American Express. Must have fallen out of my wallet or something. I don't know where."

"Did you report it missing?" asked the Warden. "Have you gotten a new driver's license or called the credit card company to cancel it?"

"Cindy!" They heard her father yell. "Did you cancel that credit card?"

"No," came Cindy's voice, "I forgot. Do you want me to cancel it right now?"

"No," said the warden, "don't cancel it. Tell her not to cancel it. Do you have a copy of the credit card number? Do you have receipts?"

"No," her dad yelled at Cindy, "don't cancel the card." He turned his mouth back to the receiver. "That's Cindy's department. She'd have the number and receipts. What's going on?"

"Dad," Janice said, "I think William Franz is back. I think he's got your driver's license, and he used it to visit mom here, two weeks ago. I bet he's got your credit card too."

"That fucking bastard!" her father yelled into the phone. "Goddamn son of a bitch has the nerve to show his face around here? After everything he did! Nearly destroyed my life, ruined my practice."

"Dad," Janice called to him, "Dad, calm down. There are people he hurt worse. People he can still hurt."

"What do you want me to do?" her father asked. "I'll do whatever I can to help you catch that bastard."

"Dr. Matheson, I want you to stay put," instructed Warden Jenkins. "Get that credit card number. I'm going to get in touch with the investigating officer and have her give you a call as soon as possible. If he's using your credit card, she can trace him through those transactions. Sit tight. Someone will get back to you."

"Thank you, Dad," said Janice as the warden hung up. If her father replied, she couldn't hear it.

Warden Jenkins opened a file cabinet and began to search for her mother's file.

"It's Detective Shauna Burke," said Janice, "with the Denver police department. She was the investigating officer."

Janice wrote down her father's phone number and handed it to Officer Cotter.

"Go back to your mother, Miss Matheson," advised the warden. "See if she'll give you any more information. Anything she says might help us."

* * * *

Shauna's phone rang. She looked up from the report she was writing.

"Detective Burke." Listening for a few seconds, she reached for a notepad. She nodded, mumbled something unintelligible, and after a moment, began snapping her fingers in Scott's direction. She pointed to her notepad. Scott took one look at the pad, strode to the file cabinet, and pulled the files from the William Franz case.

Photos, Shauna mouthed. Scott thumbed through the file and pulled all the photos. Shauna continued to write and nod. Within five minutes, she'd finished her conversation and hung up the phone.

"Damn," she said to Scott. "He's back, and he's been to see Rebecca Matheson at the prison, using her own ex-husband's doctored driver's license for ID. According to Warden Jenkins in Canon City, he was there two weeks ago yesterday. He's got Ben Matheson's credit card too. Lucky for us it hasn't been cancelled yet." She handed Scott the sheet with Dr. Matheson's phone number written on it.

"I'm on it." Grabbing the paper, Scott headed over to his desk.

"I've got to get out a photo and a description. According to the daughter, her mom says he's thinner and graying, but we're talking basically the same guy. Apparently, he took two hundred and fifty thousand dollars out of a safety deposit box at FirstBank in Colorado Springs last week. He and Bitsy stashed it away five years ago. Call the sheriff's department down there. Have them send a car. They can see if anyone at the bank remembers anything."

"What about Devlin Barre?" Scott asked. "Is she still in town?"

"As far as I know. I'll send a couple of officers over to the hotel. I think she's still staying there. They can pick her up and bring her here. I don't want her on the street until he's caught." Shauna reached for the phone. "After you get moving on that credit card, touch base with the sheriff's department in Pottawattamie County. Clue them in."

An hour later, they had an up-to-date description of William Franz from the bank employee who'd assisted him. He'd flirted with her. Apparently,

he'd lost weight. Dropped from one hundred and ninety pounds to about one seventy-five. According to the employee, a young woman, he was good-looking for a man in his early fifties. His thick, graying hair was cut short and brushed back. He was clean-shaven. The day she saw him, he wore a white button-down shirt and khaki trousers. No tie and no socks. She noticed that he wore brown slip-on loafers. She said his nails were neat, almost as if he'd had a manicure, and he wore a large ruby ring on the ring finger of his right hand. When asked about a vehicle, she stated she had no idea.

The check on the credit card had turned up some pretty specific information. Charges had been made in the past few weeks for clothes, shoes, toiletries. There were charges for a number of restaurants in the Denver area and a charge for several nights at a run-down motel. Though she knew in her gut he wouldn't be there, Shauna sent two patrol cars to check it out and see if they could find anyone who could confirm the description given by the bank employee. She was waiting for another call from the credit card company as they continued their investigation. They were her best hope of tracing him.

The two officers she'd sent to the hotel to locate Devlin radioed in that she and Jake hadn't been seen since the day before. As Shauna instructed, the officers insisted the manager unlock the door to their hotel room. They reported that all the luggage and clothing appeared to be there. The housekeeper claimed when she went in to make up the room early this morning, the bed hadn't been slept in and no towels had been used. That had Shauna worried.

"What if we give Mike a call?" suggested Scott.

"He's on his honeymoon in Hawaii," she replied. "I have no idea how to reach him."

Shauna's phone rang. It was the credit card company. Benjamin Matheson had purchased an airplane ticket to Chicago four days ago. Last Friday night, he rented a car in Illinois, in the Quad Cities area. Early Saturday morning, he checked into a motel in Grinnell, Iowa.

"Scott, get over here!" she yelled in his direction. "Look at this!" She pointed at the list of credit card charges on her notepad.

"Shit."

“Call the sheriff’s department in Pottawattamie County and find out who covers Grinnell. Tell them to get someone out to this motel now. Make sure they know he’s probably armed. And call this rental car agency in Moline. Get a year, make, model, and license plate. Pass on the information ASAP.”

Shauna flipped quickly through the file. Somewhere she had Mary Workman’s home number. Devlin had lived with her for several months. She was pretty sure Mary was already on maternity leave. If anyone would know where Devlin and Jake were, it was Mary.

Chapter Thirteen

“Goddamn it!” William Franz rolled over in bed and looked at the clock. He’d overslept.

Who could blame him? After he sent Margie on her way, he’d been up half the night imagining everything he’d like to do to the little bitch Devlin, if he could get his hands on her. He crawled out of bed and headed into the bathroom. He’d have to hurry without drawing any attention to himself. At least he was confident Farmer Brown wouldn’t show up. For the past three days, he’d appeared at 5 p.m. on the dot. Franz shrugged. Well, that made it easier for him to do whatever the hell he wanted to do.

He showered, shaved, dressed, and packed. Then he checked out of the motel and drove away. He parked at the local supermarket between two full-size pickups. He grabbed a newspaper and walked over to the diner. Breakfast wouldn’t take long. He still had time to get over to Devlin’s. After last night, he didn’t expect her to be there, but he could destroy the place. Franz smiled to himself. That left him plenty of time to get to O’Hare and catch a 6 p.m. United flight to Toronto. Or rather, Benjamin Matheson would catch a flight to Toronto. Bitsy thought of everything. She was something. Or she used to be. Too bad she looked like a hag now. Well, Bill thought dismissively, prison would do that to you. He wasn’t worried about his rental car. He figured it could sit in long-term parking indefinitely. He laughed to himself. At O’Hare, it might sit there for years.

He drove down the highway, passing his turnoff a couple times, until he was certain there was no one around. When he felt the coast was clear, he pulled onto the graveled path. This time he drove farther in, parking behind a grove of trees. Before he locked up the car, he opened the trunk and pulled out the bolt cutters. They would be useful for breaking windows. Then he opened a small toiletry bag and removed a revolver. It was a Smith and Wesson, his favorite firearm. He’d picked it up at a gun show in Denver.

Easy. Ben Matheson had a clean record. Bill checked to see that it was loaded, just in case Farmer Brown varied his routine. He tucked it into the back of his pants and closed the trunk.

Checking first for vehicles, he crossed the road ducking his head as he entered the cornfield. Devlin couldn't have picked a better place to live. No visibility from the highway, no neighbors, no dogs, at least as far as he knew. It was as if she'd chosen the place just for him. Like she was taunting him, saying, *Come and get me*.

Franz was about to walk right into Devlin's front yard when he saw a car parked in her drive. He stopped in his tracks and backed into the tall green row of corn. He stood still and opened his mouth slightly, listening for any sound. There was none. Cautious, he checked every side of the house. Except for the black Toyota Celica and a pair of white sandals lying next to it, there was no sign of any living human being. Then he noticed the curtains. Aside from those in the kitchen, they were closed. Yesterday, they'd been open. Franz glanced at his watch. She probably got in late last night, and she was still asleep. Unbelievable! He must have just missed her!

Crouched over, he jogged to the front door and tried the knob. The door was locked. If he broke in, she might have time to call the cops. He wanted to avoid that. Franz looked toward the barn. Eventually she'd have to get up. That's where he'd wait for her.

He walked to the barn. He removed the broken padlock he'd cut the day before and carefully slid the doors open. He left them wide open and dropped the pieces of the padlock just inside. She wouldn't see that the lock had been cut until it was too late. Franz sat down in the shadows to the left of the doors. It was a sunny day. She'd be as blind as a bat when she stepped over the threshold. He smiled. Things were looking up.

* * * *

Janice was on her way to Mary's house, driving as fast as she dared. She assumed Shauna would try to find Devlin, but what if she couldn't? It was Janice's fault Devlin had run off yesterday. If she was alone, she was at risk. There was no way of knowing whether or not William Franz had been following her, waiting for an opportunity to pounce. Janice fought back a growing sense of panic. If he hurt Devlin, if he killed her, she was to blame.

She'd never forgive herself. If Devlin had contacted anyone, it would be Mary. Janice had to know. She had to know where she was and if she was safe.

As she pulled up to the curb in front of Mary's house, she saw Jake's Jeep parked in the driveway. Janice breathed a sigh of relief. Then she remembered, even if Jake was here, she had no idea whether or not he'd found Devlin. She could still be out there somewhere. As far as Janice knew, none of them was aware Franz was back. Taking a deep breath, she climbed out of her car. She'd be lucky if all Mary did was slap her, but she had to tell them.

* * * *

Mary, Katie and Beth were in the middle of baking sugar cookies. They needed something to distract them while they waited for Devlin's call. Katie had just tipped over the canister of flour. Katie and Beth sat on the floor laughing, trying to scoop it up, while Mike headed to the hall closet for the vacuum. Mary stood with her hands on her hips, breathing through what she hoped was just a Braxton-Hicks contraction. She'd felt them since early morning. Mary toyed with the idea of calling Ken, but he was in surgery. The doorbell rang.

"Mike," Mary called out, "can you get that?"

"Yeah," she heard him answer.

The front door opened. Then Mary heard Mike say, "What the hell are you doing here?" before the door shut behind him.

She and Beth exchanged glances. The contraction subsided, and Mary followed him to the porch. Mike stood with Janice. She was crying. Good, Mary thought. She should be crying. Mike motioned toward Jake's Jeep. She hoped he was reading Janice the riot act. Mary was about to step out onto the porch and do exactly that when she heard Janice plead with Mike to listen. She heard the words "William Franz."

"What about William Franz?" asked Mary, opening the screen door.

Janice turned to her, her tear-streaked face deathly pale. "He's back," she said. "I came to tell Jake and Devlin."

"Jesus Christ!" yelled Mike, darting past both women into the house.

Mary swayed on her feet. Janice grabbed for her and helped her onto the porch swing.

"Where is he?"

"I don't know," sobbed Janice. "The police are looking for him."

"I don't understand," said Mary. "How did you find out?"

"He came to see my mom. She told me."

"Are you sure?" asked Mary.

"Yes," said Janice, her voice stronger, her sobs subsiding. "Yes, I'm sure. So is Shauna."

Mary's phone began to ring just as Mike bolted over the front steps with Jake's keys in his hands. Beth chased after him, flagging him down as he backed out of the driveway.

"It's Shauna," Beth yelled. "She needs to talk to you."

Mike threw the Jeep in park and jumped out, leaving the engine running. As he ran past them again, he instructed Beth to get Katie out of the house and take her to a neighbor's. Beth followed him to the kitchen. Mary began to breathe heavily.

"Are you all right?"

"I think," Mary panted, "I'm in labor."

Janice was silent for a moment. Then she asked, "How early are you?"

"Three weeks," panted Mary.

"Wasn't Katie a little early?"

"Yeah, two weeks."

"Okay, let's get you to the neighbor's too, and we'll call 911."

They could hear Mike yelling. Janice helped Mary to her feet as Beth joined them on the porch, Katie in her arms.

"Mary," said Janice, "where are Jake and Devlin?"

"In Iowa," Mary replied. "In Grinnell, Iowa."

Beth appeared on the porch. "Mike wants you. Shauna needs Devlin's address in Grinnell."

* * * *

Janice helped Mary to stand as she searched for the address book. They found it near the sink, covered with flour. Both Mary and Mike were trembling. Janice opened the book and found Devlin's address. She pointed

it out for Mike. He couldn't read it, so she said it aloud, and he repeated it to Shauna, who immediately hung up.

"I have to call Devlin. I have to warn them," Mike said, his voice filled with horror. His best friend and his best friend's girl were in terrible danger. "God, I can't see the number. Read me the number."

Janice, as pale as a ghost, removed the receiver from Mike's hand and listened. There was no dial tone. She replaced it in its cradle, then picked it up again, listened, and handed it to him. With steady fingers, she dialed Devlin's number.

* * * *

Devlin was only half awake when Jake put his hands on her hips. He slid her boxers off and lifted her leg onto his thigh. Without hesitation, he entered her from behind. She gave a little gasp, as she always did, at the intrusion.

"I love it when you do that," Jake said, lifting her curls and nuzzling the back of her neck, rocking himself in and out of her.

"Do what?" she murmured.

"Gasp like that. And quiver when I first get in."

"It's hard not to."

After an entire night of wild abandon, their lovemaking was gentle, tender, and quiet. Jake brought Dev to her climax and then, groaning in appreciation, came himself one thrust later. Still buried inside her, he pulled her close and nestled her soft, slender body against his hard one. He had almost fallen asleep again when he felt Devlin move away.

"Where are you going?" he mumbled, opening one eye.

He saw her pull on her boxers.

"I thought I'd go make some coffee, see if I have anything to eat," she replied. "You wait here. I'll bring something back."

Jake sat up and grabbed the back of her cutoff tee shirt. He pulled her down onto the bed and kissed her. "Don't be too long."

Devlin smiled and tossed her curls out of her eyes. She headed barefoot down the hall toward the kitchen. Jake flopped back on the bed, his hands behind his head and stared at the shadows on the ceiling. For a moment, he thought about how close he had come to losing her, but he shook the feeling

off and decided to think about how lucky he was to have her. He was just drifting back to sleep when he realized he needed to take a piss. Jake stretched, reluctantly climbed out of bed, and pulled on his jeans. He headed to the bathroom.

* * * *

Devlin walked into the kitchen and pulled the coffee maker toward her. She removed a coffee filter from a nearby box, filled it with several scoops of coffee, and popped it into the slot. She grabbed the carafe and went to the sink to fill it up. As she stood gazing out the window, she noticed that the door to her workshop was wide open. Devlin stared for a moment. She thought back to last night. Had she looked? Was it open then? She realized she hadn't gone back there, not after what happened on the hood of the car. Besides, it was too dark last night to see much anyway. Reuben had the key, but she wondered why he would have opened it. Then she remembered. She'd asked him to replace some wiring while she was gone. Mice had stripped the protective covering from some of the wiring he'd installed, and she was afraid she'd get a shock when she plugged in the Crock-Pots she used to melt wax.

Devlin finished up with the coffee maker and unlocked the back door. The early afternoon was beautiful. She stopped for a moment to enjoy the warm sunshine on her face, then closing the screen door behind her, she tripped lightly down the few steps and walked barefoot across the grass to the barn.

"Hey, Reuben," Devlin called as she approached the barn.

He didn't answer.

"Reuben," she called again, stepping inside.

It was dark in the barn with the sun behind her, and she couldn't see very well. Reuben was nowhere in sight. Devlin shivered, suddenly chilled. She took a step forward, right onto something sharp. Dev reached down and picked it up. It was a piece of the padlock. It had been cut in two. Devlin's blood instantly froze in her veins. She turned, bolting for the door, but found herself tackled from behind. The wind knocked out of her, she lay on the hard dirt floor. She knew who it was. She could smell him.

“Miss me, girl?” he hissed in her ear, grinding his erection against her back.

Devlin gasped, panic-stricken, unable to catch her breath, unable to scream for help or get away from him. He kept her pressed to the dirt.

“My, how you’ve grown.” His hands were on her bottom, pinching, reaching between her legs. “I thought we could have a little fun before I kill you. You’d like that, wouldn’t you? I know I would.”

Devlin clasped her thighs together, bucking, attempting to throw him off.

“Oh yeah, I forgot, you like it rough.” His laugh was coarse. He grabbed her tee shirt and jerked her to her feet. He spun her around to face him. “Aw,” he said, “why’d you have to go and cut your hair? It made it so much easier to drag you around.” Franz threw his head back, laughing at his own joke.

Devlin wasted no time. She grabbed his shirt and pulled him toward her as she jerked her knee up, hard, into his groin.

“Christ!” he yelped, and he loosened his hold. She dived for the open door.

Franz threw himself after her. He managed to catch her ankle, and she fell against one of her worktables, banging the side of her head, sending the contents of the table flying across the room. He dragged her toward him and spun her around. Devlin clawed at his face.

“Fucking bitch!” Franz backhanded her, his ring catching her in the mouth, splitting her lip. The force of the blow flipped her onto her side away from him. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught sight of her stainless steel fabric shears lying on the ground. She knew exactly how sharp they were. She’d cut herself many times. She clutched them in her right hand, hiding them beneath her. Franz grabbed her by the arm and hauled her to her feet. He showed her the gun, waving it back and forth in her face.

“Let’s go.” He pointed the gun toward the door. “You want to go back in the house? Let’s go back in the house. A bed sounds pretty good to me. Does it sound good to you, you little tramp?”

Devlin jerked her arm from his grasp and ran for all she was worth, Franz right behind her.

“Jake!” she screamed at the top of her lungs, “help me!” before she was tackled and knocked to the grass.

Franz hauled her to her feet again, but this time he wrapped an arm tightly around her throat. "Who you calling for? Farmer Brown? He never comes by 'til five. Yell all you want. Nobody can hear you." Franz began to drag her toward the house.

* * * *

Jake was just finishing up in the bathroom when he heard the phone ring. He borrowed a toothbrush and began to brush his teeth, expecting Devlin to answer it. Even after he had rinsed his mouth, it was still ringing. He wondered where she was. She obviously wasn't in the bathroom. There was only one.

Jake wandered down to the kitchen, following the persistent ring. Devlin wasn't there, but the kitchen door was open. She must have stepped outside for a minute. Jake decided he'd better answer the phone.

"Jake! Thank God!" yelled Mike. Before Jake could utter a word, Mike continued yelling, "Get out of there! Get Devlin out of there! Franz is in Grinnell!"

"Jesus Christ!" yelled Jake. Just then, he heard Devlin scream out his name and the words, "Help me!"

Jake dropped the phone and started toward the door. Then he remembered the shotgun in the bedroom, and he sprinted down the hall. Devlin said she kept it loaded. He reached behind the headboard. Wrapping a hand around the barrel, he raced back toward the kitchen. Through the window, Jake could see Devlin struggling with Franz in the yard. He had an arm wrapped around her throat. He held a gun in his hand.

Jake heard him say, "Yell all you want. Nobody can hear you," just before Jake burst through the door with the shotgun braced securely against his shoulder. He pointed the barrel unerringly at William Franz's face. "I hear her," Jake growled.

* * * *

Franz grabbed Devlin's chin and pulled her face in front of his, pressing the gun against her right temple.

“Drop the rifle, cowboy,” Franz ordered, “or I’ll blow her fucking brains out.”

Jake stepped closer and stood firm. He kept the shotgun pointed at Franz. If Mike had called here, then the cops were already on their way. His ears strained for the sound of sirens.

“Okay. Fine,” said Franz. He pressed close behind Devlin. “Shoot. Go ahead. Be my guest. Kill your little girlfriend. Save me the trouble.”

Jake’s eyes were fixed on Devlin. She looked calm. The paramedic part of his brain made a quick assessment of her injuries. She had a split lip. That was nothing. The gash on her temple concerned him a little. Blood dripped steadily down the side of her face, staining her shirt red. Scalp lacerations bled like a son of a bitch. If he could get her away from Franz, that could be stitched up quickly enough. Her arms and legs were already bruising, but she didn’t look like she had any broken bones. If he could get her away from Franz, she’d live. That’s what mattered. It was a big if. In order to stop him with a shotgun, Jake needed to be closer, and he needed Devlin out of the way. With his peripheral vision, Jake saw Devlin move her right hand ever so slightly. She held something that glinted in the sun. Jake took a better look without appearing to do so. She moved her hand again. He saw a pair of long, wicked-looking stainless steel scissors.

“Drop the rifle, cowboy,” Franz repeated, “or I’ll kill her.” Jake turned sideways to make himself a smaller target as he set the shotgun on the ground at his own feet.

“Funny,” said Franz. “Real funny guy. Kick it over here. Now.” He moved the gun from the side of Devlin’s head and waved it in Jake’s direction.

Jake knelt down and pushed the gun toward Franz.

“Now stand up,” ordered Franz. “Say good-bye to your cowboy.” Franz laughed in Devlin’s ear as he pointed the gun at Jake.

At that exact moment, Devlin lifted her right hand and buried the fabric shears deeply into William Franz’s groin. She twisted them viciously. For an instant, there was utter silence in the yard. Then Franz gave a high-pitched shriek and fell to his knees, the gun loose in his hand. His khakis were quickly stained red with blood. He reached for the shears imbedded deep in his groin. Devlin threw herself to the side, dropping to the ground. She

glanced back at her uncle. He slowly raised his head and looked toward her, panting, his face a mask of pain and outrage.

With a shaking hand, he raised the pistol toward Devlin. "You fucking bitch!"

Jake was already diving for the shotgun. He grabbed it and rolled to his knees. Before Franz could pull the trigger, Jake fired at close range. Franz's chest exploded. He fell backward into the green grass, mortally wounded. Jake discharged the spent shell casing as he approached the man. He thought briefly about unloading another round into the twitching body but decided against it. Devlin was all that mattered now.

Despite the fact that Franz was dying, Jake grabbed the pistol from his limp fingers and tossed it out of reach along with the shotgun. Devlin reached out to him, and he scooped her off the ground, racing for the car. By the time they made it to the front yard, he heard the sirens.

* * * *

Two hours later, Jake called Mike from the local hospital. Jake filled in the blanks from his end, while Mike provided the sequence of events that led up to Franz's appearance in Grinnell.

"Oh," Mike added, "I almost forgot. Mary had a little boy. She and the baby are doing well."

Jake shook his head when he heard about Janice's role in warning them all of Franz's return. He asked Mike to thank her and said he and Devlin would talk to her personally when they got back in town.

"How's Dev holding up?" asked Mike.

"Complaining. The doctors want to keep her here overnight for observation, just in case she has a concussion. She banged her head pretty hard." Jake paused for a second and ran a hand along his jaw. "My God, Mike, she kept her cool. We might both be dead if she hadn't managed to grab those scissors. I don't even want to think about it."

"Yeah, well, I'm guessing you weren't a slouch yourself. Thank God it turned out the way it did."

"You leaving on your honeymoon?"

"Nah," replied Mike, "I think we'll wait 'til you and Dev get back. We'll both feel better when we see you with our own eyes."

“Mike, thanks. If you hadn’t called when you did, I might have been too late.”

“No problem. Give our love to Devlin, and get your asses back here as quickly as you can.”

“Yeah, we will.”

Jake hung up the phone and returned to Devlin’s cubicle. He found her asleep. The ER doc had stitched the scalp laceration. It took thirteen stitches to close. Devlin refused to allow him to shave the area, so Jake told the doctor he’d help her get the dried blood out of her hair later. The doctor wouldn’t touch her lip, though. He was concerned he’d leave too big a scar, so he called in a retired plastic surgeon to do the repair. It looked good. Jake didn’t think Devlin would care much either way. He knew he didn’t. Franz was dead. Nothing else mattered.

Dev opened her beautiful eyes and looked up into Jake’s face.

“Thank you,” she said, her words slurred slightly by the Novocain. “Thank you for hearing me. Thank you for killing him.”

Jake lowered the safety bar and scooted her over on the gurney. He squeezed in beneath her, folding her in his arms and holding her tight.

“Anytime, darlin’,” he murmured in her ear. “Anytime.”

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Julia Rachel Barrett writes both fiction and nonfiction. Her favorite genres to read and write are romance/suspense and science fiction romance. She and her husband live in Northern California with their three children, new German shepherd puppy, assorted cats and two talkative parrots. She loves to hear from her readers.

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