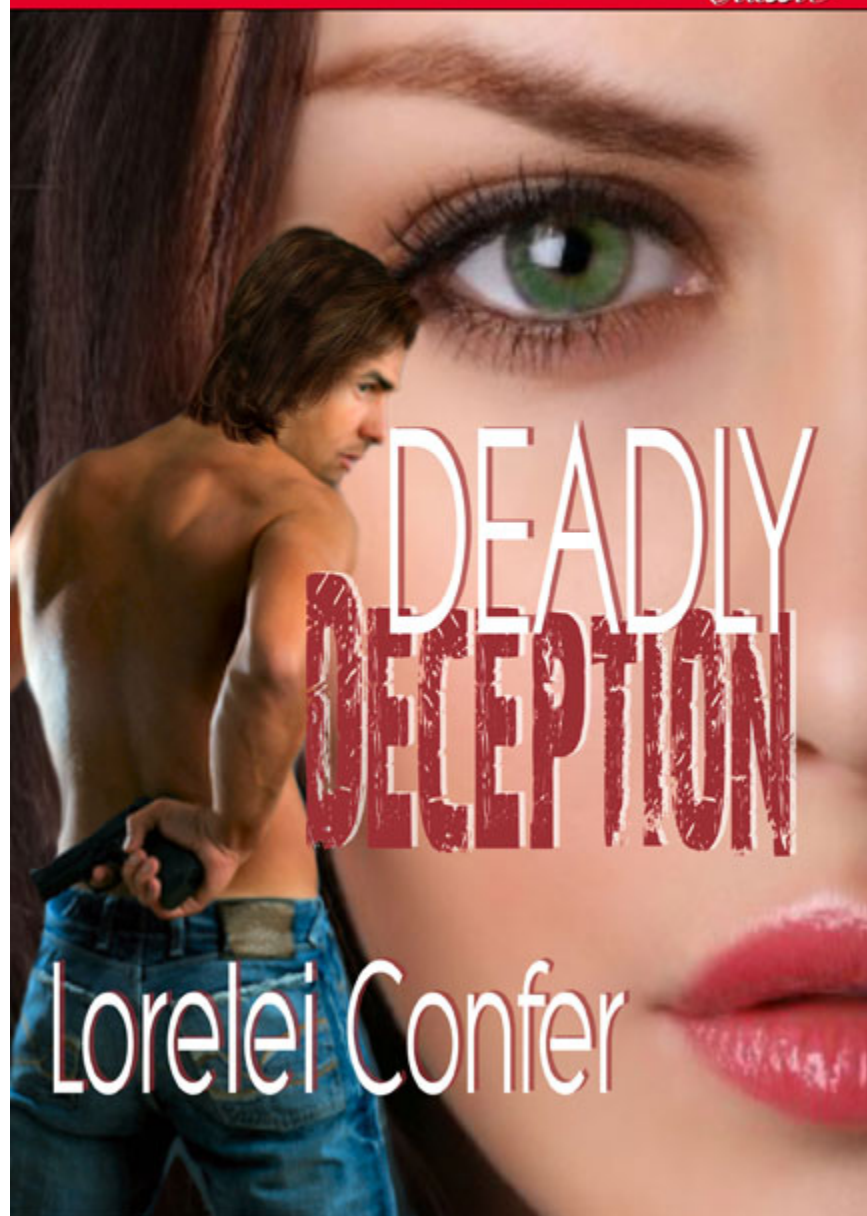


SIREN PUBLISHING *Classic*



Deadly Deception

Human trafficking. One of the most prolific and profitable businesses in the world and growing every day. But that's only in third world countries, right?

Isabella Donnelley finds out the answer the hard way--through personal experience--when she is drugged at a friend's house and transported from Denver, Colorado, to Stoney Creek, Virginia, to be sold to a crime boss as a sex slave.

She puts her life in the hands of a man she finds intensely attractive but also distrusts. Now she must rely on him to keep her safe from her pursuing abductors--and maybe from him, too.

Wyatt Bowman, former-cop-turned-detective, is assigned to the Task Force of Human Trafficking. Sparks fly when a young and beautiful woman bursts into his house. But what neither one of them counted on was how much their lives would change.

Genre: Contemporary, Romantic Suspense

Length: 64,702 words

DEADLY DECEPTION

Lorelei Confer

EROTIC ROMANCE



Siren Publishing, Inc.
www.SirenPublishing.com

ABOUT THE E-BOOK YOU HAVE PURCHASED:

Your non-refundable purchase of this e-book allows you to only ONE LEGAL copy for your own personal reading on your own personal computer or device. **You do not have resell or distribution rights without the prior written permission of both the publisher and the copyright owner of this book.** This book cannot be copied in any format, sold, or otherwise transferred from your computer to another through upload to a file sharing peer to peer program, for free or for a fee, or as a prize in any contest. Such action is illegal and in violation of the U.S. Copyright Law. Distribution of this e-book, in whole or in part, online, offline, in print or in any way or any other method currently known or yet to be invented, is forbidden. If you do not want this book anymore, you must delete it from your computer.

WARNING: The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000."

If you find a Siren-BookStrand e-book being sold or shared illegally, please let us know at **legal@sirenbookstrand.com**

A SIREN PUBLISHING BOOK

IMPRINT: Erotic Romance

DEADLY DECEPTION

Copyright © 2010 by Lorelei Confer

E-book ISBN: 1-61034-037-X

First E-book Publication: November 2010

Cover design by Jinger Heaston

All cover art and logo copyright © 2010 by Siren Publishing, Inc.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED: This literary work may not be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, including electronic or photographic reproduction, in whole or in part, without express written permission.

All characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any resemblance to actual persons living or dead is strictly coincidental.

PUBLISHER

Siren Publishing, Inc.

www.SirenPublishing.com

Letter from Lorelei Confer

Regarding E-book Piracy

Dear Readers,

I'm eternally grateful to readers who purchased my books. Any time you enjoy my work and demonstrate your satisfaction by recommending one of my books to a friend for purchase, those sales inspire me to write more.

Many writers, including me, depend on the income from our writing. EBook piracy greatly affects our livelihood especially with the downturn in the economy and the rising costs of living. My books are pirated probably ten times for every copy that is sold legitimately.

We need to take a stand against this sort of theft. It may be easy to pirate an eBook, but it is ethically wrong and it is also a crime, not against some nameless face, but against me and all other hardworking theft by not sharing or giving away copyrighted e-books.

With deep gratitude,

Lorelei Confer

DEDICATION

I would like to acknowledge and thank the local task force of human trafficking for providing invaluable research information as well as continuing their hard work in the community. Also, many thanks to the Intercultural Advocacy Council for the awareness programs they provide.

This book is dedicated to Maureen Sevilla, my good friend, critique partner and mentor for all her generous time, support and inspiration.

My special thanks go to my husband and other family members for allowing me the freedom to pursue my dream.

Please take note of all the Editors, Cover Artists, and people at Siren-BookStrand who work behind the scenes to make this book possible, and I'd like to acknowledge them as well.

And as always, thank YOU. As much as I love writing these stories, it's always nice to know someone is enjoying them.

DEADLY DECEPTION

LORELEI CONFER

Copyright © 2010

Chapter 1

Somewhere outside Suffolk, Virginia

Wyatt Bowman paused in the doorway of the small conference room as he looked around for an empty seat. He spotted his partner, Dave Miller, motioning to him—he had secured two seats on the far side of the room. Wyatt stopped at the refreshment table and poured himself a mug of coffee, then walked toward Harry Edwards, who was wearing sunglasses, a cup of black coffee already in hand.

“Late night, Harry?” he asked his colleague with a smile.

“Don’t ask. Then I won’t have to lie,” Harry responded by raising his cup to Wyatt as if in a toast.

Wyatt slapped Harry on the back and turned away, almost bumping into Olivia Winters, another member of his team.

“Well, fancy meeting you here.” He chuckled.

“Good morning, Wyatt. Ready for another go at it?” Her lips curved into a smile and her blue eyes sparkled with sexual innuendo.

“If you’re talking about the new assignment, yes. Anything else you’ll have to get back to me with more details.” He winked at her, grinned, and patted her arm as he left her side.

As he took his seat, he greeted other colleagues, careful not to spill his coffee on anyone while shaking their hands. He sat in his chair and placed his folder and pen on the table in front of him while

Richard Mullins, agent in charge of the two task forces assigned to Human Sex Trafficking, began the morning briefing.

“Good morning, everyone. You have in front of you the pertinent information related to our most recently assigned abduction case, which happened outside the Lakes Shopping Mall in Denver. For those of you who can’t read,” he teased with a smile, “I’ll reiterate. Mall security cameras were able to capture the license plates of both vehicles involved, and from further investigation, we were able to identify the victim as well as the suspect.”

As Richard continued his diatribe about the victim, Wyatt sat listening. His mind was in turmoil. *When is this going to be over? When will I walk into a meeting and there won’t be ‘the latest victim?’ There are so many now that we are constantly searching for and more every day. When will it end?*

“The victim, Megan Witherite, according to her driver’s license information is twenty-eight years old, about five feet, seven inches, one hundred twenty pounds, blonde hair, and green eyes. In addition, her cell phone left in her car had a GPS in it that we were able to track down to a motel in a seedy part of town known for drug trafficking and prostitution rings.

“Tire tracks left behind on the pavement near where the victim parked her car match those of a newer model van belonging to our suspect, Steve Spikerelli, aka Spike. He’s a wannabe big-time mobster with a long rap sheet. His previous arrests and activities range anywhere from money laundering, car thefts, prostitution rings, drug trafficking, and anything and everything in between. He’s also known for his international activities in human sex trafficking in Bolivia, Guatemala, and most of Central America. He’s apparently decided to add sex trafficking to his infamous list of illegal activities here in the United States, primarily in the Denver area.

“Some of you may be familiar with him since we have been working his case for quite some time. Those of you who aren’t, pay

attention to his dossier. Any questions come to me or your team leader.”

Richard reached over to a laptop computer on a nearby desk, clicked a key and a picture of Spike appeared on the large screen on the wall.

“We need to focus on this guy and his organization *before* there’s another victim like Megan,” he said as Spike’s picture on the screen was replaced with a picture of an attractive young woman.

“Bowman, your team will focus on Spike and his internal operations. We already have an undercover operative, so we should be getting some viable information there. Miller, your team will concentrate on the victim’s family background with jealousy, relationships gone bad, grudges, et cetera. You all know the routine.

“As usual, I’ll need full reports from both your teams within forty-eight hours. Let’s hope you have some good news for me.”

“Yes, sir,” Wyatt said. He gathered his paperwork and stood to leave.

“See you in Denver, Dave.”

He looked back at his partner as he left the meeting room and saw Dave gaping at his quick departure.

* * * *

Denver Airport

Two days later

Wyatt leaned his head back on the headrest of the airplane seat, closed his eyes, and rubbed out the furrows in his forehead with the palms of his hands. The events of the past few weeks swirled in his mind. He was tired. No, he was more than tired—he was fed-up, weary, and worn-down. And he still had an overabundance of paperwork to catch up on.

He sighed deeply, thinking about his career with no typical days in his life anymore—every day was different. His work on the Human Trafficking Task Force made it necessary for him to be available 24/7, responding to crimes. And lately, there were too many crimes and too many responses for his six-member task force. *No wonder I feel so overwhelmed.*

“Whew!” Wyatt blew out a deep breath as Dave settled in the seat next to him. “I really thought we had the bastard this time.”

“Yeah, I did too,” Dave replied.

“We’ll get him. We know it’s just a matter of time. The way Spike’s organization is expanding, the sooner we get him the better. I’ve been meaning to ask you, Wyatt, what’s eatin’ at you? I’ve known you for a long time, and I know when something’s troubling you. What’s up?”

“I don’t know how much longer I can run Dad’s company, be a part of the task force, and do a good job at both. I’m torn between them, Dave.”

“Well, unfortunately, buddy, you’re the only one who can make that decision. Sorry I can’t help you.”

“Dad worked so hard to build the company, and if I sold it, I’d feel like I was letting him down. He always wanted me to take over some day, but he went along with me when I wanted to become a cop. He never pressured me about it.”

“That’s true, he never did pressure you. Maybe he should have.”

Now that I’m involved with the task force I feel like I can fill a void that’s been left inside me. There are so many kids and women who need me to help them.”

“They don’t need just you. They need all of the task force. You’d be replaced by someone real soon if you choose to back out.”

Wyatt laughed. “Bet they wouldn’t be as good as me, though.”

“Probably not.” Dave nodded in agreement. “But, unfortunately, you are the only one who can make this decision and from the looks of your tired-ass eyes you need to make it soon, my man.”

Wyatt settled back into his seat. He listened halfheartedly to the copilot announce the not-soon-enough-for-him departure. His mind wandered. In a few hours, he would be home, back in Virginia, leaving Denver far behind. He planned to take a day to rest and catch up on the local news.

He also needed to follow up on the client he had visited in Denver and make sure he handed all the information over to his sales manager. Managing his father's company and staying with the agency were taking its toll on him.

The special arrangement he'd made with the agency when his father died a few years ago allowed him to indirectly manage the company. But he would have to make a decision between the two and soon. He needed to choose whether to stay with the task force or to fully assume the role of CEO in his late father's company.

The company was continuing to grow and was suffering the pains of progress like any other company, taking up more of his time. He had hired a sales manager, Matthew Miles, who came very highly recommended. He could now turn clients as well as hands-on management over to Matthew and let him take care of them with his trusted expertise. *Probably something I should have done years ago.*

Too much to do, and so little time to do it in. He needed a nap. *Sleep, sure that's all I need.*

As the plane taxied down the runway, he made a mental to-do list, sorted through unfinished business, along with some new endeavors he had on his mind and worried about completing all the necessary paperwork.

When the plane lifted off the ground, he finally relaxed and drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 2

Denver suburb

Two hours later

Twenty-eight-year-old Isabella Donnelly pulled her car over to the curb as she came to a gated four-way stop and studied the directions Amanda Nelson had given her. She looked for street numbers up and down the beautifully landscaped yards of the condominium buildings on all four corners.

Wow! These are nice! Amanda's done well for herself! Girls' night out is looking good so far.

When Isabella heard Amanda call her name, she quickly closed her mouth to hide her astonishment and turned to see Amanda on the second floor of the condo to her right. Amanda waved to her from the front porch.

"Hey, Isabella, park right here in front." She motioned with her hands to Isabella.

"Okay!" The gates swung open on the right so Isabella could enter and park her car where Amanda was indicating. When she got out of the car, she approached the building and, once again, heard Amanda call her name from the balcony above.

"Isabella! Did you have any trouble finding the address?"

"No, not really. Your directions were very good."

"Well, that's great. Come up to the second floor, and I'll meet you there."

As soon as Isabella stepped through the foyer of the apartment building, she knew she had stepped into affluence. A uniformed guard was hanging up the phone.

“You must be Isabella. Please, let me get the elevator for you.”

When the elevator door opened on the second floor, an excited Amanda, wearing her usual jeans, t-shirt, and see-through stilettos, raced down the hall to greet her.

“I’m so glad you’re here.” Amanda ushered her down the hall and into her apartment. “You can relax, make yourself at home, and I’ll go order the pizza. We’re going to have a wonderful girls’ night. I have everything planned down to the last detail.”

When she entered the condo, the stale smell of cigarette smoke overwhelmed her. Isabella swallowed hard and followed Amanda into the spacious, wide-open apartment with side and front balconies that let in tons of natural sun light. She noticed there were no photos, knickknacks, or floral arrangements—nothing personal to indicate what the person was like who lived there.

“Isabella, could you give me a couple minutes to make a personal call?”

“Sure, go ahead,” she said with some reluctance. “I’d still like to get my daily run in before it gets too late, so I don’t want to stay too long.”

After Amanda disappeared down a short hallway and closed the door behind her, Isabella wandered around the beautifully decorated room, realizing how little she really knew about this woman. She began to have a gnawing feeling in the pit of her stomach.

She had met Amanda at the gym across the street from the elementary school where she worked as a second-grade teacher. They had joined at about the same time and attended the same sessions. They had become supportive of each other’s efforts and the accountability that came along with working out regularly. They got along great right from the start and had become close friends. They’d gone out for dinner together, went to a movie, but Amanda had never

invited Isabella to her home. This was her first visit, although Amanda had been to her tiny apartment many times. Thinking about it now, she thought their relationship was odd.

Although she had to admit that, during the time they had spent together, she had done most of the talking. Amanda simply asked her a question and she blabbed the hours away, confiding in her about her breakup with Michael.

Isabella's stomach growled. She began fidgeting, folding and unfolding her arms.

Humph!

She turned down the hall toward the room into which Amanda had gone. She paced in front of the door, wondering if she should knock.

"Amanda, wha... what's taking so long?"

When she didn't get a response, she pounded on the door and called out, "Amanda!" much louder.

"I'll be right out, Isabella. Just give me a sec. I'm calling Joe about the pizza," Amanda said with annoyance in her voice.

Isabella's fists clenched, and anger and dread filled her chest. *What kind of game is she playing with me? Who's this Joe, and why is she calling him about pizza? This is supposed to be a girls' night, so where are all the other girls I'm supposed to meet? Why is she acting so secretive and weird now? She had always been so kind and considerate to me.*

"So much for being nice," she muttered. "I'm done playing games."

She let her animosity get the best of her. Standing firm with her feet apart and her hands on her hips, she bellowed, "Amanda! How long does it take to order a pizza, for heaven's sake? Did you order the pizza or not?"

Amanda finally opened the door and sauntered into the small living area, with a cat-who-swallowed-the-canary smirk on her face.

"Amanda, I'm outta here. I need to get home and get my run in, so I'll see yo—"

“No, no, you can’t go yet. You have to stay. The pizza will be here any minute. Please, I insist.”

Isabella wanted to forget the pizza and leave right away. Something was wrong, terribly wrong. Amanda wasn’t normal. She could see it, feel it, and she wasn’t comfortable anymore. But she was torn. She wanted to see it through and not hurt Amanda’s feelings by leaving without eating, so she acquiesced. “Well, okay, but just long enough for a slice of pizza. Then, I really need to go.”

“Sure that’s okay, I understand,” Amanda said, her gaze darting around the room.

“Do you want a beer or something else to drink?”

“No, I’m good, but thanks anyway.”

There was a quick knock at the door. The door opened and the smell of pizza filled the room with a mixture of baked cheese, Italian spices, and a man’s cologne. The man who had brought the pizza was tall and rangy, wearing a sports coat over his T-shirt and jeans. His face was attractive yet rugged. In fact, Isabella had never seen anyone look so rough. His nose sat crooked on his face, indicating that he was obviously a scrapper. In general, he gave Isabella the creeps.

“Isabella, this is Joe Sneed, a good friend of mine,” Amanda said as she took the box of pizza from him and put it on the table.

With his dark eyes, he stared blankly at Amanda for a moment. Then, quickly, he nodded in greeting as he tied his thick, black shoulder-length hair back in a ponytail. His reaction to her was as immature as one of her second-grade students.

“Hi, Joe. Nice to meet you.” Isabella nodded at him, ran her fingers through her hair, and looked away as she straightened the wrinkles in the front of her slacks.

“Want a beer, missy? It’s cold.” Joe licked his lips and grinned wide, revealing yellowed, decaying teeth.

His beady eyes traveled lecherously up and down her body. *With his yellow fingernails and teeth, he could be a poster child for the effects of long term smoking.*

“No thanks. I’ll just have some water.” Her hands were shaking as she turned away from him and grabbed a slice of pizza on her way back to the couch. Amanda handed her a glass of water, and after a few sips and a couple more bites of the pizza, she was finished eating. She sat on the couch waiting for the right opportunity to make her getaway, say her good nights, and get the hell out of there.

Edgy and impatient, getting more eager to leave by the minute, Isabella squinted at her watch. She groaned inwardly. *It’s early. I can still get my run in if I leave soon.* She yawned. Her face flushed, and her eyelids began to droop. *Why am I so tired?*

She felt so dizzy.

The room began to spin in front of her.

Drowsy.

Hoping to clear her head, she leaned back on the sofa and closed her eyes.

She woke up groggy, her eyelids heavy, hard to keep open. Amanda’s face loomed above her as if from inside a fish bowl. Her words were muffled. Isabella giggled. Something about Amanda’s voice reminded her of how the adults spoke on a ‘Charlie Brown’ show she once saw: “Wah, wah, wah, wah.”

“Isabella, please, let Joe drive you home. It’s gotten late, and you’re too sleepy to drive. I’m afraid you’ll fall asleep or get lost in my neighborhood. In fact, I insist.”

Isabella hesitated, cleared her throat. Thinking about a drive home with creepy Joe made her uneasy, especially since her arms and legs felt like jelly. She struggled to keep her eyes open and was too weak to argue.

Joe half carried her out of the house and placed her in his van.

“What’s your address, missy?” he asked as he backed the van out onto the street.

When she tried to reply, her tongue was tied in knots, swollen in her dry mouth. She licked her rough lips, attempted to swallow, and tried again to form words she didn’t know if he would understand.

“I’ll have you there in no time.” He smiled. “Just sit back and relax.”

His words dripped with reassurance.

* * * *

The van had stopped moving.

Isabella’s heavy eyes fluttered open. She tried to take a deep breath and coughed. Stale cigarette smoke, dust, and old-car smell filled her nostrils. She tried to move her arms and legs, but they were stiff and felt weighted down. Rubbing her eyes, she tried to remember. She had a brief recollection of something about a man helping her into his van to take her home.

She blinked her eyes open, and she squinted, trying to bring her surroundings into focus. She attempted to sit up, swallowing to keep down the rising bile. Turning her head to look out the window, she didn’t recognize the railroad tracks or the blinking red vacancy sign of an old, oddly named motel. *Not my neighborhood, that’s for sure.*

She sank back into the seat and closed her eyes surrendering to the black clouds swirling behind her eyes. *Where the hell am I?*

Her head felt enormous and her vision was blurred as Joe half led, half dragged her up the porch steps to a two or three-story house with two dark blue doors, one on each side. Or maybe she was seeing double, she couldn’t be sure.

He guided her through the door on the left and pushed her down onto a small bed. The mattress smelled sour and a spring poked at her hip. She concentrated on lying still, trying to stop the room from spinning. She blinked her eyes and probed at her surroundings, glimpsing the bare outline of three or four single beds in a small room, no night tables or lamps. When her attention settled on Joe sitting in a chair beside the bed, she tried to sit up, but he shoved her back down, his burly, hairy arm stretched across her chest, restraining her.

“What are you doing? Get your filthy hands off me,” she screamed, slurring her words, fighting against him with her arms. “Where am I?”

Joe snarled. “Just shut up an’ don’t give me any trouble. I’ve got a job to do, and I’m gonna make sure it gets done right. You got that? Now drink this.”

He pressed her head back against the pillow, cramming a bottle into her mouth, forcing her to swallow a few sips of foul-tasting soda. She had to swallow or choke. Some ran down her chin dripping onto her clothes. Soon the heaviness signaled the onslaught of black oblivion.

Chapter 3

“Can I have a bottle of water?” she asked Joe as she sat, dazed, on the bed munching a granola bar. Whether she’d been gone a few days or a few hours, Isabella had no way of knowing. She’d slept most of the time. Days turned into nights, nights into days as time continued to go by.

“Too bad, soda’s all we got. Get used to it,” he curtly answered her while cleaning his fingernails with his pocketknife.

There were two abrupt knocks on the door, a pause, then two more knocks.

Joe walked to the door, peered through the peephole, unlocked, and opened the door. He whispered something and then stepped aside.

When Isabella saw who arrived, she choked, spewing out most of the contents from her mouth all over herself, the bed, and surrounding area. She was stunned, exhilarated. The emotions hit her at the same time.

Amanda came to get me out of here! I’m rescued!

She tried to catch her breath as she sat up on the bed. But when she looked again at the woman standing inside the door, Isabella recoiled. Amanda’s expression exuded menace, danger. There were no happy-to-see-you’s or don’t-worry smiles on her threatening face. Amanda’s eyes flashed, her nostrils flared, and her mouth compressed as if to bite back words on the tip of her tongue.

Isabella jumped off the bed with intentions of seeking comfort in Amanda’s arms, but walking toward her, Joe lifted his hand as if to strike her. She backed up until she felt the bed against the back of her legs.

“Sit down and shut up. I’m warning you girl. You’re gettin’ on my last nerve,” he snarled as he loomed over her in a successful attempt to intimidate her.

Confused and frightened, Isabella trembled. Cowering in the corner of the bed, she pleaded in a whisper, “Amanda, help me. Why did you let him bring me here?”

Raising his hand ready to smack her, Joe bellowed, “I said shut the hell up, damn it! One more word outta you an’ I’ll knock your teeth out.”

Amanda walked toward Isabella pointing a finger at her. “Shut up and stop your bawlin’. I’ve been workin’ on you for over six months now for the boss, so just shut up. Do what you’re told, and no one gets hurt.” Her words were sharp, crisp through her tight lips.

Terror ripped through Isabella, her hands fisted, her chin trembled in disbelief. She withdrew from Amanda’s imposing form, curled into a protective ball on the bed, and wept.

Betrayed. Alone. Trapped.

* * * *

Isabella struggled to listen to the whispered conversation in the kitchen. *Why would Amanda do this to me? What would make her do this to another woman who was her friend? Was she poor and needed to make some big bucks to live the fancy lifestyle she wanted? Or had she been kidnapped and given money for a new identity of wealth and affluence.*

* * * *

What seemed like hours or days later, Isabella opened the door to the bathroom and was surprised to find an attractive blonde woman about her own age inside. The woman held her finger to her lips warning Isabella to be quiet and pulled her inside shutting the door.

“Shhh! They hear everything,” the woman whispered.

“What’s your name?”

“Megan. What’s yours?”

“Isabella. We have to get out of here.”

“There’s no way out. Believe me, I’ve tried.”

“How long have you been here?”

“About a week, I’m not really sure. They keep telling me they’re waiting for some kind of ‘word’ and then I can leave. I’m so scared,” Megan said through trembling lips.

“So am I. Why haven’t I seen you before?”

“I’m usually across the hall, but my shower is broken today so they let me come over here to ‘get ready,’ whatever that means.”

“Where are you from?”

“Right here in Denver.”

“Me, too.”

Both seemed a little stunned.

The door burst open, almost torn off its hinges. Joe reached in, grabbed Megan by the arm, and jerked her out the door.

“Stop, you’re hurting me,” she screamed, but Joe only covered her mouth with his hand as he slammed the bathroom door shut.

Isabella could hear Megan’s muffled screams, her kicks against the floor as she was pulled across the room. She stood unable to think of something she could do to help, the pounding of her heart in her chest deafening in her ears.

Suddenly, without a plan in mind, except to come to the aid of Megan, she sprinted after them and jumped on Joe’s back when she caught up to him. Hitting, biting and scratching anywhere she could find skin. Surely, between the two of them, they would be able to fight him off and escape.

While holding Megan around her waist with one arm, Joe loosened his hand on her mouth long enough to take a swipe at Isabella. She grasped hold of his lower side as his solid fist hit her on

the side of the head. She lost her hold and fell to the floor in a dazed heap.

I didn't see that one coming!

"Run, run, get away, get help, Isabella. Go! Go! Run!" Megan screamed.

Hearing Megan's cries sent a shot of renewed energy through Isabella. Her heart lurched in her chest, and sweat beaded on her upper lip. She ran ahead of them, out the door, across the porch, down the stairs into the street, and came to a screeching halt. *What to do? Which way to go?*

She looked up and down both sides of the street. Each looked the same, rows of tall narrow houses, similar in size and shape, color being the only main difference. Long skinny alleyways three to four feet wide separated the houses. Large oak trees spanned the street from yard to yard, making a canopy covering the street.

She glanced behind her. Amanda, not Joe, was now struggling with Megan, dragging her kicking and screaming to the van parked nearby.

Isabella made a quick U-turn running through the alleyway toward the back of the house. Her knees weakened, and breathing became more strained as she ran down the lengthy passageway. She stumbled and fell on the loose stones covering the ground. With the gravel embedded in the scratches, she didn't risk taking time to brush them off. She crawled for a few feet, then got back up and resumed running. Limping, with her knees bleeding, she slowed down in hope of catching her breath. She took a chance to look behind her. *Good, no one followed.*

She stopped and leaned over, resting her hands on her knees while she tried to catch her breath. When she turned her head around and squinted upward, she gaped straight at Joe's bull-like face.

Without a word, he grabbed her by the arm and started dragging her back the way she had come. He continued to tow her over the gravel, even after she fell to her knees. Since she only wore a T-shirt

and running shorts, the loose stones and pebbles scraped skin off her arms, knees, legs, and ankles.

She screamed out as pain tore through her, “Let me go! Help! Somebody, please help me! Stop, you’re hurting me.”

He covered her mouth with his other stinking hand, muffling her words. Reaching down, putting a tight hold around her waist, he picked her up. She squirmed, trying to wrest herself free, trying to pull his fingers from her waist and mouth.

As soon as he got her inside the apartment, he slapped her across the face knocking her to the floor. She felt something hot, stinging at the corner of her mouth. Her tongue automatically flicked the spot and she tasted blood mixed with salt. She shook her head to clear it while touching her mouth. When she took her hand away, it was covered in blood. Tears of pain, anger, and frustration ran down her cheeks.

She turned her eyes on Joe. “I’ll make you pay for this, you son of a bitch!”

He lifted his hand to hit her again. She flinched and rolled into a ball to protect her face from the next punishing blow. It never came.

Instead, she heard Amanda yell, “Stop it, Joe, right now. Boss’ll really be mad and won’t pay us, ’specially if we deliver damaged goods. We need the money, man. We need this job.”

Amanda helped Isabella off the floor, none too gently, and pushed her onto a bed. She felt a pinprick sensation in her arm, followed instantly by that old familiar woozy feeling. Isabella drifted into a deep, dreamless sleep.

* * * *

Isabella sat up, shook the cobwebs from her head, and looked around. Everything appeared muddled, obscured, her mind bewildered. She turned her head to one side. Joe stood beside the bed

with some clothes and a pair of sandals in his hands. He threw them at her.

“Get up and shower,” he ordered crisply, “and then put these on. Right now. We gotta get a move-on.”

She stood, staggered, and paused to steady herself. “I said, get moving,” he bellowed. “Now! We got things to do, and remember what I tol’ you.”

She stumbled into the bathroom, not because he told her to but because showering and washing her dirty body and matted hair would make her feel better. The cuts on her body weren’t serious, but they stung like the dickens when the water hit them. She dressed in a T-shirt, jeans, and sandals, and towel-dried her hair. She walked out of the bathroom refreshed, more human, and ready to do battle if necessary. With a clearer head, she felt more confident than she had in quite a while.

Eagerly, she focused on her dilemma, concentrated on finding a solution. She had to get away from this hellhole. Get away and put this horrific experience behind her. Get away before she spent the rest of her life sleepwalking.

Chapter 4

Isabella struggled as Joe held her left arm. The two of them went through the open door, crossed the front porch, and went down a few steps. She took a fleeting glance around, looking for anyone. She had to get someone's attention. She had to find someone, anyone, to give some kind of signal to for help. Getting away, far away, from Joe and Amanda stayed foremost on her mind.

As if he read her thoughts, Joe put his hand into his jacket pocket. A sharp pain slammed into her side as he pushed a hard, blunt object into her ribs. She yelped, jumping away from him.

He jerked her arm brutally back toward him and pulled her close against his side. He shook her. "Look at me. Look at me, girl, and keep your mouth shut or this gun will go off." His eyes were dark, his lips stiff, as he thrust the gun against her ribs.

She swung her head around coming to an abrupt halt in front of his face.

"If you think I'm bluffin', just try me," he snapped at her. "I've been itchin' to take you out anyway. Remember, keep your eyes on me, no lookin' round. You understand? First time I find you lookin' somewhere else, I'm takin' you out. Right here. Right now. You got that? We're gonna take a little walk in this beautiful park." He growled low in his throat as he jabbed her, hard in the ribs, again with the gun, to make sure she understood.

She winced, nodding in understanding. She crinkled up her face, tried to breath in air away from his putrid exhaled breath. She trembled and her knees wobbled as Joe pushed and pulled her along. *Where is he taking me? What is he going to do with me?*

She had to walk sideways as Joe held her close to his side but slightly in front of him as a shield. He pushed her along with caution, his eyes darting around, into every nook, every alley along both sides of the street, even on the rooftops, as if someone might be watching them or looking for them.

After a block or so, Isabella felt the warmth of the sun on her face and closed her eyes to savor the moment. Her mind strayed when a fresh breeze with a lingering sent of clover wafted past, and she took a deep breath. Ah, fresh air. It smelled so good and felt wonderful as it ruffled through her hair.

Another sharp jab in her ribs brought tears to her eyes and back to reality. When she turned her nose away from his face for a clean breath of air, he jammed the gun harder into her side, which made her wince in pain.

“Come on. Move it!” He dragged her along. “I’ll be glad to get rid of you, that’s for sure. I never had one like you give me so damn much trouble.”

She watched his eyes leave her face looking beyond her. The corners of his disgusting mouth turned up into a smile. “Well, look here, and right on ti...” he muttered, his hold on her arm relaxing but then retightened.

He looked away from her while his hold loosened once again. When he didn’t turn to look back at her right away, she chanced a glance. She wanted to see what made him smile without drawing his attention. Keeping her head still, she moved her eyes to the side. A sleek, shiny black limousine made its way toward them.

“Oh, shit,” Joe mumbled as he pulled her into nearby bushes at the entrance into the park.

She looked up in time to see a police car pulling in at the curb right behind the limo. Joe stared back and forth between the limo and the cops. He slackened his hold on her arm a little more each time his attention lapsed until he had let go of her arm completely. He started to cross the street toward the limo.

And then it happened. Joe wasn't even halfway to the limo when it suddenly started to move. It moved ahead and turned the corner and left, the police car following close behind, leaving Joe left standing in the middle of the street, his hands held out to the sides.

As soon as Joe left her side, Isabella saw her window of opportunity open, and expand. And she captured it.

No way was she going to run to the cops for help. She had to depend on herself for survival. If her father had done that, he would probably still be alive today. There were just too many dirty cops, and she couldn't trust any of them. Not anymore.

She took off running for some woods on her right side. She ran, trying to be as quiet as possible so no one would hear her while hoping to get a good head start. It felt great to be running again, but because she had been lying around for so many days, her lungs and leg muscles soon began to burn, to cramp. She slowed down, slouched behind a tree, and took in big gulps of air while clutching at the stitch of pain in her side. She sank to the ground, listened for and heard the sounds of trampling brush behind her.

She heard Joe hollering to Amanda. "She went ov'r here, this way. We hafta find the bitch before she gets away. Hurry up! Boss is gonna kill us if we lose her."

Isabella knew she had to run and keep on running in order to get away, no matter what. She didn't know where she was or where she was going but she wasn't going to let them catch her, not this time. She began running in the opposite direction of the sound of their voices, crawling and jumping, scrambling over and under fallen trees, shrubs, and bushes. Her shirt caught on a bush and ripped along the side, but she kept running. She fell, tearing her pants in the knees, but she didn't care. She scrambled up and started running. Her lungs burned, and her side felt about to split. She was unable to take a deep breath. She kept running.

Eventually she slowed her pace and listened to the sounds behind her. The sounds were farther away, but she could still hear twigs shattering under stomping feet.

Exhaustion began to set into her tired, burning muscles. Her mouth pursed tightly as her tongue swept her dry mouth. She could barely swallow. She felt as if she had been running for hours.

The sun began to set, casting ominous shadows through the tall trees. She didn't want to have to spend the night in the woods. She would have to find somewhere to hide-soon.

She reached down deep within herself for more strength, took a cleansing breath, and began running, this time setting a slower pace.

She glanced up from the path and thought she saw a dim light. Tired, she thought her imagination was playing tricks on her. She slowed down and, wiping the sweat running down her face on her sleeve, drew in a couple of deep breaths. Again, she looked and the light remained—like a beacon in the night—the promise of civilization. She stumbled toward it.

As she got closer, she saw the light coming from a long, narrow, horizontal window on the end wall of a huge house located in a large clearing. She searched the side away from the woods, found a door and turned the knob. *Damn! Locked.*

She poked around in the grass surrounding the concrete pad outside the door for a key or a wire, hairpin, anything she could use to jimmy the lock. She picked up a thin sharp stick, jabbed it into the key hole, and jiggled it back and forth. Nothing! She pulled the broken stick out and retried the door. It wouldn't budge. *There has to be a way through this damn door!*

She ran her fingers along the doorjamb but only the knob protruded out. She looked behind her, running her shaking fingers through her hair. She patted herself across her chest, her back and front pockets of her pants, searching for anything, anything at all. She felt a poke in her underarm, thinking it a stick, she absentmindedly

reached to pull it out and found the underwire of her very-worn bra sticking out. *Voila!* For once, it paid to have large boobs.

She quickly pulled out the wire. She put the smaller end into the lock and jiggled it up, down, and around with both her hands. She felt something move. Saying a quick prayer, she turned the door knob and pushed. She fell forward into the house onto her bruised and bleeding elbows and knees.

Ouch!

She jumped up, closed the door softly, and locked the deadbolt, trying not to make any noise. She turned around, with her back to the door, and sank to the floor. While taking in big gulps of air, as quietly as possible, she listened for any sounds coming from inside the house. Her heart pounding in her ears was deafening. She wiped her brow with her torn sleeve and closed her eyes as she rested her head on her bent knees and tried to catch her breath.

She didn't want to disturb anyone, or announce an intruder. She especially didn't want anyone calling the police for breaking and entering, not after what happened to her father. She didn't know who she could or couldn't trust, and until she did, she would be on her own. Who knew? Maybe the cops were involved in this somehow. She hoped the house was empty so she could hide from everyone until she could figure out on her own what to do next.

Free at last, at least away from her so-called friend Amanda and her cohorts. A shudder ran through her as she thought of where she had been held, shaking her head, clearing it of the past lingering thoughts, she wondered when and how she would be able to pick up the pieces of her mangled life.

Gazing around the room, Isabella saw a child's bedroom with two single beds, some toys between them on the floor, and a dollhouse similar to the one she had played with as a child. Below the long window and between two beds sat a dresser with a lamp on top, which spread the light leading her to this house. She immediately turned off the lamp so no one else could see it from the woods as she had.

She fell to her knees looking around for a place to hide. Lifting up the comforter, she looked under the beds, but they were boxed all the way to the floor. She looked around the room again. There wasn't any closet, only one other door leading into the rest of the house. *What idiot would build a big house like this without a closet in a bedroom?*

No, no place to hide in this room, not under either of the beds, not in the nonexistent closet, not behind any long drapes. Nowhere!

She needed a safer place to hide. She jumped up, desperate, thinking about what to do, where to go. Looking around again at the meager furniture, she didn't see anything that she could use to put in front of the door to buttress it from her pursuers. She lifted up one of the center ends of the curtains to take a swift peek out the window. *Oh, no!*

Amanda stood along the darkening edge of the woods, in the shadows of the trees looking directly at her.

Leaping away from the window, Isabella hoped Amanda hadn't seen her. She turned, sprinted for the doorway heading into the huge dining room, looking for somewhere to hide. A closet, a hutch, or a buffet. *I'm little enough to fit into a small area.* There was no place to hide in there.

She ran to the next room, the kitchen. She slid to a stop on one foot to one side of the room to what looked like a closet but turned out to be a built-in china closet, the doors covered with fabric. A table sat in front of a wide window seat facing the woods. She went around to the other side of the table, but it was also a china closet. *Both too small for me.* Still nowhere to hide!

She looked around the kitchen again, this time for a weapon of some kind. At least if there was someone in the house she could protect herself. She started rustling through drawers and opening cabinet doors when she finally found a knife rack in one of the drawers. *Looks like a steak knife but it will have to do.*

She began to tremble. Her heart raced. Despair flooded her. Hopeless, she turned and proceeded through a large arched doorway,

and skipped on one foot to a quick stop. To her immediate right stood a wide, open staircase that curved down and on the other side, another led up. She flew to the side with the stairs going down and stopped when she reached the bottom.

The softly lit room was well furnished with a burgundy leather L-shaped couch, a recliner, and a large wooden trunk—used as a coffee table. *Can I fit inside the trunk?*

Newspapers were strewn all over the couch. After a closer look, she saw bare feet sticking out from the bottom of a pair of jeans under the newspapers.

Oh shit!

She shook uncontrollably, her teeth chattered, and her palms grew sweaty as her heartbeat pounded loudly in her ears.

The form lying under the papers moved. She choked, and started coughing.

Chapter 5

Wyatt had dozed off while reading the newspaper in the downstairs family room, exhausted from his last trip. When he heard the outside door to the playroom upstairs open, he became instantly alert.

Kerthump! Thump. “Ouch, damn it!”

What the hell? That door’s always locked!

He wished he’d have turned on the alarm system he rarely used when he was home. Since he was so isolated by the three sides of the park, no one ventured out this way. If he’d had it on he might have missed this interruption from his afternoon nap.

The hair on the back of his neck bristled as he concentrated on more sounds coming from upstairs. On first reflex, he reached for his gun usually strapped under his arm but found nothing. Then he remembered he had put it on the coffee table/trunk and reached out for it, feeling much more secure now.

With his sense of hearing heightened, he lifted up the newspaper a fraction and peered out as he heard heavy breathing and footsteps running down the stairs.

The intruder came to a quick stop in front of him. The petite young woman, with a heart-shaped face like an angel, had a body made for sin. The image of her in her dirty, tattered blue jeans and ripped shirt posed a ridiculous backdrop as she stood before him with a knife in her hand. The threatening pose failed when her body trembled. She froze in mid-breath when he moved the papers aside and sat up.

He looked into her beautiful, liquid green eyes. Mystified, he felt like he could drown in them. She appeared real to him, but looked so nymph-like that he began to think he might be having a hallucination. He knew exhaustion could play tricks on the mind but...

“Please, please help me!” she whispered. ‘They’re coming after me. They’re going to kill me. Help me, please. Please hide me.”

Her voice jolted him back to reality. She *was* real. She could talk. He knew then she couldn’t be a figment of his imagination. He threw the paper aside and stood up. He observed her forlorn and frantic state, the desperate fear in her eyes and the knife she held. He immediately grasped reality.

As if on cue, he heard shouting followed by loud banging on the front door.

“What the hell?” he asked to no one in particular as he retrieved a remote control from on top of the trunk and entered some numbers.

“Please, you have to hide me,” she pleaded as the banging on the door grew louder. “If they find me, they’ll kill me. Please, I’m begging you.”

Each looked back and forth between the direction of the noise and each other, then glanced around the room, searching. Earlier in the day, Wyatt had opened the large glass sliding door on one wall to allow the warm fresh spring air into the room but had closed and locked the screen door. It would be their only protection for now.

“I just activated the alarm system so if anyone enters any door or window the police will be here immediately,” Wyatt said to her in a calm voice.

His professional training took over, and keeping them both safe became his main concern. He grabbed her arm, took the knife away in one swift movement and tossed it across the room onto his desk.

He wanted to keep her out of sight in case anyone ventured to look in the large glass sliding door—he didn’t want her recognized until he could find out more about her. He wanted to protect her, to take care of her but he wasn’t sure why.

He took her arms and began pushing her across the room into the corner behind the blinds. She protested at first, wriggling, trying to get away, and screaming, "Let me go," but he quickly subdued her when he put a hand over her mouth and pushed his gun in the middle of her back.

"I'll remove my hand from your mouth if you swear you'll be quiet." Wyatt whispered close to her ear. "Don't say a word. Just stay behind me. I'm trying to protect you."

He could smell her scent, feel her warmth, and hear her quick breathing. She nodded, and he removed his hand.

"Now, stand close behind me and don't make a sound. Not one sound," he said as he held his fingers up in front of his mouth. "They're coming along the side of the house."

Wyatt heard a man's voice as if in a tunnel. "Where the hell is she?" He heard footsteps in the grass and stones outside the open sliding glass door. He held his breath, intent on listening to every sound, every noise, and every reverberation.

"We have to find her—she's worth too much money to let her go now." The man's voice had turned into a loud yell.

As the sounds of sirens blasted in the distance, Wyatt turned his head to see two people running across the backyard. Wyatt watched them, as they wasted no time, scampering across the yard, into the woods and into the darkening night.

He closed and locked the sliding door, put his gun in his desk drawer, and made a quick phone call. He turned to her, realizing she hadn't moved an inch from where he had put her. "You're safe now," he said as he walked closer to her. "It's okay. I'll protect you."

He saw her trembling as he reached out to her and pulled her up against his body to help her feel safe. Desire surged through him. Raw. Direct. He smiled and winked at her. Both could scarcely breathe as time stood still. The only sound was the beating of their hearts, their labored breathing.

Her short dark hair feathered against her fair skin, which made her eyes appear even larger. Dried blood from the bruise at the corner of her mouth riled him to his guts. He left her alone for a moment; returned with a warm, wet washcloth; and handed it to her. “Here, hold this on your mouth. It will help.”

He looked into her bright, terror-stricken eyes, at her soft lips. He thought about how much he wanted to kiss away her pain. Something about this woman brought out his protective instincts.

He sat down a short distance from her on one end of the couch, watching as she held the warm, wet cloth against her lip, softening the dried blood. He almost relaxed until he saw her body shaking, tears streaming down her cheeks. When her eyes darted around the room, first toward one doorway, and then to the stairway, then back again, looking for a way out, he tensed. He had seen the same look many times during his years of interrogation experience. She was going to bolt.

Chapter 6

Another few minutes passed before the man broke the strained silence. “Why don’t you sit down, take a couple deep breaths, and get your bearings? The alarm system’s activated now, so you’re completely safe with me. And when you’re ready to talk, I’m ready to listen. I just might be able to help you.” Exasperating minutes passed by before his deep voice disrupted the silence again. “My name’s Wyatt. Wyatt Bowman. What’s yours?”

Isabella tried to control her trembling lips, and slow down her breathing to normal. Confusion joined the fear and anxiety from her flight through the woods. Snared again, but this time with a stranger whom she had some kind of attraction to and no idea if he was friend or foe. She looked toward the doorway wondering if she could escape his reach and make it out the door before he caught her.

Where would she go if she did get away? Joe or Amanda could be waiting right outside the locked door for her. Joe would kill her. She had no reason to doubt his threats, especially now, after she had defied him. She didn’t know whom to trust.

She remembered Wyatt’s gun and the familiar way he handled it. Was he a cop? The mere thought sent a shiver through her.

Drained of physical endurance, her brain fatigued from the mental challenges facing her, she couldn’t afford to be stupid now.

She took a couple small steps backward until her legs were touching the couch and sat down on the end far away from him, all the while watching him. His sharp, don’t-miss-anything eyes drilled into her the entire time. She didn’t have to tell him everything or even anything at all.

He leaned forward, resting his arms on his knees with his hands clenched together between them.

She moved farther away from him.

“Well, tell me what’s going on so I can help you.”

He looked at her, brows raised, as if waiting for an answer. She glanced down at her fingers, her shoulders sank, her head dropped forward as wave after wave of sobs tore through her from the deluge of memories, turbulence, and apprehension.

She looked at him, trying to form words, her mouth moving but no words coming out. When she met his eyes, she lost all her thoughts. Her lips quivered, she started breathing rapidly, and her heart pounded. She was afraid to trust him, afraid she couldn’t handle the consequences.

Chapter 7

Wyatt waited for a response with patience, one of the things he did best. “Just take a minute and collect yourself. I’m sure whoever’s after you is long gone by now. They probably have warrants out on them, so they aren’t going to stick around.”

He sat back, relaxing on the couch while she shied away from him on the edge of her seat.

“Ar-ar-are you a cop?” she sputtered, her lips trembling.

“Why? Do you want me to call the cops, or are you afraid of cops?”

She giggled. A stifled laugh, soft and snickering, stunned him by the animosity he heard within the sound. “I’m not afraid of them. I just don’t trust them, not even with a stick of chewing gum.”

Now it was his turn to laugh. He hadn’t heard that one before. So she had a sense of humor.

“Well, you can trust me.” Wyatt chuckled, trying to provide her with reassurance.

“How do I know I can trust you? I thought I could trust my friend Amanda too. Look where it got me.”

“Where did it get you?”

She studied her hands, shaking her head, but unwilling to provide any further information.

“Well, let’s try this again from the beginning. My name’s Wyatt Bowman. I own and manage Bowman Industries and Land Development. I’m sure you’ve heard of us. We’re pretty big in this area of the country.”

“No, no, I haven’t heard of you.” Finally she shrugged and whispered, “Isabella, my name’s Isabella Donnelly.”

As her words poured out, tears trickled down her cheeks. She wiped her nose on her hand, and then wiped her wet snotty hand on the leg of her ripped pants.

“That’s a beautiful name,” he said. “It’s nice to meet you, Isabella. You can relax. You’re safe here. As I said, the alarm system’s on. No one can get inside the house to harm you.”

“How did I get inside then? You didn’t even have the deadbolt on and the alarm didn’t go off.”

“I’m not sure why the deadbolt wasn’t locked. But I turned the alarm system on by remote as soon as you entered this room,” he answered with all seriousness.

She stared at him, thinking, remembering. “That’s what you were doing with the remote. I thought you were turning on the TV,” she said with a nervous chuckle.

He laughed quietly shaking his head back in forth.

Wyatt studied her bruised, war-weary face. He understood how she felt. He ran his hand through his hair, ruffled it, raised an eyebrow in question, and expelled a deep breath.

* * * *

So she was safe from her kidnappers. But was she safe from him?

A sickening thought entered her tired, weary mind. Surely she had not been blinded by the dream of freedom from one hellhole only to be thrown into a much worse one. And what could that be?

She looked into Wyatt’s eyes for any sign of deceit, or for any lack of sincerity. But she saw only compassion and kindness. She definitely didn’t want him to report her to the police or take her to the police station, drop her off, forget about her. Law enforcement of any kind would only screw it up, as they always did. Following leads that led nowhere, arresting the wrong person, or not doing anything at all.

But what disturbed her more was the thought that he would forget about her. Isn't that what she wanted after all—to tell the authorities, let them take care of everything? No, she *definitely* didn't want them involved. She didn't think they would believe her or help her anyway. She didn't trust them enough to fix a pothole, let alone find out why or who had done this to her. She had to think!

She knew she couldn't go home. Amanda knew where she lived, had visited her apartment a few times. And since Amanda knew where she lived, Joe probably knew as well. They knew where she worked too so she couldn't go back to work teaching school where she had spent the last three years.

All her identification, credit cards, cell phone, house and car keys were in her purse which Joe carried to the van the night he "drove her home." She hadn't seen her purse or any of her belongings again.

So now she had no proof of who she was or even of how she had gotten here to his house. If the police became involved, they would laugh at her and think she was crazy.

Nowhere to go. No way to get anywhere and no one to talk to about any of this except the staggeringly handsome man on the other end of the couch.

Her thoughts drifted to her mother. They had a great relationship. She could talk to her. Her mother would believe her no matter what she said and would probably even send a cab to pick her up and take her home. Together, they could figure this whole thing out themselves and she could get her life back.

But what if her kidnappers followed her to her mother's house? Or worse yet, what if they had already contacted her mother, kidnapped her or threatened her? She wondered if her mother had tried to contact her in the last few days. Would her mother go to her apartment to check on her when she didn't answer? Would she think to call her landlord for him check on her?

She smirked, which made the split in her lip bleed and hurt like crazy.

Maybe her mother would file a missing persons report? *How long is the wait now, twenty-four or forty-eight hours?* Since Isabella didn't talk to her mother every day once she began teaching, each taking care of their own homes, hobbies, and charities had consumed much of their time. Her mother wouldn't have any reason to check on her yet, she didn't think. Hopefully, she hadn't realized Isabella's absence. Her mother didn't need to worry about her.

She hadn't realized how self-absorbed she had become in her own confusing thoughts until she heard Wyatt saying something about a drink. Did she want a drink? All the hair stood straight up on the back of her neck like a blinking red light. *Danger! Danger!* Wasn't a drink of water how all this started, ending up here in this too-confusing situation in the first place?

"Do you have water in a sealed unopened bottle?"

Wyatt's look questioned her reason for asking but he nodded as he walked to the small refrigerator in the corner of the room, reached in, and grabbed two bottles of water. He handed one to her to open.

She looked the bottle over making sure it hadn't been opened before. There were no signs of sabotage, so she screwed off the tight lid, breaking the seal. She took a sip, then a few big gulps.

She couldn't remember the last time she had a cold drink of water from a bottle. It tasted so good. She glanced up at Wyatt, who had remained standing.

He stared across the room as if in deep thought, one hand in his pocket jingling his change, which reminded her of her father. She studied him. He was muscular, with broad shoulders, an attractive silhouette, and a shapely butt. He appeared to be someone willing to listen to her, but could she trust him? What harm could there be in telling him some of what happened to her? What more do they want from her? She relaxed.

"They took me," she finally blurted out.

“What? Who? Those two?” Wyatt asked, startled at first, when she began to speak. He jerked his head and pointed toward the backyard.

She nodded.

“Who are they?”

“I only know them by their first names, Joe and Amanda. I became friends with Amanda when I met her at the gym we both attended.”

“Where do you live and work?”

“I live on Cameron Lake Drive. I’m a second-grade teacher at Lakes Elementary. If you could call me a cab, I’ll be on my way. Maybe I can figure this out after a good night’s rest in my own bed?”

“Where does your friend Amanda live?”

“She never told me her address. I followed her scrawled directions to what I thought was her condo for a girls’ night out. We were going to have pizza and drinks. There wasn’t an address on the directions. I looked, because at one point, I thought I was lost and would have to stop and ask directions.”

When she saw him raise a questioning eyebrow, she continued. “As I said I met Amanda at the gym near the school where I teach. We hit it off and became friends. You know, we went out to lunch, shopping a few times, and saw a couple movies—that sort of thing.”

As she explained all this to Wyatt, she realized that Amanda had never talked about herself. She didn’t even know Amanda’s last name, her address, or even how to contact her. Amanda always called her, or they made plans when they met at the gym. She couldn’t remember giving Amanda her phone number or address, but she must have at some time during one of their conversations because Amanda knew it. Amanda also seemed to know when she visited her mother and when or if she and her mother had argued, because Amanda would ask her about it.

Isabella finally pushed back on the couch while contemplating this new revelation. She knew nothing that could help her, absolutely

nothing about the people who abducted her including where they held her or even where she was now. And worse, but more importantly, they knew everything about her!

Wyatt interrupted her thoughts. "Tell me exactly what happened to you. Tell me from the beginning. How did they take you? Where were you held? Was it a house or an apartment?"

"You're not going to believe me, I just know it. I can hardly believe it myself. I don't know how I could have been so stupid," Isabella said, chastising herself.

"Don't be so hard on yourself. We all make mistakes, big ones, too. Try starting from the beginning and let me determine if you're telling the truth or not."

"Oh, I'll be telling you the truth. It's just so bizarre it's hard to believe."

"Try me," Wyatt said with an overabundance of patience.

"Well..." Isabella began as she retold her story.

"Had you been to her house before?" Wyatt interrupted her.

"No! She always met me somewhere or came to my place."

"What happened then?"

"I followed her directions to her condo."

"And you didn't look at the address or the street signs?" Wyatt asked with disbelief.

"I had some reservations since I had never been in that neighborhood before."

"What happened next?"

"Do we really have to go through all this now? I'm exhausted. I just want to go home. I'm worried about my mother. If you would simply call me a cab, I can pay you for it when I get home. No wait, that won't work. They know where I live. Damn!"

"Do you want me to help you or not?"

"Yes, okay, okay. Once I got to Amanda's place, she started acting weird and that worried me."

"Weird how? What did she do?"

“Amanda left me alone, went into a bedroom and shut the door to ‘order pizza.’ And no other girls showed up for our fancy ‘girls’ night out.’ I got tired of waiting so I confronted her. Amanda joined me when I threatened to leave, but she insisted I stay since she had already ordered the pizza. Anyway, this guy Joe shows up with the pizza.”

“Who’s Joe?”

“A friend of hers, I guess.”

“Okay, what happened next?”

“I took a slice of pizza, and Amanda brought me a glass of water. I got really tired and drowsy. Also, I could hardly walk. Joe offered to drive me home and Amanda insisted, so I let him. And then I ended up in some hellhole of a house on the other side of town, forced to drink soda, eat Pop-Tarts and granola bars...until I escaped today.”

“How far away from here is the place where they held you?”

“I don’t know. I’m not very good with distance. I know I ran the whole way here through woods and brush from a park to get away from them. It took most of the day I think.”

When she mentioned the park, he raised an eyebrow but didn’t say anything. He rubbed his chin with his fingers, and then ran his hand through his hair. Finally, he summed it up.

“Okay, so what we know so far is that your name is Isabella, and you were enticed or lured to the home of a woman named Amanda, last name unknown, who you thought was your friend. You don’t know where she lived even though you were at her house. You don’t know where or if she worked or who Joe is or his last name. You don’t know where you were held or for how long. But today, out for a walk, you got away, ran from the park through the woods and into my house.”

Isabella could tell by looking at him that he didn’t believe a word she said. She sank back into the couch away from him.

"I know it all sounds unbelievable." She pleaded. "I can hardly believe it myself but everything I've told you is true. I swear it is. Please believe me,"

Then he said, "It isn't as unbelievable as you might think. You couldn't possibly make up something like this, could you?"

Isabella took offense, feeling insulted. "What do you mean I couldn't make up something like this? Do you think I'm stupid?"

"Did you make up this story?" His eyes firmly set on hers.

"Of course not! Why would I do that?" Now agitated, she stood and paced in front of the couch.

"Calm down, of course I don't think you're stupid. Some people have very vivid imaginations and you have to admit your story is hard to believe. Wasn't it Mark Twain who said, 'Truth is stranger than fiction; fiction has to make sense?' You have nothing to gain by lying, do you?"

She was insulted again by his arrogant insinuation that she might possibly have made up this tale to gain something from him, questioning her own integrity. She did have some pride left after all. She couldn't find the right words for a retort to equal his insult.

"Why would I lie to you?" She was barely able to get the words out. "I thought you wanted to help me, yet you continually attack me, questioning my credibility, my character."

Feeling tortured, with no aid in sight, after another few minutes of silence, and heavy sighs, she began to cry in earnest desperation. "I swear I'm telling you the truth, I didn't make this up. Why would they want me?" Tears flowed down her cheeks. "And what would I want from you? I don't even know you."

"Exactly! Why would they want you? For a ransom? Do you or your family have any money?"

Isabella moved away from him again, a feeling of hopelessness washed over her filling her with anger, frustration, feeding the fire of defenselessness. She wanted to scream.

“My family doesn’t have money for a ransom,” she screamed at him. “You think, of all the people out there in this city or country, I sought you out on purpose? I chose you and set you up? Like I said, I don’t even know who you are, and right now, I’m not sure I want to find out.”

“It could happen. You could be in collaboration with those guys. How do I know?”

“And yet again, you offend me. To associate me with them is a direct insult of my character. Surely you believe *something* of what I said?”

“I believe you came in to my house uninvited, I might remind you, and those two thugs came looking for you. Based on what they said, you’re worth a lot of money to them. Those are the plain facts.”

She thought for a moment, trying to remember exactly everything she had told him. “What about the park on the other side of the woods? I didn’t make that up.”

Wyatt looked at her with a raised eyebrow. “The only park around here is about three miles away through the woods. I doubt you could run that distance.”

He stood from where he sat on the couch, stretched, and slowly walked to the fridge.

“You assume way too much about me,” Isabella whispered as she looked down at her clenched hands. She didn’t want to argue, her defenses worn down. She didn’t know what to think or what to do.

Tired and dirty, she wanted a nice hot shower and a soft bed. She looked at the clock, which sat on the mantel above the fireplace in front of her. *Ten o’clock? Where had the time gone?*

She had left the house shortly after a small breakfast of a Pop Tart. She hadn’t eaten anything all day. How long had she been at his house? One hour? Two hours? Had she been running in the woods most of the afternoon? She laid her head back on the top of the couch and closed her tired eyes.

She would need to rely on her own strengths to get herself out of this mess, just like everything else she had accomplished in her life. Her body was exhausted. Tired. Tired of running. Tired of thinking.

Chapter 8

Wyatt opened the fridge, got out a beer, and took a long swig. He needed something to help him understand this peculiar state of affairs happening in his own house. He found the entire account uncanny yet intriguing at the same time. *So much for a nice, quiet weekend away from business and for getting some much needed rest.*

Turning toward the couch, he studied the young woman resting. Relaxed, she lay with her head on the back of the couch, her eyes closed. He could hear her deep, even breathing. She had fallen asleep.

Something about her nymph-like, angelic appearance appealed to him. He sincerely wanted to believe her and assist her. If only he could help her without helping himself *to* her.

He walked to the couch, picked up her legs, and placed them gently on the couch while gingerly laying her flat, careful not to move too fast. She didn't stir. He reached down to take off her sandals and pulled out the leaves sticking between her toes while taking note of the scratches and dried blood covering her feet and ankles. She groaned but didn't wake up.

He covered her with a blanket and looked at her beautiful face, once again so peaceful in sleep, pure and innocent. He felt some unknown yet compelling, even disturbing, attraction to her. He felt *obligated* to help her. But what could she want from him?

Suspicious by nature, anxious to try to find out exactly who she was, he glanced toward his desk, then at the blinds covering the sliding doors. If she was lying to him or setting him up, he wanted to know about it before rather than after.

He returned to his desk, opened his laptop, and sat down. He began a local people search for “Isabella.” He had written down the street address when she gave it to him, checking his typed entry against what he had written down. He double-checked his entry for a spelling error. No listing for Cameron Lakes Drive in this city, so he checked statewide. No results. No results for the street in Stoney Creek or Suffolk or in the entire state of Virginia. *How odd!*

He hadn’t asked her for her city or state, assuming she was local from Stoney Creek, VA. He remembered everything she told him about herself. A second grade teacher at Lakes Elementary School but she hadn’t told him the street address of the school, just the name. He entered Lakes Elementary School into his browser. The only one listed in the entire United States had an address in Colorado. None of it made sense. Two and two equaled five.

He checked the databases available to him, which was numerous. He checked missing person’s reports. None reported a young woman her description missing.

What about the park she claimed to have run through all day? The nearest park was located about three miles from his house and he knew it very well. He had established it a few years ago for the neighborhood kids as well as for his desired isolation and privacy. About the size of a football field, surrounded on three sides with woods thick with tall oak and pine trees and a heavy growth of short bushes and shrubs. It would be extremely hard to travel through on foot.

He spent a few more hours on the computer, finishing some work, answering the too-numerous e-mails always filling up his inbox. He also took advantage of the opportunity to send out a number of e-mails requesting a couple of favors.

He sighed, rubbed his eyes with his hands, looking at the time. As fatigue consumed his body and mind, he turned off his computer. He began pacing in front of the couch, his anger with her deception increasing with each step he took. *How dare she lie to me?*

When he looked at her face, still wet with tears, he stopped, ashamed. He retrieved a blanket out of the trunk in front of the couch and settled into the recliner.

He wanted more answers. He knew how and from whom he would get them, but he would have to wait until morning. Right now, he needed to make sure she would still be there in the morning. His mind raced with possibilities and probabilities. His every instinct screamed for him to protect her. He didn't intend to let her leave until he had all his questions answered.

Chapter 9

Joe was out of breath, out of daylight, and out of ideas. He had spent the entire day chasing the girl, traipsing around the woods. He found no clue of any sort to lead him anywhere, and was strongly rebuffed at the only house within miles where Amanda thought she had seen her peeking out of a window.

Hot, irritable, scratched, and bleeding, he was mad as hell. He was humiliated and embarrassed for letting down his guard, especially on a job for boss man Spike, literally taking his hold off the girl's arm when he became overcome with excitement about finally completing the deal—so distracted that he let this one get away.

Now, he had something to prove. He had to come up with a plan to make it up to him. He had to find her and deliver her when Boss specified if he wanted to get paid the much-needed money as well as stay in the organization.

Amanda babbled in the background as they made their way along the street to the parked van.

“Hey, shut up, will ya? We gotta come up with a plan, a good one, and find her. We don't have much time left. We hafta find her or someone like her as soon as possible so's we can get her to Norfolk, or we'll be fish food.”

“You should stay and look for her. It's your fault anyway. And when Boss pays you, you can send me my half of the money.”

“Your half? You must think I'm an idiot or something? When I'm doin' all the work, I get at least seventy-five percent.”

When Joe turned around, he saw that Amanda had stopped walking toward the van. She stood steady, looking straight ahead at him. He saw a burst of pure rage, raw and deep appear on her face.

“After your actions today, yes, you are an idiot,” she said through tight lips. “And I have had enough of your harebrained ideas.” Her face contorted in anger, reddened, eyes bulged, and her mouth tensed. Her hands became fists at her sides. She leaped toward Joe, flinging herself on him, knocking both of them to the ground. They rolled off the sidewalk and onto the stone gravel on the outskirts of the park, arms and legs flailing. She grabbed his hair and pulled. When he grabbed her hands and squeezed them tight, she squealed and let go of his hair. Then she tried to scratch his eyes out with her long, sharp fingernails.

Joe had had enough. Between the girl giving him such a hard time, defying his every order, and now Amanda giving *him* orders, he was up to his eyeballs in shit and wouldn’t take anymore. He rolled away from her, pulling a gun out of his jacket pocket as he got up on his knees. As she rolled to sit up facing him, he pointed the gun between her eyes, the cold metal of the barrel touching her forehead.

Amanda froze, staring at Joe’s face. His threatening stare enough to let her know he’d kill her if she crossed him. Joe looked around at the few people still milling around the almost-dark park. He motioned with his gun for her to get up. Amanda stood and brushed herself off.

“Just shut the hell up,” he said through gritted teeth, holding the gun at his side, close and ready. “Don’t say another word. I don’t want nobody hearin’ our business, so let’s get back to the place so we can figger this out.”

Under the cover of darkness, Joe followed Amanda as she walked stiffly in front of him back to the van. He looked over his shoulder for any sign of followers or interest.

After parking about a block away, Joe followed Amanda in the door. “Amanda, go sit on one of the beds. I’ll get you a drink,” Joe told her, pushing her to the side as he closed and locked the door.

“No, I’ll get my own drink,” Amanda told Joe. “I wanna make sure I know what I’m drinking.”

Insulted, Joe shrugged his shoulders. “I ain’t gonna use you that way,” Joe said, walking to the kitchen.

“That’s just what I’m gonna make sure of,” Amanda said, following close behind Joe.

They sat, fuming and furious, with their drinks. When Joe’s cell phone rang interrupting the tense silence, they jumped, startled. Joe shook his head as he looked at the caller ID, hesitated a second, then flipped it open.

“Oh hi, boss. How ya doin’?” Joe said as he turned around and looked at Amanda with menace in his eyes.

“I know, boss, but we kinda ran into a snag here.” He listened for a few seconds. “I know, boss, we’re tryin’ to...” Interrupted, he listened, then said, “Okay, boss, I will.”

Joe could hear Amanda’s anxiety increasing with her deep breaths, heavy sighing, and fidgeting as she waited for an explanation from him. She was still seething over her earlier altercation with him and he didn’t want to deal with her attitude again.

“Well, what did he say?” she asked as she stood.

“Boss said we hafta drop the girl in Norfolk by Tuesday at midnight. He didn’t wanna hear ’bout no problems. We just gotta have the girl there by then,” he answered without turning around to look at her.

Amanda began screaming. “What have you gotten me into? I want out of this right now. I don’t even want any money!”

“That ain’t gonna happen, and you know it. You knew exactly what you were gettin’ into from the start. Boss knows you’re workin’ this job with me and are gettin’ a cut. When he pays for somethin’, he expects to get what he pays for. Iffin he don’t, he don’t need you *or* me no more and he’ll get ridda’ us before you can spit. You’ll be iced and floatin’ in the ’Lantic Ocean, or what’s left of ya will be.”

Amanda ran at Joe, her arms flailing, fists ready to do battle. She screamed, “What are we gonna do? This is all your fault, you fool.”

“Shut up, you bitch,” he said as he restrained her by holding her head back with one hand. “Just sit down and shut the hell up. I can’t even think with your caterwaulin’.”

Joe turned around to face her and backed her onto a nearby bed. She sat and put her head down on her arms and rocked back and forth.

“We gotta get that particular girl—not just any girl. It has to be the girl boss picked out. And we have to get her to Norfolk on time, just like boss wants. You know how picky he is. He has to get exactly what he wants when he wants it, and that’s what he’s payin’ us for. If we screw up this job, there won’t be no more jobs ’cause we’ll be dead. So if you’ve got any ideas, now’d be a good time to hear ’em?”

Amanda lifted her head, pointed her finger at Joe, her lips tight, her face red with anger.

“I risked gettin’ caught and goin’ to jail for this job, man, I need the money. And now, thanks to you I’ve got nothin’. No deal. No girl. No money.”

“Like I toldja. It ain’t gonna’ matter. Boss’ll see us dead ’fore he pays either of us the first red cent. We have to deliver the goods or else.”

Unflappable and composed, Joe sat in one of the two chairs in the house, crossed his legs, and lit up a cigarette. “We hafta come up with a way to find this girl. If we don’t, we’re dead. That’s our only choice. I know Boss. There’s nowhere to run or hide he won’t find us. Iffin we don’t deliver to Boss what he wants, we can’t run far or fast enough to get away from him.”

They needed to come up with a plan. They needed it to be foolproof. They needed it now.

* * * *

Money. The one thing she needed the most, she didn't have. Money, or the lack thereof, continued to haunt her and was the main reason Amanda had gotten involved with Joe in the first place. Big, big mistake!

Her minimum-wage job barely paid the rent on the lavish condo she lived in, let alone the necessary utilities. She had felt overwhelmed with hopelessness, at a dead end. She didn't think she would ever be able to get ahead.

She had met Joe at a bar they both frequented and only knew each other by name and face. Neither had talked to the other at length about anything except maybe the weather before he finally sat at her table one night while she was nursing a poor-poor-pitiful-me beer.

When Joe approached her about making some good and easy money for doing a couple of simple jobs, she got excited. She could almost begin to see the light at the end of the tunnel. The jobs sounded easy enough, and she was confident she could handle them. All she had to do was make friends with certain girls Joe picked out, invite them over to her house, and Joe would take care of the rest. She would make a bundle, pay off her credit cards, and maybe even be able to buy a newer car.

She couldn't stop thinking about everything she could do with all the extra money and how relieved she would feel—no more debt collectors calling or embarrassing, harassing moments with her landlord. After a few weeks of great consideration, she decided to do one job and evaluate the results or any negative consequences.

But after working the first couple of jobs with Joe and receiving the much-needed extra cash, she was able to pay some past-due bills. Since it was "untraceable cash" no one knew anything about it, she supported Joe and his activities one hundred percent.

She didn't really think about getting caught even though she knew it was wrong and breaking the law. Eventually somewhere down the line, before the law could catch up with her, she was going to quit. Move away and change her identity. But for now, she still had so

many unfulfilled dreams that she wasn't ready for it to end. She loved the money. But now, thanks to Joe and his mistakes, she really needed to be careful since this particular job had just gotten too careless, too complicated, and they could both be in big trouble.

Amanda tossed and turned all night trying to come up with a plan to help her put an end to all the secrets and lies of which had become her pitiful life. This simple job should have gone so smoothly. Amanda had done her part. She had made friends with the girl Boss or Joe picked out, took her wherever whenever he said. That's how it had worked with previous, similar jobs. When Joe delivered a girl or kid to Boss, Boss paid Joe and Joe paid her.

But Boss's plans had changed. Instead of getting the girl a week ago in Colorado, he had suddenly left town. They had to take the girl all the way to Virginia in order to make the delivery.

She even considered aborting the whole plan, cutting her losses now, getting back to her condo, and settling down. She wanted out. She didn't want Joe breathing down her neck, telling her who to make friends with, who to keep asleep, and who to keep awake. She wanted to go straight for a while, try to get a better job with a regular paycheck, try her best to get by and stay clean.

She didn't think Boss would agree to let her just walk away. She knew too much about Boss and his organization even though she'd never met him. Even if Boss did let her out of the deal, she wouldn't get any money for this gone-bad job. She wouldn't be able to get back to Colorado without transportation or money for transportation. Maybe she'd already been gone too long.

Chapter 10

Isabella woke up in the early morning hours. It took a few minutes for her eyes to adjust to the darkness, for her to recognize her surroundings, to remember where she was and how she had gotten there. She had hoped to wake up from this nightmare to find herself in her own bed, that she had only been dreaming but no such luck.

Now she needed to find a bathroom. She vaguely remembered the large house and had no idea where one might be located. She tried to recall her hurried run-through a short time earlier but couldn't remember seeing a bathroom along the way.

She lifted her head and noticed Wyatt asleep in the recliner. She warily glanced around, then got up and tiptoed to the stairs. Her feet throbbed with pain with each and every step she took, and she winced, looking back to see if Wyatt had moved. He hadn't.

At the top of the stairs, she turned left into the kitchen. She tried to remember if he had said anything about a wife. She couldn't recall. If he did have a wife, where was she? Or maybe he had a girlfriend. Why did that trouble her? And why did she even care?

She rounded the corner into the dining room to the open staircase leading upstairs, which probably led to the bedrooms, and bedrooms always had bathrooms nearby.

Fumbling through the dark, she got to the top of the stairs, stopping in front of a set of closed double doors. To her right were three closed doors; to her left, the open railing overlooking the dining room, foyer, and a darker room, possibly a living room according to the faint moonlight coming in the windows.

She decided to be quick about it since she really had to go, so she opened the double doors straight ahead. She walked on smooth and cool wooden floors toward the dim light coming into the room from the left.

Finally! A bathroom! A well-equipped one too, with a big bathtub and a huge separate shower. She exhaled after realizing she'd been holding her breath. What she wouldn't give to take a long, hot, soapy bath? She felt dirty, sweaty, and so stressed. She would love to relax, let the feelings of hopelessness and anguish wash away down the drain with the dirty water. Running her fingers through her matted short hair, she found short sticks and leaves poking out everywhere. The corner of her mouth hurt too.

When she looked at her feet, she saw they were caked with dirt, covered with scratches and dried blood from the briars and bushes in the woods. She took a closer look at the large multiple sprays in the shower. She knew the pulsing hot water would feel so good on her aching muscles.

She couldn't wait any longer. Before she could talk herself out of it, she removed the remnants of her clothes and jumped into the shower. As the hot water began running over her, she relaxed. Closing her eyes, she relinquished her body to the hot water, running her soapy hands over her sore muscles, melting away the aches and pains. She washed and rinsed her hair and relieved her feet of the dirt and caked blood. She breathed the moist air deeply into her lungs, savoring every second—she didn't want it to end.

Fatigue soon overwhelmed her. She grew tired and wanted to lie down. She quickly got out, found a big fluffy towel nearby, and took advantage of every inch of it to dry off her body and hair. The scrapes on her feet and ankles had begun bleeding, so she had to take extra time to stop the bleeding with tissue paper.

She didn't want to put her dirty clothes back on, so she searched the bathroom and found a soft, white terry bathrobe hanging on the back of the door. She thought it would be okay to borrow for a short

time so she slipped it on. It was too large for her: the sleeves hung down to her knees and the bottom almost reached the floor, but it felt so cozy that she decided one night wouldn't matter. She opened the door and walking precariously on her heels or toes, limped out of the bathroom.

From the dull bathroom light, she could see a large, king-size bed in front of her. *If only I could get a good night's rest. It would feel so good after my relaxing shower, too.* She decided to lie down a moment, just to think in the quiet of the night. Closing her eyes, she listened to the sounds of the leaves rustling in the trees and the bugs making their various noises. The open French doors leading to a balcony allowed a light breeze to gently sway the sheer curtains carrying them across the bed. With her arms propped behind her head, she breathed deeply and relaxed her entire body. Her thoughts spun as she tried to wrap her mind around the possibilities, of her recent experience.

She dreamed about the handsome man sleeping downstairs, and wondered what it would be like to feel his security, his strength, and his warmth lying next to her.

Chapter 11

A light sleeper, always attuned to his surroundings, Wyatt automatically woke up when Isabella moved on the couch, and was at full attention before her feet hit the floor. He lay watching her every move through his slit eyes. Once she reached the top of the stairs, he sat up and listened to her soft footsteps as she made her way up to the third floor. He heard his bedroom door open and close. He owned some valuable artwork, silver, a coin collection, but nothing of public knowledge or worth breaking-and-entering charges. *What could she be up to now?*

He stood and started up the stairs. When he heard the shower water running in his bathroom, he decided to wait it out in the kitchen until she made her next move, and hoped it would not be out the front door. Whatever she was planning or had planned for him, he would be ready. He sat in the moonlit breakfast nook staring out into the woods while thinking about everything she had told him, what he had found out during his limited research on the computer, and what his next steps would or should be at daylight. But first, he could use a few more hours of sleep.

The bright moonlight shining through the big windows made the room appear as if a soft light had been turned on. He hadn't heard the water running for a while nor had he seen or heard her come down the stairs. He decided it was time to investigate her whereabouts on his own.

Tiptoeing up the stairs, he walked into his bedroom and came to an abrupt halt. The moonlight streaming in through the open French doors illuminated the room, spreading its light across the bed,

spotlighting where she lay. The sight took his breath away, her appearance ethereal, chaste, and virtuous.

She lay on her back with her arms flung aside. She had put on his robe after her shower and it had ridden up, showing her beautiful, shapely legs. He could see her soft feminine curls between her legs where the robe had slid open. She was beautiful, and with her tussled dark hair a contrast on the white pillow case, and her soft, now-clean milky skin she reverberated sexy. He wanted to touch her, to kiss her, to do so much more: he simply wanted her. He couldn't believe the feelings coming to the surface, feelings he hadn't had in too long, feelings only a man can feel for a woman he desired, feelings he couldn't and didn't want to hide.

Trying not to disturb her, he gently lay down on the bed beside her. She shifted onto her side toward him and put her hand on his chest. Expecting a response, he lifted his head to look at her, but her eyes remained closed in sleep. He stared at her fingers splayed across his chest, it felt good, somehow right. He laid his head back down, put his hand on top of hers, and slowly drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 12

The effectiveness of the aroma of coffee permeating the bedroom roused Isabella from her sleep. Before opening her eyes she languished in the comfort of the bed, thinking she had spent the night at her mom's, planning to spend a leisurely day shopping and girl-talking. She heard the birds chirping as a cool breeze drifted across her bare legs. *It must be a windy day for so much air to be coming in the small opening of my bedroom window.*

She stretched her arms over her head, groaning from the aches in her sore leg muscles. She half opened her tired eyes and peered around the room. Finding it barely light outside, she was surprised to see the open French doors. She looked out onto the pretty landscaped yard and caught her breath. All the memories of the past few days or weeks came rushing back. Her heart stuck in her throat, strangling her. *How could this be happening to me?*

Sitting up and glancing around the room, she noticed the indentation in the top of the pillow beside her, which suggested Wyatt must have come to bed sometime during the night.

As she heard footsteps on the stairs nearing the bedroom door, she pulled the bed covers up to her neck just as Wyatt walked into the room carrying two cups of steaming coffee.

His presence filled the room. She couldn't take her eyes off his bare chest, the hardened muscles rippling as he moved, the V-shaped chest hair leading to a point below the waistband of his well-worn jeans that fit his butt perfectly. She tightened her hold on the covers as he moved toward the bed.

“Wasn’t sure what you took in your coffee so I brought one with cream and sugar and one black,” he said with a smile as he held them both out to her.

She looked at him in awe wondering if he were real. *If I were in his shoes, I don’t think I’d be treating a stranger to coffee in bed.*

“Th-th-thanks, cream and sugar, please,” she managed to say as she accepted the mug he offered her. She took a careful sip. It tasted good.

She watched Wyatt’s powerful, corded muscles as he walked to the open French doors and stood, drinking his coffee. He appeared in deep thought. She became speechless. After a few more sips of her coffee, she set her cup on the table beside the bed, crossed her arms over her chest, and waited for the deluge of questions she knew would be coming.

With her eyes, she followed Wyatt as he walked back and forth in front of the French doors. He stopped pacing and stood still with his back to her as he looked out at the luscious backyard, rocking back and forth on the heels of his feet in agitation. He turned to her when he heard her put the cup on the table.

“We have to talk,” he snapped.

In hopes of delaying the inevitable, she picked up her cup and took another sip of her coffee. When she looked into his magnetic eyes, fear returned to clutch her chest, constricting her breathing, and most-unladylike droplets of sweat broke out on her upper lip. She studied his face, his perfectly formed lips, and her thoughts turned to her dream of him kissing her. She could feel his lips on hers and the heat. So-hot heat he left as he trailed her lips along her neck, nibbled her ear lobes. She quivered, weak, and dizzy.

“Isabella, Isabella.”

She heard Wyatt repeating her name. She realized she had been staring at him, lost in his eyes and her memories. She shook her head to clear her mind of any lingering reflections.

"I'd like to help you." Wyatt said, motioning with his coffee cup as he spoke. "But, I can't unless you tell me the truth, so no more bullshit."

She sat, staring at him, not sure how to respond.

"I told you everything I remembered," she whispered.

"I did some research last night after you fell asleep on my couch. There's no such person with that name in the Commonwealth of Virginia. And, the street address you gave me doesn't exist in Stoney Creek or anywhere else in the Commonwealth of Virginia. You lied to me. You gave me a fictitious name and address. Why? What are you trying to hide?" His voice rose with agitation.

Astonished! Stunned! Speechless! Stoney Creek? Virginia? Where? Her jaw dropped open in disbelief as she looked away from him, out the open doors, down at her clenched hands. Her gaze darted back to Wyatt, who peered at her through the narrowed slits of his eyes with his one hand on his hip, his other holding his coffee.

"Well?" he asked.

She was filled with turmoil and bewilderment, and her heart hammered in her chest so loudly that she thought he would see it thumping in her chest. Her face flushed with annoyance of idiocy as a burst of anger surged through her. Her hands turned into fists as she pursed her lips. The bed covers fell as she raised herself onto her knees. Her anger gave her the strength to meet his intense stare.

"I don't have anything to hide." Her words came out in bursts of fury. She lifted her outstretched arms toward him, palms open. "And of course I'm not listed anywhere in Stoney-whatever. In fact, I've never even heard of the place. Or been in Virginia. I live in a small town outside of Denver, Colorado. Why would you be looking for me in Virginia?"

"Because that's where you are. Stoney Creek, Virginia," he said as he turned to her and eyed her with suspicion, his head tilted to one side. "Now come clean, damn it, and tell me who you really are and what you want from me."

The hair on the back of her neck bristled as she heard the anger in his voice. Panic raced through her, as goose bumps broke out on her arms, and dread drowned her ability to think. Despair flooded her mind, her thoughts in turmoil. Her body shuddered when she inhaled. The tears threatened, then spilled over, streaming down her cheeks, unchecked. She couldn't stop them. They were tears of fright, of anger, of disbelief.

How? How could I have gotten from Denver, Colorado, to Stoney Creek, Virginia? Who would want to do this to me and why? Why would anyone want to torture me like this?

Chapter 13

Wyatt sat down on the bed across from Isabella, his face drawn tight, his eyes glittering with anger.

“You have to be honest with me. You need to give me some reason why I should believe anything you say. Why should I trust you or believe you?” he said, as though talking to a small child, firm but gentle.

When he released a long, deep pent-up sigh Isabella realized his waning patience. He didn’t appear to be the sort of man to play games. *Good thing!*

When he looked at her, she felt that he could see through her, into her, read her thoughts, know her feelings. He left her tongue-tied and weak. A no-nonsense kind of man, Wyatt expected a straight and honest answer for a direct question.

Isabella answered with trembling lips, her voice shaking as she tried to get her breath, gulping big swallows of air.

“I’m the victim here, okay? I’ve told you the truth, everything. I’m a second grade teacher, for God’s sake. I’m not out for some ill-gotten money or any notoriety.” She paused, catching her taking a deep breath to relieve some of the anger.

“I live in Cameron Lakes, a suburb of Denver, Colorado. My street address is Thirteen Twenty-one Cameron Lake Dr, Apartment One-oh-one. I work nearby at Lakes Elementary School. Check me out anyway you want. It’s all true,” she shouted, pulling the comforter with her as she stood.

“If all you say is true, how in the world did you get here? How? Why? And who? Why would someone bring you all this way, and for

what purpose?" Wyatt asked, looking down the end of his nose at her, tilting his head backward.

His condescending tone set her off. She lost control of her trying-to-be-stalwart front and started to cry in earnest, choking between sobs. "I've been asking myself the same questions. I don't know why or how or even when I got here, but I swear I'm telling you the truth. I have no reason, no reason at all, to lie to you."

Wyatt examined her face for a few more minutes, and then walked into the bathroom. He came back with a box of tissues and handed them to her.

She looked up at him. "Please, will you help me try to figure this out?" She took the tissues from him and loudly blew her nose. "I swear, on my father's grave, I'm telling you the truth."

He began pacing again, back and forth at the foot of the bed, his fingers strumming on his lips, his eyes looking at the floor in front of his feet, deep in thought.

He turned toward her suddenly, making her jump. "Okay, I'll help you *but* you have to play by my rules. I'm in charge. You follow my directions at all times and all places, no ifs, ands or buts."

She started to protest, but he put up his hand, halting her by giving her a look that said "any objections would not be considered."

"It's the only way I work. Otherwise, I call the cops and I'll let them handle it however they choose. So which is it, them or me?"

She sat on the bed, her arms locked across her chest, her mouth in a pout, thinking of her choices and any alternatives she might have. Did this mean he would help her? *Duh! Not that I have any choice in the matter.* She could always agree with him now, but at the first opportunity, she could make a break for it and be out of here.

Nodding her head in agreement, she said, "Okay, we play by your rules, but only for as long as I like. I control my own life. Nobody else does."

"Fine. I wouldn't have it any other way. First, I think you need to get dressed. I'll see if I can find something for you to wear," he said

as he walked out of the room. She heard him open a door down the hall, open and close a couple of drawers.

He came back into the room carrying some clothes. He laid them on her lap. "These are some of my sister's things. You're both about the same size so they should fit you. Why don't you get dressed while I see what I can rustle up for breakfast?"

Without waiting for a response, he left the room, closing the door behind him.

* * * *

Dave Miller had always been an early riser and had his daily workout finished usually before daylight. He was at the gym when he heard his cell phone ring under the towel he tossed down nearby. He received calls at all hours of the day and night but decided to ignore this one, early Sunday morning, at least until he was done with his workout. He soon heard the beep indicating a new voice message.

After a quick shower, he checked his messages while he dressed. Wyatt had called. *That's odd! I was just thinking about him. I hope he doesn't want to get together to work out. If he does, he's on his own. Ha! Ha!*

He hadn't talked to him in a few days so as soon as he got into his car he dialed Wyatt's cell number. After a lengthy conversation, he backed out of his parking space and set off toward Wyatt's house.

* * * *

Isabella sat on the bed running her hands up and down her arms wrapped around herself seeking comfort, staring straight ahead. She ran her fingers over the clothes in her lap. When she finally looked at the clothes Wyatt had given her to wear, she saw a pair of blue jeans, a pair of not-what-she-wore-at-home sexy-looking bikini underwear and a long-sleeve T-shirt—no bra. She looked through the stack

again, still no bra. She always wore a bra. Always! She needed to confine her large breasts, and she felt more comfortable with less jiggle and wiggle. *Damn these big boobs!*

She walked to the bathroom, tightening the robe around her waist taking the clothes with her. She washed her face, dressed, and returned the robe to the back of the door where she found it. She did a quick perusal of the bathroom to make sure everything was in order, poking around for the clothes she left there during the night to find her worn-out, now-wireless-but-better-than-nothing bra, but she didn't see anything remaining.

She glanced in the mirror and noticed her hair standing up every which way. She wet her hands and ran them through her hair to fluff and straighten where needed. The jeans fit rather well in the waist and hips but needed shortened about two inches so she rolled them up to avoid tripping. The top wouldn't work at all. It fit well enough, a little tight across her breasts, revealing her nipples and the darker areolas through the lightweight fabric.

She held her arms across her chest as she left the bathroom to tidy up the bed. She picked up the pillow when she saw the indentation from Wyatt's head. Sitting on the bed sniffing the pillow, his scent of man and woodsy, exotic cologne sent a chill down her spine, a quickening in her stomach, even lower. Her knees began quivering. Her heart lurched in her chest as if missing a beat. She remembered his scent, his intense heat, as he hid her from her captors, and felt a tingling deep within the pit of her being. Something she had never felt before.

What's wrong with me? These emotions, feelings had never been stirred before, not even with Michael, whom she had planned to marry. She and Michael had known each other since high school. They had hung out with the same group of friends, even though he was about ten years older. While in college, she heard from a mutual friend that Michael traveled often and was even out of the country for a few years.

Shortly after returning to the States from Central America, he had run into her at a coffee bar near the school where she worked. He had made her laugh. They started to see each other on a regular basis, and their relationship soon had become serious. He invited her to move into his townhouse with him. She happily accepted.

They shared all their dreams and lifetime desires. She thought they were in love with each other. A marriage she had dreamed of all her life could be the next step in their relationship.

They'd been happy living together for the first few months, but then Michael changed, taking on an unfamiliar persona she didn't like. Out of the blue, with no notice or discussion with her, he quit his job, which made a hardship for her to support them both on her teaching salary. He started leaving early in the morning and staying out late at night. He stopped talking to her the few hours he was home. When she asked him about this change, "I'm working," was his only explanation, and that "it isn't any of your business." He wouldn't talk to her about his job, telling her very clearly that her responsibilities did not include "keeping tabs on him every minute of the day or night." Paying the bills and servicing all his needs, especially sexually, were what she needed to be concerned about. And it didn't matter whether day or night, tired, in the mood or not. He basically had become a sex addict with perversions beyond her greatest imaginations.

She despaired over what to do, not sure she had the strength to walk away from her lifetime dreams. Then she came home from work *that* night. She remembered it as if it were yesterday.

* * * *

The ringing of the doorbell stirred her from her nightmarish daydream. She tiptoed to the door, opening it just enough to see out. Over the stair railing, she could see Wyatt, who now had on a shirt,

walking toward the door. As he opened the front door, he motioned with his hand for a nice-looking healthy, fit man to come in.

“Hi, Dave, come on in. Coffee’s fresh and hot, just like you like it,” Wyatt said in greeting.

“Good! I can use a cup.”

Dave laughed as they shook hands and patted each other on the back.

“Come on in the kitchen. We can talk there,” Wyatt motioned for Dave to follow him.

Once they reached the kitchen, she could only hear the rumbling of male voices but nothing she could decipher.

She closed the door and sat on the bed wondering who he might be, hoping he wasn’t a cop. Damn! Had Wyatt called the police to have her arrested like he had threatened? They couldn’t help her; they would only muddle everything up. She couldn’t believe it had happened to her herself. *I knew I shouldn’t have trusted him.*

She heard footsteps on the stairs, jumped off the bed, and scurried behind the door.

Wyatt knocked while asking, “Isabella, are you dressed? Breakfast is ready, and I have someone downstairs I’d like you to meet.”

She groaned, gradually moved her hand toward the doorknob. Unlocking and opening the door slightly, she became mesmerized as she looked into his bright blue eyes. As if frozen in time, she couldn’t move.

He grabbed her hand and gently pulled her toward him, breaking the spell. “Come downstairs with me. You need to eat breakfast, and I have someone I want you to meet. I promise it will be worth it.”

She started to back away, trying to find some excuse not to go with him. The strength, power, and masculinity emanating from him both alarmed and thrilled her.

“I don’t have to go anywhere with you. Besides, I don’t have any shoes to wear.” Isabella pouted like a reticent child.

“We made an agreement, remember?”

“But what about shoes? I don’t have any to wear.”

“That’s fine. I usually don’t wear shoes around the house anyway. You need something to eat to build up your strength. Trust me!”

“Trust you? Famous last words! I’m not dressed for any company. I don’t have the proper underwear and you can see through my shirt,” she whined, covering her breasts with her hands.

“I don’t care about that right now. I think I can help you, and we agreed you would follow my rules. This is one of those rules. You can sit at the table and no one will notice. I promise.”

He half-pulled, half-dragged her down the middle set of stairs of this three story house, around the corner, and toward the kitchen.

Chapter 14

As Wyatt followed Isabella into the kitchen, Isabella stopped, hesitating. She examined the room, remembering her hasty journey through it less than eight hours ago. Now with the early morning sunlight streaming in through the large window, the bright and airy room looked like a different place entirely. It felt homey.

A man sat at the table and raised his coffee cup to her in acknowledgement. His tanned complexion, dark hair, and trimmed mustache reminded her of her father. His loose T-shirt, jeans, and smiling green eyes made her relax.

Wyatt picked up the coffee pot in one hand, carrying it to the table while ushering Isabella by the elbow with the other hand. “Sit down and have some breakfast.” Wyatt told Isabella, leading her to the table. “When did you eat last, do you remember?”

She shrugged and shook her head. She had to think. She couldn’t remember eating a meal or much of anything except Pop-Tarts, or protein or granola bars once or twice a day since she had woken up dazed in that wretched room with Joe.

“That’s okay. I have some scrambled eggs and toast ready, and there’s orange juice on the table. You can help yourself. Go ahead while I get you a plate.”

Wyatt retrieved a plate and returned to the table to find Isabella standing in the exact same spot. He motioned for her to sit down at the table before making introductions.

With her arms across her chest, she walked warily around the table to the opposite side from the man and sat down.

“Isabella, I’d like you to meet my best friend, Dave Miller. He and I grew up together, not far from here actually. He is a genuinely true friend, and he knows how to be discreet. He’s accumulated a wealth of information and experience helping people in similar situations as yours. Dave, I’d like you to meet Isabella Donnelly from outside Denver, Colorado.”

“Isabella, it’s very nice to meet you,” Dave replied, his voice soft and comforting.

Isabella, feeling more and more comfortable, nodded at Dave. Wyatt put a plate in front of her heaped with scrambled eggs and toast. When she smelled the eggs, she felt a wave of sickness, and then realized she was famished. She lifted her fork and began to eat. It tasted delicious. She had taken only a few bites before nausea crept through her. She broke out into a cold sweat, tiny beads of moisture appearing on her forehead and upper lip. She put down her fork, wiped her face with a napkin, and tried to take deep breaths in through her nose and out through her mouth until the queasiness subsided.

Wyatt looked at her with concern. “Are you okay? You look kind of pale. Do you need a drink?”

She nodded. “I guess I hadn’t realized how long it’s been since I last ate any real food.”

She added more cream to her already-diluted coffee with sugar while looking at Dave. She caught Wyatt’s concerned look, out of the corner of her eye, as he sat down beside her. A few minutes later, she felt better and began to eat again.

Eating a little more before putting her fork down and pushing her plate away, she folded her hands in front of her on the table.

“Wyatt’s told me a little bit about you and your predicament and I think I can help you,” Dave began. “I’m a detective assigned to the Human Sex Trafficking Task Force.”

Terror gripped her, reached to the very depths of her inner soul. Her heart began pumping, she began shaking, and she swallowed

hard. Her chair scraped the floor as she stood, rushing to leave. Wyatt grasped her arms with his hands, gently pushing her back down into the chair.

“Will you please listen to what he has to say?” Wyatt asked quietly.

“Why should I? I’ve heard enough. I asked you to help me get back to my home, my family, and to leave the police out of it. I can’t trust you, I can’t trust anybody,” Isabella, seething, managed to say through clenched teeth.

“We had a deal. Have you forgotten that already?”

“No, I haven’t forgotten our agreement. But I don’t know how this has anything to do with it.”

“Listen to what he has to say and then decide. It won’t hurt to listen. Where else do you have to go?”

Wyatt looked between Dave and her. When she sat down Dave tried again.

“As I said, I work on the task force for Human Trafficking,” he paused, watching her reaction, “and based on the information Wyatt relayed to me,” he said as he pointed to a number of printed pages spread out on the table, “we have reason to believe you may have been abducted.”

Isabella just stared at Dave and Wyatt in puzzlement. *Duh! Finally you believe me!* She laughed, rolled her eyes in disbelief, and crossed her arms across her chest.

“That’s what I’ve been telling you. They took me. They abducted me. You act like you just solved the great mystery of the Egyptian pyramids.” She paused, waiting for their reaction. Hearing none, she continued. “I don’t even know for sure what ‘human sex trafficking’ is, so how do I know it might have happened to me?” Isabella took another sip of her coffee.

“Isabella, without any identification or evidence, we have no idea who you are or from where you came,” Dave explained.

“Except for what you’ve told Wyatt, of course. It’s pretty clear we have to start at the beginning and reconstruct and verify virtually your entire life. The sooner we do, the sooner we can make plans to get you back where you belong.”

He took a small fingerprint kit out of his briefcase and began to take her fingerprints while explaining they would be entered into a database looking for a match.

“Since schools typically fingerprint anyone and everyone who works within the school system they will be searched within the same database. We’ll probably have a match quickly, and that would be a good thing.”

After putting the fingerprint kit away, he retrieved a small black notebook, directing his attention to Isabella. “You need to tell me everything about yourself in detail, things I can verify.”

“Okay, what do you want to know?”

“Let’s start with personal information like your full name, address, age, date of birth, social security number, parents’ names, home and work addresses, occupation, where and when you graduated from school and college, where you work and how long, your friends, and especially your ‘friend’ Amanda,” Dave answered.

Surprised to hear he knew about Amanda, she assumed Wyatt must have told him. She took a couple of deep breaths, hesitating, knowing she would have to relive the past year, which included moving out of her mom’s house, moving in with Michael, breaking up with Michael, getting her own apartment, and somehow getting abducted to Virginia. None of it seemed real or appealing to her.

Chapter 15

Isabella answered their questions while Wyatt retrieved a yellow legal pad and made notes on it.

“Are you married?” Wyatt interjected among Dave’s questions.

“No.”

“Ever been married?”

“No. Is this relevant?” she asked Dave.

Dave and Wyatt ignored her question and continued asking her about what kind of car she drove, the tag number.

“Okay, how did you come to know Amanda?” Dave asked her.

“I met her at the gym where we’re both members. It’s near the school where I work.”

“How did you become friends with her? Did you approach her or did she approach you?” Wyatt asked.

“Amanda introduced herself to me one day at the gym. Then she invited me for coffee after our workout, so I guess you could say she approached me.”

“When did she first meet you?” Wyatt asked.

“About six months ago. I had recently broken up with my fiancé and needed a friend. I guess I was vulnerable and she won me over.”

“Where did you go for coffee?” Dave asked.

“It’s a local coffee shop with a real trendy name on Ridge Street near the school. I don’t remember the name exactly, but it’s something like Groovy Grounds or something similar.”

“Interesting name. Maybe we can get a video surveillance with a description of Amanda,” Wyatt interjected.

“What’s Amanda’s last name? Maybe she has priors,” Dave asked.

Isabella shrugged her shoulders and shook her head from side to side. “She never actually told me her last name. I just always knew her as Amanda, and I never asked her that I remember.”

“Can you tell us Joe’s full name, if he works and where?”

“Amanda introduced Joe as Joe Sneed but neither of them ever mentioned their jobs. Amanda lives in a beautiful, affluent condo building so she had to work somewhere. She always dressed real nice too.”

“Can you describe them? Did they have any accents or tattoos? Did any of them wear watches? What kind of clothes did they wear?” Wyatt asked her.

“Well, Joe is tall with a handsome face, crooked nose though. He dressed nicely enough in jeans, T-shirt, sports coat, dress shoes. He sometimes pulled his shoulder-length dark brown hair back in a ponytail.

“I didn’t see any tattoos on either Amanda or Joe or any jewelry either. Oh, and Amanda always wore stiletto shoes, always.”

“Where did Amanda live? Do you know her address?” Wyatt asked.

She shrugged and shook her head. After a few more exasperating questions from both Wyatt and Dave with the same response from Isabella, she turned to Wyatt with pleading eyes shaking her head. “Is all this really necessary?”

“In order for us to help you, we have to know anything and everything.” Wyatt responded softly, giving her an I-warned-you glare. “Some of it may seem unimportant right now, but it might lead to some little tidbit we can use later.”

She nodded and addressed Dave. “Okay, but I went through all this with Wyatt last night. It seems like a waste of time, and frankly, I can think of numerous other things we could be doing to get me out of this fix.”

“Like what?” Wyatt asked.

“Like tracking down Joe and Amanda, getting to the park and backtracking to where they held me. The longer we wait, the colder their trail gets.”

“And what do you plan to do when or if you find them?” Wyatt asked.

“Well, I hadn’t gotten that far yet, but at least I would be doing something.”

“They sound like they’re experienced traffickers to me, Isabella.” Dave explained. “They’ve been doing it for a while, too. It happens every single day to young women and children. They start abducting kids as young as ten years old, infiltrating middle schools, befriending a kid, making all kinds of promises of money and easy work. Then they’re abducted and delivered.

“The abductors get paid and start all over again. The abductees are left to serve a lifetime of slavery without their families ever being aware of where they are or if they are dead or alive. And it happens all over the world, more in the United States than most people can imagine.”

“We know you’re anxious to find them and, believe me, we are too.” Wyatt interjected again. “We’ll be doing all you want us to do and much more, only we’ll have more information and a plan ready to implement and apprehend them when we find them. And we *will* find them. Okay? Just try to be a little more patient a bit longer.”

Dave changed the line of questioning. “Tell us about your fiancé, his name, date of birth, where he works, his home and work addresses?”

“Ex-fiancé, please,” she said as she gave him all the pertinent details she could while hanging her head, embarrassed to have been so gullible.

“When did you first meet him?” Wyatt asked.

“We went to the same high school, and even though he was a number of years ahead of me, we hung out with the same kids. He

asked me out on dates but my dad wouldn't allow it. He said Michael was too old for me. Michael would get really mad but then come back the next day asking again."

"Did he have any prior arrests?" Wyatt asked.

"I'm not aware of any arrests," she answered, "but even though I knew him from high school, I didn't keep track of him all the time."

"What does he do for a living?" Wyatt asked.

"Well, I don't really know. When we first started dating, he had just gotten back from Central America. He had been there a number of years, not sure how many."

"What did he do while he was there?" Dave asked.

"I don't know. He never wanted to talk about it, and I didn't press him for answers," Isabella explained.

"What happened then?" Dave asked her.

"What do you mean?"

"What happened between you and Michael?" Dave asked.

"I really don't understand how this could possibly be of any relevance," she retorted snootily.

"Maybe you and Michael had a falling out and he wants revenge. How would you know?" Wyatt asked.

She acquiesced and said, "When I first started dating Michael, he wowed me with kindness, and devotion. He quit his job after I moved in with him, leaving me to figure out how to pay all the bills. He also became very demanding and controlling of who I saw, when I saw them and even what I said to them. And then one day I came home...I left and never looked back."

"Did he threaten you?" Wyatt asked.

"Oh yes. Telling me I owed him, I'd pay, that sort of thing."

"Did he say how you'd pay?" Wyatt asked.

"Of course not. He doesn't have a clue. He was too angry with himself for getting caught and losing his meal ticket," Isabella replied, once again crossing her arms over her chest in a huff.

“After you left, did Michael try to contact you?” Wyatt tapped his pencil on the table.

“Yes, a couple of times. He called and threatened to get me fired from work and thrown out of my apartment. I had to get a restraining order. Then I moved into an apartment building with a security guard. Oh, I also change my phone number to an unlisted number.”

“When did you hear from him last?” Dave asked.

“I haven’t heard from him in months.”

“What about your parents and siblings? Are they still living? If so we’ll need their personal info as well.”

“I only have my mother. My father’s gone, and I don’t have any brothers or sisters.”

“What your mother’s full name and address? We’ll need to check with her and make sure she’s safe,” Wyatt said.

After relaying all the pertinent information to them regarding her mother Isabella asked Dave, “Will you let her know I’m okay? I’m sure she’s frantic with worry about me.”

He looked at her with raised eyebrows, tilting his head to the side. After a minute or so of unspoken words, his implication dawned on her.

“You can’t possibly think my mother had anything to do with this, can you? She loves me. She tries to look out for me. She never liked Michael. We argued about him many times, especially when I moved out of her house and in with him. She told me many times he was trouble. But she’d never do anything to hurt me, ever.”

“Did your mother need any money, or did she recently take out a loan? Maybe receive a large sum of money?”

“No, no, to everything. You’re wrong, way wrong to even think it! It’s absurd! When my father died about ten years ago, he left us both with enough money to live on comfortably for quite some time. I *told* you my mother has nothing to do with this. I think we’re wasting valuable time here.” She stood and walked over to the sink.

“You’re probably right, Isabella, but we need to check out every angle, and of course, we need to make sure your mother isn’t a victim or in any kind of trouble, remember?” Dave asked.

She nodded. “Okay.”

“So, how did you get to Amanda’s house, if you didn’t know her address?” Dave asked.

She explained how she followed her handwritten directions.

“Where did you park your car at Amanda’s? Was it in a residential area? Did you notice any neighbors or anyone outside maybe walking the dog? Do you remember seeing a fire hydrant, a church, or a traffic light, any street signs?” Wyatt asked.

Bombarded with questions by both Wyatt and Dave, she expected them to turn on the bright lights or hook her up to a lie detector machine at any moment.

“What happened next?” Dave asked.

She retold her story in its entirety as she stood with her back leaning against the sink. “I only remember bits and pieces of people, persons, and things after I left Amanda’s.”

Dave and Wyatt looked at each other.

“Do you remember what the date was when you went to Amanda’s house?” Wyatt asked.

“I know it was a Thursday, because I didn’t want to go to Amanda’s house on a weeknight, but it was the only night I didn’t have a department meeting after class. I wanted to get home and get my run in and not have to get up early the next morning. I think it was May fourteenth, because it had been six months to the day since I split from Michael.”

Wyatt took her hand in one of his and turned her face with his other hand, putting his finger on the side of her cheek. When she looked at him, he asked, “Do you know what the date is today?”

She shook her head.

“Today is May twenty-fourth. You’ve been gone over a week.”

She looked at him, aghast, and leaned away from him, her lips trembling and her eyes wide in disbelief. Covering her mouth with her hand and gnawing on her index finger, she tried to blink back the tears forming in her eyes. It didn't work. Rivulets of tears made their way down her cheeks.

Wyatt rubbed his thumb across the top of her hand, while rubbing her back with his other hand. Her trembling lessened in the silence as minutes ticked away.

* * * *

Morning came too soon as it always does after a sleepless night. Amanda got up and headed to the kitchen in search of coffee. She heard Joe's voice and found him talking on his cell phone. When she walked up behind him, he turned away from her, talking more softly into the phone, then clicking the phone closed.

"Joe, I made a decision," Amanda started to say.

Joe shook his head back and forth, waving his coffee cup at her, cutting her off.

"No one but Boss's gonna make any decision 'bout where, what, who, when, or anything. Thought I made that clear last night when I explained all that to you. Now, either we deliver the girl Boss picked out or we can both kiss our sorry asses good-bye right now. We already delivered the blonde girl he wanted, what's her name?"

Amanda answered with anger and fear. "Megan, her name's Megan."

"Yeah that's right, but we also need this brown-haired girl with big tits. I don't know why, but Boss has to have this particular girl, not just any girl, an' that's what he's gonna get. So we need to get back out there in those woods where we last saw her and track her 'til we find her. If she wasn't in the woods or at the big house last night, she might still be at the big three story house. I doubt she woulda

stayed in the woods all night. Girls are scared of the woods and the dark.” He shot Amanda a scornful sneer.

“It wasn’t ‘we’ who lost her, Joe. It was you.” Looking Joe straight in the eye, she continued. “And I told you, I saw her in the big house last night peeking through the curtains.”

“How do you know it was her? It could have been someone who lives there, or a girlfriend or wife just closin’ the curtains.”

“Yeah, well where is she then? We searched those woods pretty good all day yesterday and didn’t find even a clue she *ever* went through there.”

“We hafta start over!” Joe bellowed. “From where she first went into those woods. We look at every broken twig, every path or footprint, and we follow it. We hafta think like her. Sniff her out an’ track her like a dog, and those tracks will lead us to her. That’s what we hafta do. I’m not gonna call Boss again an’ tell him we can’t find her an’ we can’t deliver. He gave us till Tuesday at midnight to get her to Norfolk, so we gotta find her today or it’ll be too late for us.”

Amanda shrieked at Joe, “It’s already too late for me. I want out now. It’s your fault we’re even in this mess, so it’s up to you to find her.”

From the waistband of his droopy pants, Joe pulled his gun, pointed it at her, and said with finality, “We’re both in this together. We started together and we finish together, one way or ‘nother. Let’s get goin’. Just keep your yap shut.”

* * * *

Dave and Wyatt resumed their thorough questioning, each making notes and occasionally conferring with the other.

“Did you smell, hear anything nearby like trains, buses, blinking red lights, or see anything out of the windows of the place you were held?” Wyatt asked.

"I never got the chance to look out the window until I got away, but no, I don't recall any sounds or smells," Isabella answered.

"Do you know what they drugged you with or how they drugged you?" Dave asked.

"Drugged? What do you mean drugged? I didn't realize... I was drugged? Now that I think about it, I must have been. It must have been something in the soda Joe kept making us drink. I guess I kinda thought about it when Wyatt told me earlier this morning I wasn't in Colorado anymore."

"That's the only explanation I can come up with for your lack of memory for over a week. What else could it be?" Dave asked.

Wyatt interrupted him. "Wai-wait. What do you mean 'us'? Were there other women there too?"

"No, not any more. I think I was the only one left. I just don't remember. Joe forced me to drink this awful soda. My mouth was dry. I slept most of the time. I was groggy and everything fuzzy when I woke up. A couple times, I felt a pain in my arm like a pin prick but didn't think much about...Wait! I remember a girl named Megan in the bathroom one day when I walked in, but Joe dragged her out before I got to talk much to her."

Dave and Wyatt glanced at each other when she mentioned the name Megan.

"Can you remember how many days ago you saw Megan?" Dave interrupted her litany of information.

"I think two days, maybe three."

"Why didn't you see her before?"

"She said she stayed on the other side of the house. Wait, wait, they were letting her go, but she didn't know where. That's why she was in the bathroom. Her shower was broken. She screamed for help when Joe dragged her out. I tried to stop him from taking her, but Joe hit me, knocking me to the floor." She touched the side of her face. "I couldn't help her so I ran down the alley between the houses to get help, but Joe caught me."

“Tell us about the house. Can you describe it? How far away from the house is the park?”

“The house looked the same as all the others on both sides of the street. It’s grey with two dark blue doors on the front porch and it’s a couple of blocks from the park, I think. Joe forced me to keep looking at his ugly face by jabbing a gun in my ribs, threatening to shoot me if I looked away.” She grimaced from the memory and reached for her sore ribs.

“How did you get away?” Wyatt asked.

She followed with the explanation and of her excursion through the woods, how she saw the light leading to Wyatt’s house.

“How did you get the door unlocked? I’m assuming Wyatt didn’t have the security system on,” Dave said with a chuckle.

Isabella hung her head inspecting her fingernails, while deliberating how she could tell them. She crossed her arms over her chest.

“I had to use a piece of my bra to get it unlocked,” she whispered as she looked out the window.

Wyatt laughed. “Now I understand. I looked at the lock on the door and found the arc-shaped piece of metal but couldn’t place it. Don’t worry. I secured the door with the deadbolt and made a substantial adjustment to the alarm system,” he said, looking at Dave.

Dave put down his pen and rubbed his eyes.

“Any other questions you can think of, Dave?”

“No, not right now.”

Wyatt looked at Isabella. “I’ve got one more. Did you try to escape any other time?”

Isabella sighed and rolled her eyes as she looked out the window toward the woods.

Good grief, does he think I’m a moron? Of course, I tried to escape.

She told them the memorable details of her futile attempts of escape. “Well, I found myself alone in the room one time and

remembered a small door in the kitchen I had noticed a day or so before. I jumped up from the bed, too fast I guess, because I lost my balance and had to catch myself on the end of the bed to keep from falling. I righted myself, ran the few steps into the kitchen, back to the door with the elevator shaft, really more like a dumbwaiter. The promise of escape increased my flow of adrenaline, I guess, giving me enough courage to do it. I opened the door and crawled out on the platform. Just as I reached for the rope to raise or lower it to the top or bottom floor, a big hand closed over mine. I thought I was finished right then and there.

“Someone grabbed the back of my shirt, then my arm, yanking me back, dragging me roughly across the floor where I was flung onto the bed. I tried to scream, but Joe’s hand closed over my mouth. His hand smelled like cigarettes, beer, and unwashed skin. I gagged. He shoved a bottle of soda into my mouth, forcing me to swallow. It ran down my chin, onto my ripped, dirty T-shirt. Blackness swirled around in my head, soon fading into blissful darkness,” she whispered as she propped her hand on her forehead, avoiding eye contact with them.

“Any other attempts?”

“Well, another time while I was in the bathroom I heard the outside door slam shut. So I opened the bathroom door and peeked out. There was no one there so I ran to the door leading outside and tried to open it, but it wouldn’t budge. Then I tried the open staircase in the one corner of the room. I started up the stairs but they were packed with cases of soda, Pop-Tarts, and granola bars. I began throwing aside anything I could put my hands on. About half the way to the top, I heard someone coming up behind me. I increased my speed, climbing over, stepping on boxes, moving faster and faster.

“Then I felt a hand clasp hold of my ankle. I kicked my foot, in an attempt to break the tight grip the hand had on me. But the hand held on trapping me in place and that’s when I glanced behind me.

“Joe’s big yellow-finger-nailed-hand was wrapped tight around my ankle. He dragged me back down the stairs, and threw me on a bed.

“He told me if I did it again he would get rid of me, he would kill me, and I believed him. Then he forced me to drink a soda. I coughed as he made me swallow and then cowered, cringing away from him. I closed my eyes. All I could think about was finding a way out of there.”

They asked again how she came to arrive at Wyatt’s. She explained, with exasperation, for the third or fourth time, her final escape from Joe leading to her appearance here. She supplied them with the memorable details of her excursion through the woods, explaining how she fell a number of times but got up and continued running until she saw the light from the house. “Even after I got inside the house they came after me. They were relentless.”

After the continual inquiries, an already-exhausted-but-not-ready-to-give-up Isabella had some questions for them.

“So now it’s my turn to ask some questions and get some answers. Can you help me get back to Colorado or not? I don’t have any money with me but I do have some money saved and I promise I’ll pay you back,” Isabella pleaded.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Wyatt answered.

“Why isn’t it a good idea?” a confused Isabella asked. “I don’t understand.”

“I already explained to you how dangerous these people can be. They’re trained, skilled professionals. They do this for a living and know how to search and destroy. Your home is probably the *second* place they’ll look for you. Think about it. If they were able to transport you from Colorado to Virginia, hold you captive under the influence of drugs for over a week, you can bet your annual salary they will try to find you, no matter where you go. You’re worth a lot of money to them, remember. They went to great lengths to get you and keep you. Chances are they’ll try to get to you again. We need to

consider these people very dangerous until we find out more about them,” Dave answered.

Strumming his fingers on his lips while addressing Dave, Wyatt continued. “That’s what they said when they were here looking for her, that she was worth too much money to them to lose her and they had to find her.”

“And right here is probably the *first* place they’ll come looking for her,” Dave said to no one in particular.

The nearby clock ticked away minutes one by one, the only sound in the room.

Chapter 16

Wyatt rubbed his eyes and finally broke the silence. “What do you think?”

Dave thought a moment or two while rubbing the back of his neck with his hand, looking out the large window while Wyatt and Isabella waited with patience for his reply.

“I think we need to verify a few things first, but we should have some answers later today.”

Isabella looked at both of them, then asked one more time, “Why can’t I just go home to my mother’s?”

Dave and Wyatt exchanged glances. Isabella thought for certain that she saw Dave nod to Wyatt.

“Trust me,” Wyatt answered. “We both want nothing more than for you to go home. But it may not be safe there. Your mother may be in danger herself. We’ll be checking that out, so don’t worry.”

“I think you’ll be safe here with Wyatt. His house sits back away from the main street and we’ll add some patrols going by the house. I can take care of that with a phone call to the local PD. But you need to stay in the house at all times, away from the windows. Keep all the doors and windows locked, of course, and don’t let anyone in unless you know them. Wyatt knows the drill, so I don’t really need to say anymore.”

Isabella looked at him with her mouth wide open in awe. She covered her mouth with her hand. “You really think all those precautions are necessary?”

“Absolutely. We can’t be too careful in a situation like this, especially not until we know more about exactly who we’re dealing with,” Wyatt answered with complete assuredness.

Dave gathered up the loose pages, closed his notebook, and got up from the table. He looked from Wyatt to Isabella, who also stood.

“Oh, I have one more thing, Isabella.” He reached into his briefcase and took out the folder with Megan’s picture in it. He pulled the picture out and showed it to her. “Have you ever seen this woman before?”

“Yes, yes, that’s Megan. The girl I met in the bathroom. Joe took her and put her in the van and took her somewhere? You have to find her.”

“We will, Isabella, and with our help, we’ll be able to find her soon,” Wyatt said calmly.

“I’ll be on my way now. Wyatt knows how serious this situation can be, I know it sounds drastic, but please listen to me, this is critical. I’ll be in touch as soon as I have any new information. If you remember anything else, make sure you tell Wyatt. Talk to you soon.”

* * * *

Midmorning, Amanda walked somberly to the van. Since she hadn’t figured out anything to do to get released from this job, she had acquiesced, decided to go along with Joe and finish the job. A no-brainer really, especially since Joe threatened her with a gun. She had to remain optimistic that they would find the girl, make the delivery, get paid, and get the hell out of there.

The van coughed, choked, and smoked all the way to the park as both she and Joe remained silent. Amanda wondered how the van had made it this far and if it would make it back to Colorado. They pulled in and parked in a spot located away from all the other parked cars. Joe turned off the van and looked around the park. There were only a

couple of parents with kids on the gym equipment. Joe glanced at Amanda, then toward the surrounding three sides of wooded area.

“I think we should split up. I’ll go to the left over to the middle and you take the right side over to the middle. Remember to walk real quiet an’ try to sneak up on her. She musta spent the night in there, an’ she’s probably cryin’ and lookin’ for us since she don’t know nobody here. When you find her, you tie her hands to yours, see. Then you drag her or pull her or do whatever you have to do to get her to the edge of the woods. Then wait till I get back to load her up in the van. Gag her if you have to. We don’t want no one hearin’ anything and nosin’ around in our business.”

They looked at each other and then at the woods. Without saying a word, they opened the doors, peered out, and walked their separate ways, each entering the woods at their designated areas.

* * * *

Wyatt followed Dave to the door, and after a lengthy conversation, they said their good-byes. He closed and locked the door, while watching Dave turn and drive out to the street. He used his cell phone to request passport and out-of-country employment information on Michael Terrell.

He closed the blinds in the living room to block out the light as well as the view. He did the same in all the rooms on the main floor. When he came back into the kitchen, he found Isabella sitting at the table staring into the woods. He sat down beside her.

“Is there anything I can get for you? More coffee?”

She shook her head.

After taking a few deep breaths, she said, “I don’t know what to say. I’m so scared, for myself, for my mother, for you for taking this risk. I’m very grateful for everything you’ve done for me. How can I thank you for believing me?”

She shook, and her lips quivered. He put his arm around her shoulders, and she flinched.

“It’s okay. You can relax,” Wyatt whispered. “I think the worst is over.”

Then she leaned toward him letting the tears run down her cheeks onto the front of his shirt.

Wyatt wondered why anyone would want to hurt such a beautiful, caring, and compassionate woman, but he already knew the answer. He became flooded with a range of emotions from anger and fear to hatred and pity—pity for the fools who had done this to her when he found them.

His chest filled with such hostility for the thugs who had done this to her, and his hands clenched, his jaw tensed, his Adam’s apple bobbed as he tried to swallow the bad taste rising in his throat. And he looked forward to finding them and getting them off the street so they would never be able to do this to anyone else again.

His attraction to her and his overwhelming sense to protect her told him he was getting too involved. He didn’t know if he could do his job and be as objective as necessary without a conflict of interest.

He would have to consider assigning the case to Dave. Even though he trusted Dave with his life, Wyatt didn’t like the idea of someone else being responsible for her safety.

He knew there could still be a slight possibility of uncovering a farce, a fabrication from a psychopathic woman, but the information verification would definitely rule out any deception. *Almost certain anyway.*

Chapter 17

Dave's anticipation increased as he made his way out of Wyatt's drive. Already on his cell phone, he requested random patrols surrounding Wyatt's house, the woods and the park.

He called a detective familiar with the area and put a door-to-door canvass out for the house with two blue doors a couple blocks from the park. Since they didn't know in which direction, it would take some time since they would have to cover a large area but he was sure they would find it.

Finding Isabella's abductors, along with any ensuing dangers, remained foremost on his mind. He had a hunch about who might be involved, and if his suspicions were correct, his team had been tracking them for quite some time. They also had an undercover operative within the organization.

Dave also called in a few other favors before he reached the park. Scanning the area with a trained eye, he noticed only a few kids playing on the equipment and parents sitting at a picnic table. Nothing out of the ordinary there.

Driving around the park in his unmarked car, he waved to the parents and they waved back. A bungled-up heap of a van turned into the park as he prepared to pull out onto the street. He watched in his rearview mirror as the van parked in an isolated area. After a minute or so, two adults, a man and a woman, peered out the van's slightly open doors before getting out.

Dave, not born yesterday and suspicious by nature, thought it a little odd—a run-down van at the park, no kids, with a New York

license plate. He wrote down the license plate number and asked one of the area patrolmen to check it out closer.

* * * *

Joe watched as Amanda entered her assigned area of the woods. He had turned to begin combing his area when he heard another vehicle on the gravel of the park's parking lot. He looked in the general direction of the sound and saw a cop car coming to a stop behind the van. He waited and watched to see if it was simply a routine check or if the cop had been tipped off somehow. The cop walked around the van, looking into all the windows.

When he saw the cop look toward the woods in his direction, he instantly got flat on the ground. Boss had given him specific instructions last night to shoot or be shot, whatever it took, to get the girl to him by midnight Tuesday night, and time was soon running out.

Cautiously lifting his head Joe watched the cop look around the park, and then walk back to his car. Joe thought the cop would probably call in the tag number, find out the van was stolen, and impound it, and he wouldn't have any wheels to get to Norfolk or anywhere. And that just wouldn't work for him.

The cop sat in his car while Joe waited and watched. Wondering what was taking so long, Joe decided to stay in the woods. Maybe the cop would leave and he could finish the search. A minute or so later, Joe watched as the cop got out of the car while talking on his radio. He would have to act fast. Soon there would be fifteen cop cars all over the place, maybe with search dogs. He wanted no part of that.

He drew his gun out of the waistband of his drooping pants, wincing as some skin came along with the gun. *Son of a bitch that hurt!* From now on he would have to keep his gun in the back of his pants, where his skin wasn't quite so sensitive.

He held up his gun with both hands, took aim at the cop's head, and pulled the trigger. Bull's-eye!

He ran, low to the ground, looking around for any witnesses, toward the cop, at the ready to shoot again. But he had been accurate on the first shot with a neat bullet hole in the left temple. Joe leaned over the cop. A small amount of blood seeped out and dripped onto the ground. Joe picked up his arms and dragged him the short distance into the woods.

Then he had an idea. Very proud of himself, he imagined a cop would be able to open the door at the big house nearby and maybe even get his foot in the door. Maybe even get to search the house for the girl or get the truth outta the guy there. So why couldn't *he* be the cop and conduct a search for the girl? And since he and the dead cop were about the same size, the plan should work.

He quickly undressed himself and the cop and re-dressed himself in the cop uniform. Without a care in the world, he walked out of the woods expecting to see Amanda at any minute. Out of the left corner of his eye, he thought he caught a slight movement, but when he looked closer, he didn't see anything or anyone. He calmly walked to the cruiser, got in, and drove away.

* * * *

Amanda soon became tired of zigzagging back and forth through the bushes and brambles—too much area to cover. She tried to walk softly, quiet, but every sound she made seemed to echo over and over again. She sat down to catch her breath.

She listened for sounds of anyone else moving around, thinking how great it would be if she were the one to find the girl. But Amanda only heard the slight rustle of the wind in the tree branches and a bird twittering nearby. She wanted Isabella to walk right up to her and beg for help. She shivered and wrapped her arms around herself. They had to find this girl so she could get back to her life.

Tired and worn out, she got up and began her search again. She made a circle in what she perceived to be the middle of the section assigned to her. She had just started making her way back to the van when she heard what sounded to her like a gunshot. She didn't have a gun—but Joe did.

She raced to the edge of the woods, stopped, and looked around, frantically trying to find the source of the loud sound. A quiet early afternoon like today brought little traffic to the street, and no one was at the park. No one around. Not at the picnic table or on the jungle gym.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a movement by the van and noticed a police cruiser parked behind it—Joe leaning over a cop lying nearby on the ground.

Oh my God! Joe shot a police officer! He said no one would get hurt.

In the other jobs she'd worked with him no one got hurt. But no one had ever escaped either, making Joe as desperate as he'd become.

Amanda shrank back to the edge of the woods and sank to the ground behind a tree. Peeking out around the tree, she watched as Joe dragged the cop into the nearby woods. A few minutes later, she looked over to where Joe had gone into the woods. Now she saw a cop walking out. Joe hadn't shot him after all. The cop walked over to the police car, got in, backed out, and onto the street.

What happened to Joe?

* * * *

Joe thought he would make a respectful neighborly patrol visit to fancy big house just in case the girl was hiding there. He figured there would be extra patrols in the area anyway. But he knew he needed the neat appearance of a cop, which meant shaving and fixing his hair, so he drove back to the house for a quick makeover.

* * * *

Amanda shook her head, clearing her vision. Leaning on a tree, she sank to the ground trying to absorb everything she had just witnessed.

She'd better go see if Joe was okay. She alternated between walking and running to the spot where she saw Joe drag the cop into the woods, her eyes darting around in search any movement anywhere. She scanned the area, and then entered the woods where Joe had dragged the cop.

"Holy shit!" She turned in circles, covering her mouth. "He's lost it. He's gone nuts."

This guy wasn't Joe. It was another man in his underwear. Joe must have changed clothes with the cop and that was who she had seen get into the car. Joe dressed as a cop. He shot a police officer, a cop. No one, no one, especially a cop, was supposed to get hurt.

"This is bad, real bad, and I don't want nothin' to do with it. I hav'ta get out of here and right now," Amanda muttered herself.

She ran back toward the van only to find the van doors locked and, of course, the keys gone. She glanced around, saw no one, picked up a rock, and hurled it into the back-door window. Punching in the pieces of glass, she reached in and opened the door. She grabbed her purse and backpack and slammed the door closed. She watched for any sign of Joe's return or anyone else who may have heard the glass breaking or the door slamming. She didn't see anyone so she took off running toward the house.

As Amanda got closer to the house she saw an empty police car sitting outside. Joe must be there and inside. She thought a few minutes and then took off walking briskly toward the interstate. She had hitchhiked before and probably would again. Right now, she wanted to get back to Denver and head to parts unknown. She would change her name and appearance so Boss or Joe wouldn't be able to find her.

She jogged along the streets. Any time a car passed by she ducked behind whatever was nearby poles, bushes, Dumpsters, sheds, or parked cars. She feared Joe or someone Boss sent would come looking for her when there was nowhere to hide.

* * * *

Joe parked the stolen cop car in front of the house and went inside. He shaved his entire face and smoothed back his hair enough to hide under the hat. When he felt he would pass muster for a police officer he walked back to the park on foot, taking some back streets.

Chapter 18

Wyatt got up from the table and started to clear the breakfast dishes, stacking them in the sink, while Isabella watched him a few seconds before helping him finish up. She stood beside him at the sink, leaning her back against the counter while sipping the last of her coffee. She glanced around the room.

“You know, I never would have thought this to be your kitchen. It’s beautiful, don’t get me wrong. Very homey and efficient, but it just, just doesn’t seem like you.”

Wyatt looked around the room at the print border with matching valances and fabric covered doors. “I don’t really care that much about anything else in here except the huge bay window facing outside. When I’m in this room all I see is the picturesque wooded outdoors. My sister, Amy, wanted to decorate it for me, and I let her do what she wanted with one stipulation. She had to leave the window alone and uncovered. I love the woods and wide-open spaces.

“Speaking of the big windows facing the woods,” he cleared his throat, “we’re sitting targets for your abductors. And as much as I love the view, I want us both to be safe, so we need to limit the amount of time we spend in here, especially you. And we better start right now, so I’ll finish up here and meet you downstairs. We can read the Sunday paper in the family room unless you have something else in mind you’d like to do?”

He feasted on her face, settled on her eyes, and licked his lips involuntarily. She stared at him a few seconds, fear crossed her face, replaced with confusion and doubt, not sure exactly what he meant by “something else.” He could see her wariness of him.

He tried to cover for his thoughtlessness. “Well, we can watch TV, maybe find a good movie. I have a pretty good selection of movies as well as books to choose from if you’d like to read something a little deeper or more soul-searching than the local news in the paper.”

Relief covered her face, and her tense lips and shoulders relaxed. She followed his eyes to her chest. Her nipples pierced through the thin fabric of the light shirt as if reporting the weather. In one smooth movement, she raised her arms across her breasts.

“No, no, the paper is just fine.” She turned, fleeing to the sanctuary of the family room downstairs.

Wyatt could have kicked himself. He should have kicked himself. Here is a gorgeous young woman, completely defenseless, in the midst of a traumatic experience, a crisis. Stripped of her identity and all he can think about is how much he wanted to feel her soft breasts in his hands, to lick her nipples until they became hard and erect. He pushed away from the sink when he realized he had become hard. He needed a cold shower before he joined her to read the paper.

Chapter 19

Dave answered his cell phone as he sat down at his desk. Detective Tim Hayes had run a background check on Michael Terrell through the national database and found a hit. Aha! Michael had a rap sheet including a couple arrests for money laundering and numerous offenses for soliciting prostitution. He also had an affiliation with some tough guys.

“Who?”

“Steve Spikerelli, aka Spike from Denver, but word is he left a month or so ago. I think you were there, right, Dave?”

“Can you get a current location on both Terrell and Spike?”

“I’m working on it. I also sent a teletype to Denver PD to check for the girl’s car and on her mother, Anna Donnelly. No word so far, but I’ll get back to you whenever I have more info,” Tim said and hung up the phone.

Dave closed his phone and rocked back in his chair, trying to put all the information he had gathered in his head. Some pieces of the puzzle were still missing, which left him perplexed and more convinced than ever that he needed to solve the case.

He wondered if Isabella had told them the truth and everything she remembered. He liked her, her spirit, and Wyatt’s reaction to her. He wanted her to be truthful, as opposed to being an extremely good actor, or possibly a very sick young woman, so he could help her. He wanted to believe her. He just needed to prove it—to be really one hundred percent positive.

He needed to be able to protect Wyatt and to cover his back, like Wyatt had covered his so many times in the past. Wyatt was a

wealthy businessman and land developer. He could easily have been set up for ransom, and Dave was certain Wyatt and his father had made some enemies throughout the growth of the business and their careers.

Dave reminisced about when he and Wyatt had first worked together. Those were the good ol' days. They had been best friends since grade school, then partners on the local police force doing what they wanted to do, fighting crime—until they made the bust on the prostitution ring during which Wyatt's fiancée, Rachael, had died in the line of duty. After that incident, Wyatt had remained his close friend but only worked a few special cases.

He knew Wyatt so well. He burned the candle at both ends. He got little sleep or rest, always busy until late every night and up early every morning. After Wyatt's parents died, he had picked up the pieces of his father's business, had made it bigger, better, and more prosperous than ever before. He owned property and malls all over the country, but he never forgot to give back to the community.

Dave shook his head, picked up his notebook, and reviewed his notes. He would have to remain as objective as possible throughout this investigation. He started making note cards and putting them on his work board—searching for the connection he was determined to find somewhere.

Chapter 20

Isabella took her time going down the stairs, peering over the banister viewing the family room. Wyatt's open laptop with a blank screen sat in the middle of the large desk immediately to her left at the bottom at the stairs. She knew she shouldn't touch it, but like a kid in a candy store she couldn't resist. She reached out and touched the space bar on the keyboard. The screen lit up. Her eyes grew larger as she saw her name, a picture ID, current home address, and all her pertinent information right there in front of her.

Oh my God! He knew. He's known since earlier this morning anyway. All the printed pages on the table, that's what they were—my identity.

After all the questioning Wyatt and Dave had put her through and they had known all along. He had already verified her name and identification on some special database he had access. *So much for unlisted phone numbers and privacy.* She quickly closed the laptop.

Sitting on the desk beside the laptop, she noticed an ornate polished gold frame. Wyatt and a beautiful young woman looked out at her from inside, their arms wrapped around each other, each smiling into the camera. She picked up the picture and studied it closer. Wyatt's smile in the picture made his face light up, and he appeared soft, even loveable. Not the rough and hardened man she saw this morning during the questioning episode. She wondered if the woman was a wife, or girlfriend, maybe a past lover, and about what would it take to get his face to light up like that when he looked at her.

He stood beside her before she had even heard his footsteps on the stairs. She stuttered, "Is-is this picture of your wife?"

While gently touching the picture she had forgotten she still held in her hands, Wyatt looked at her soft face.

"No, no wife. That's my sister, Amy. She lives in New York."

She looked down at his hand touching hers. Fire flamed across her fingers where his touched hers. She looked into his face, saw his eyes searching hers. His eyes became a darker blue, showing an almost undeniable hunger. She felt a tingling in the pit of her stomach, something she hadn't felt before, and knew she didn't want it to go away. Her heart stirred, and her knees trembled. She couldn't think. She felt giddy and scared. She took a ragged breath as she felt her face redden in a blush.

* * * *

Wyatt looked into her eyes and felt he could see her very soul. He saw sadness but also passion and wariness. She *should* be wary considering how she's been treated by men. He wanted her to trust him. He wanted her to want him. He wanted her.

What? I hope I didn't say that out loud. Please tell me I didn't say that out loud.

He felt his pants tighten as most of the blood in every part of his body flowed to his erection.

The shrill ringing of the phone brought him back to the present. He took the picture from her hands, his hand gentle but firm. He glanced around for the phone. It had been right beside his laptop, but he couldn't find it, his eyes still locked on hers. She remained standing, her hands outstretched as if still holding the framed photograph.

"I-I better get that. It, it might be Dave with some news." He turned to put down the picture and searched in earnest for the phone.

Wyatt spoke in the phone. "Everything's fine. I just need some downtime. I want to spend some non-thinking time in front of the tube... Okay, talk to you soon... Love you too. Bye!"

While talking to his sister, Wyatt watched Isabella walk across the room, and found it hard to concentrate on his sister's words. He heard something about flying down for the day.

He wanted to be alone with Isabella to get to know her better, much better. He saw her looking out at the patio and then toward the woods, probably looking for whomever may be out there looking for her. The hair on the back of his neck stood on end imagining her danger.

Hanging up the phone, he crossed the room and reached Isabella in three strides. "Move back." He put his hands on her shoulders and gently moved her away while picking up a remote on the table at the end of the couch. After touching a button, the blinds closed, dimming the light in the room.

"Why did you do that?"

"Think about it. If you can see the woods from here, then whoever may be in the woods can see you, right? Do you want to be seen?"

"No, of course not. This is awful!" She wrapped her arms around herself, rubbing her arms. "I'm trapped again and not even able to look out a window. I just spent more than a week of my life in the same place. Standing still."

Wyatt chuckled. "But I bet the company wasn't as good-looking as I am." When she didn't respond, he continued. "And the accommodations weren't as nice either."

She looked at him a moment and then smiled. "Yeah, you're right, I'm sorry."

When he saw her smile, he coughed, losing his breath. "You have a very pretty smile! You should do it more often."

* * * *

Isabella felt a goofy rush to her head, embarrassed. She didn't quite know how to react or what to say about a compliment from a man like him. Most men seemed to have one thing on their minds: how to get in her pants.

She finally said, "Thank you if you meant that as a compliment, but no thanks if you're trying to get me into your bed like most other men."

Wyatt's eyes turned as dark as flint as he became acutely aware of her.

She tensed under his scrutiny, and her senses became heightened.

"Listen, honey, I've had lots of women and have never been forced to give a compliment to any one of them to get anything I've wanted. Sex, sleeping together, making love, whatever you want to call it has always been and will always be something a man and a woman mutually agree on. And most important, and get this straight, I'm not like 'most other men.' I don't believe a woman 'belongs' to anyone except herself and let's just leave it at that."

Isabella ran her hand through her hair while watching him. She moved to sit at the other end of the couch farthest away from him. *Just so we're both straight on that subject*, she thought to herself while she watched him fumble around with the newspaper. Finality. The conversation had ended.

* * * *

Wyatt walked over to the desk, picked up the paper, and settled into the recliner. Fuming and fussing, he shook the paper open. *Sure I have flaws, but I'm also a man. A very capable and considerate man.*

He leafed through the sections of newspaper until he found the business section. He put the rest of the paper down on the couch and started reading. He had been interviewed a few weeks ago about the growth of his company and about how he had been able to employ many men and women of the community who otherwise would be

unemployed. He was anxious to see what really ended up in print. He found the article and had settled down to read it when the doorbell rang.

When the doorbell rang, Isabella inhaled an audibly ragged breath. He put a finger to his mouth indicating not to talk and whispered, "Stay here, I'll see who it is."

He started up the stairs with frequent glances back at her. Taking two stairs at a time, Wyatt quickly reached the front door. He peeked out the side door curtains but couldn't see very much other than a police car was parked in the circular drive at the front of the house. He retrieved his .38-caliber snub-nose pistol from his ankle and stuck it into the back waistband of his jeans, turned to the front door, and opened it with caution.

"Good morning, Officer. Can I help you?" Wyatt asked.

"Good morning, sir," the officer said while trying to look past Wyatt. "Just wanted to come by this morning and make sure everything is okay."

"It's a beautiful day, isn't it? There are probably lots of people out and about playing, picnicking at the park, right?"

The officer looked Wyatt up and down. "Yeah, I just came from there. Nice weather like today you want to enjoy the great outdoors."

Wyatt thought the officer at the door looked familiar, but he didn't recognize him. He studied his badge and memorized his number while they talked. "It sure does. Thanks for coming by."

"You have a good day now," the officer said as he turned to walk to the car.

Wyatt closed and locked the front door, then found a loose piece of paper and pen in the table drawer in the foyer. He wrote down the badge number he had committed to memory and thought it odd the officer didn't introduce himself. Maybe Dave had been too vague about the reason for the extra patrols and a rookie, wanting to gain some extra points, thought he needed to go the extra mile by making a

personal appearance. Anyway, he would check with Dave when he called later.

He watched through the small slit in the dining room blinds as the patrol car drove down the driveway to the street. He saw the guy look into the woods, first one side and then the other.

Wyatt found a trembling Isabella sitting on the edge of the couch when he returned to the family room. She had a wild, desperate look on her face, and his heart stirred, his chest tightened.

He crossed the room to the couch and sat down beside her. He didn't know what to say or do. He spoke softly to her as if to a small child. His mind was clouded by questions without answers.

* * * *

When Joe got back to the park, he saw someone had broken the back door window. He didn't notice anything missing as he glanced inside, so he pulled the keys from his pocket, unlocked the door, and left.

He drove to a chop shop he had found late last night. The owner had shown an interest in some of the van parts, and he needed the extra bucks the owner would be willing to pay him for them.

Chapter 21

“Everything’s fine. You’re safe and don’t have to worry about anything. It was just a patrolman making his rounds, making sure we’re safe. Dave said he would ask for extra patrols, remember?”

She looked up at him. His eyes full of understanding and compassion caused her to feel dizzy. Her eyes filled with tears. She tried to blink them back but they streamed down her cheeks.

Wyatt reached up and wiped a tear from the side of her cheek. She reached for his hand and stared into his eyes. He was so strong and street-wise, making her feel pampered and protected. He could be her knight in shining armor, but could she trust him to protect her from himself? Her chest tightened with strangling emotions as she searched his face.

He lowered his mouth to hers, gently touching her lips with his. She couldn’t have been prepared for the onslaught of emotions racing through her by the consequences of being kissed by him. Her breath flew from her lungs as his mouth devoured hers. She shuddered at the razor-sharp jolt of awareness exploding through her. Her insides became knotted with emotions she knew nothing about, had never experienced before.

Incapable of thinking, let alone remembering her name or where she was, she returned his kiss, running her fingers through his thick, dark hair. It felt so soft, just like his lips, except they were so hot. She moaned when he deepened the kiss, running his tongue along her lips, into her mouth.

She pulled him closer to her with her hands on his shoulders. He wrapped both his arms around her closing her within his heated

cocoon. He ran his hands up and down her back, moving along her side to her front, and reached for her breast. He rubbed the nipple back and forth with his fingertips and it quickly became aroused and erect.

Isabella felt on fire, heat flaming from the top of her head to the tips of her toes. She trembled, and her breathing was uneven. Wyatt's hands and lips touched her, leaving a trail of burning embers everywhere on her already-too-hot skin. His hands were in her hair, caressing her neck, shoulders, up her back and her breasts. Her breasts were already sensitive from when he had squeezed her nipple, and she became overwhelmed with pleasure. Isabella quivered and moaned.

When he began pushing up her top, she grabbed his hands. "No, don't, don't, stop. This is wrong. We can't do this. It's not right."

Wyatt looked at her and held up his hands, palms open, to her. "You're right. You're right. I'm sorry." He moved back to the other side of the couch and picked up the paper.

Isabella wrapped her arms around herself, trying to gain back the warmth that had just left her feeling barren, empty. Her heart pounded in her ears, thumped in her chest, her breathing heavy and erratic.

The room was quiet except for the crinkling of newspaper.

Chapter 22

Isabella couldn't concentrate on reading the newspaper. In her mind, she kept replaying how Wyatt's lips felt on hers. She shook her head to clear it of those unwanted thoughts and put the paper aside. Wyatt was looking very comfortable, relaxing in the recliner with his feet propped up.

Isabella cleared her throat. "What's she like?"

Wyatt looked up from the paper. "Who?"

"Your girlfriend. That's who you were talking to on the phone, right?"

Wyatt laughed and shook his head. "No, not my girlfriend. It was my sister, Amy. She wanted to come and visit for the day."

"Oh, does she come here often?" She looked down at her hardened nipples showing through the fabric of her shirt and crossed her arms to cover them.

"Not often enough. I wish we could spend more time together. Amy sometimes flies down from New York to spend a day with me."

"Well, what's she like? What does she do for a living?"

"We're very close as far as siblings go. I miss spending time with her very much. Growing up, the four of us were inseparable especially as teenagers." When he saw her eyebrows rise in confusion, he continued. "Dave, his brother Dan, Amy, and me. 'See one of us; see all four of us,' neighbors often said since we were always together. Amy used to be such a tomboy and the only girl we allowed in our tree house. That is until Amy grew up—overnight it seemed—from a long-legged, gangly teenager into a beautiful, shapely young woman and a very independent, astute businesswoman."

“Dave and I chided her endlessly about the clothes she wore, but especially about who she dated. She finally gave us an ultimatum. We had to find someone we approved of for her to date within forty-eight hours or we would never say another word about her dates again. We agreed, foolishly thinking we could do better than she could, and of course, we couldn’t deliver. We didn’t think anyone in the world would be good enough for her.

“Then, after our parents died, Amy about lost it. She was overwhelmed with grief as you might expect. Amy and I wondered how we would be able to get on with our lives without our parents. But they had raised us well, teaching us self-confidence and independence. We were able to find comfort and consolation in each other, and relied on each other and good friends like Dave and Dan. Together, we provided each other with the necessary support we needed at that time in our lives. That support system saved us again when Dan was killed in Iraq. Dave and his family were devastated. And Amy and I were there to help them through the grief process.

“Amy finally took the money left to her by our parents and became a shrewd businesswoman. She invested it in a boutique of specialty hand-crafted vintage jewelry. One boutique quickly turned into numerous stores up and down along the East Coast. I’ve always been proud of her and her success. And I miss her all the time, too, very much.”

“You’re very lucky to have a sister and great friends like the Millers. Since I’m an only child, my mother is more like a sister to me, so we’re very close as well.” Feeling the need to change the subject, Isabella asked, “How long have you lived here, in this house?”

“Let’s see. I bought the property about five years ago, and it took about two years to build.”

“I love all the natural light from the large doors and windows in every room. Did you design it yourself?”

“Thanks, but no I didn’t personally design it. A friend of mine drew up the plans and allowed me to add a lot of personal changes to fit my wants and needs, and he included them in the end result. I think it came out very nice. It’s kind of big for one person, but I like it. I can spread out and not worry about any mess.”

“Do you like children? Michael”—she paused—“he hated kids, and he never wanted any. And my whole life has been centered on kids and their education. Sometimes I don’t know what I ever saw in him. My mother is a much better judge of people than I am,” Isabella said, wondering where all that had come from.

Wyatt took a moment and studied her. “I know exactly what you mean,” he replied. “I thought I was in love with someone. We were even engaged. But then after”—he faltered—“after she died, I found out she wasn’t who I thought she was. She had become a complete stranger.”

“How long ago did that happen?”

“About five years, around the same time I bought this land and decided to settle down, I guess.”

When he didn’t say anything further, she didn’t press him. If he didn’t want to talk about it, he didn’t want to talk about it. Isabella thought it best to change the subject.

“What about kids?” She waited for an answer this time.

“I enjoy kids, want my own someday. I had a great childhood, and I think I can provide a good and safe environment for children. Part of the reason I developed the park. Many of the kids in town had no place to go to play ball or swing, holler, and let loose.”

They talked comfortably like old friends catching up. He told her about some of the clowning around the “foursome” had done in their younger years and about some of the things they tried to get away with and how they always seemed to end up getting caught.

She told him about her students and some of their funny antics during one of their field trips to a petting zoo and what a great experience for all of them, including herself.

The ringing of the phone interrupted their conversation. Wyatt picked it up from the table beside him and said, "Hello."

Chapter 23

On the other end of the line, Dave talked and Wyatt listened for a minute or two. Dave gave him the update on the pursuit of Terrell and Spike's location. He explained it appeared to be a kidnapping by Spike's gang, for an unknown reason. Isabella definitely needed protection.

Wyatt looked at Isabella while listening to Dave and wondered how much he should tell her, if anything at all. The less she knew, the better off she may be.

"I have everything under control here and you know where to find me if things go bad."

"Wyatt, this isn't like a normal job. I saw how you look at her. I don't think you can be as detached emotionally in this investigation as you would like to be. I think you have a definite conflict of interest. You need to really think this through and listen to reason, man."

Wyatt responded by changing the subject. "A patrol guy gave me the VIP treatment this morning with a personal visit to the front door. What's that all about?"

"Don't know. Did you get a badge number?"

Wyatt recited the number to Dave.

"Hold on a minute."

A short time later, a confused Dave came back on the line. "Badge number belongs to Wayne Richards. Remember we worked with him for a while."

"I remember him. I just saw him with his family the other day. The guy at the door definitely wasn't him. I would have recognized him and invited him in for coffee or something."

“He hasn’t returned from duty yet and I understand he’s a little late reporting in. Let me check it out further and get back to you. Remember what I said, Wyatt, and think about it,” Dave said once more before hanging up the phone.

Wyatt found Isabella, shaking, wringing her hands again with a wild, desperate look on her face and her eyes filled with fear and insecurity.

“Dave just wanted to go over some of the information we gave him earlier, make sure he understood it correctly. How about some lunch? I make a mean chicken salad sandwich.”

“I’m not really hungry. I really need to visit the bathroom if you can point me in the right direction.”

Wyatt stood and walked to the bottom of the stairs, motioning for her to follow. He flipped a switch on the wall while taking two steps at a time up the stairs.

“Bathroom’s right there on the left. I’ll get something to eat and be right back. Don’t forget, stay away from the windows.”

Isabella looked at him putting her fisted hands on her hips and drawing her lips tight, probably hating to be told what to do.

Wyatt indicated the room she entered was a bathroom. A full-size tub, separate shower, huge double sink vanity with granite countertop, and marble floors filled the massive space.

Wyatt came down the stairs, and turned to meet her at the bottom.

He walked her to a large room, a game room of sorts. Definitely a man’s room. A large pool table sat in the middle with a juke box on the end wall along with a rack containing cue sticks. A glass front refrigerator with a wide selection of beer sat beside the jukebox. She heard Wyatt’s footsteps on the stairs.

He carried two plates, one on top of the other with a bag of grapes in his other hand. He handed her the grapes, walked to the couch, and put the plates down on the trunk. He turned around and realized she still stood at the bottom of the stairs holding the grapes in her hand.

He motioned for her to follow. She took the plate he handed her, muttered a subdued, “Thanks,” as he walked toward the kitchen and opened the fridge.

“Soda, water, or beer; what’s your preference?”

“Water, please. I’ve had enough soda for my entire lifetime.”

He grabbed two bottles of water from the fridge and reached into another door for some chips. He returned to the couch, sat, and started to eat.

They ate in silence. Since Isabella hadn’t been able to eat much of her breakfast, she quickly consumed half her sandwich. Wyatt, deep in thought about all the facts Dave had relayed to him, tried to put it all together to formulate a plan. And then the phone rang.

Isabella jumped, startled by the shrill sound in the otherwise silent house.

Wyatt was talking on the phone.

“No problem, Matt. I understand how things come up at the last minute, but you’ll need to call Robert in Denver and reschedule. Something’s come up here I need to handle personally”—he glanced at Isabella—“so I won’t be able to cover for you this time.”

Isabella had stopped eating, and was watching him with apprehension from the edge of her seat on the couch.

Wyatt noticed her apprehension and realized she was waiting for an explanation. “Matthew, my manager, needs to reschedule a Monday morning meeting in Denver. Some sort of family emergency came up. He and I work closely together, and sometimes I cover meetings for him when he’s overbooked, like now. It’s nothing for you to worry about.”

Wyatt clicked the off button on the phone but continued to hold it in his hand, rethinking his conversation with Matt. He trusted him explicitly but found himself curious about what his “family emergency” might be. In all the time he’d worked with Matt, he’d never heard him mention any family or known him to reschedule any meetings. Odd, since he suddenly couldn’t “make” a Denver meeting

when Isabella had just come from Denver. He worked hard, was always on top of his game.

Wyatt had done a simple background check on him before hiring him, and now he thought he needed to take a closer look at the results, make sure everything appeared as it should and he hadn't missed anything. Isabella stuttered and brought Wyatt out of his revelry.

"I-I-I heard Denver and my mind just went berserk, thinking of my mother, my job, my whole life there, or was there. Now I don't know where anything is, and it crossed my mind it might have something to do with me."

Wyatt looked at her thoughtfully as his mind tried to absorb her important words.

Chapter 24

When his cell phone rang, Dave had just taken a big bite out of an apple while putting sugar in his fifth or more cup—he'd already lost count—of coffee for the day. He really needed to cut down on the caffeine. After answering and listening for a moment, he said, "I'm on my way."

He closed his cell phone. Having lost his appetite he threw his apple in the trash, grabbed his jacket, and sprinted toward his car.

Only a couple minutes away from the crime scene, he could already hear sirens of fellow police officers on the way. There would be a big showing, especially since this crime involved one of their own.

Dave arrived at the park in a matter of minutes, coming to a screeching halt. Vince Evans and Mark Foster, both homicide detectives, stood outside, away from the large area of the parking lot and woods cordoned off and secured with yellow crime tape. He could see one or two people from the crime scene lab inside the area, a flash every now and then from the photos being taken. Dave got out of his car and walked over to join Foster and Evans.

"Hey, man. You're not gonna believe this," Evans said.

"Why?"

"It's Richards. Detective Wayne Richards. You worked with him, right?"

Dave's shoulders slumped, and he hung his head. He took a deep breath and two steps backward. He and Wyatt both had worked with him in Vice. They both knew him well. Richards had shocked them all when he put in for a transfer. Married with two small, adorable

children, Richards thought he had seen too much undercover and needed to change back into the uniform, thinking it would allow him more time with his family, that it would be his dream job. And Richards, now a patrolman, had stopped at the park at Dave's personal request.

Dave rubbed his eyes that had, for some reason, filled with some sort of water element. "What happened?"

Evans replied somberly. "While on patrol he called in a stolen vehicle that appeared abandoned. Didn't hear anymore from him so we did a search, got a Code 4 response. And then no more responses, so we checked out his last location and found blood leading into the woods over there."

He pointed to where Dave saw the coroner entering the woods. Dave quickly headed in the same direction with Evans following a short distance behind.

The crime scene was clear now except for a couple of forensics officers and the coroner, the surrounding atmosphere somber as many other officers arrived along with the chief.

"You'll be notified of any new information as it comes along. Only those authorized or directly involved in the investigation are allowed to stay," Chief Orrin explicitly ordered, directing everybody back to their duties.

Forensics took photos, many, many photos, of everything: footprints, tree scrapings, blood stained grass, and of course, the body, and the gunshot wound.

The coroner did his job while Dave waited patiently nearby. He had worked a number of cases with him and had known him well. Dave knew him to be a straight shooter and approached him to get a straight answer when he stood ready to leave.

"Can you give me a time of death, Doc?"

Doc answered vaguely, "Probably a few hours ago but I'll know something more definitive once more tests are conducted."

“Thanks. You’re the best, but we both know you can do better than that. It’s vital that I get a better estimate now. I really need to know,” Dave implored. “It involves another case of human trafficking and a young woman’s life is at stake.”

Doc scrutinized Dave, then shook his head and finally said, “Based on the temperature of the body,” he rubbed the back of his neck, “my better guess would be between ten and eleven this morning.”

Dave looked at his watch and slapped Doc on the back shoulder. “Thanks. I really appreciate it. Please keep me posted with any new information.” Dave turned and hurried to his car.

He leaned his head on his hands on the steering wheel. He tried to make some logical understanding out of a senseless death. According to Doc, Richards died about the same time a patrolman had visited Wyatt wearing his badge. Now that he knew the connection, he just had to prove it—and find the goddamn murderer.

Dave called again and spoke in short and abrupt bursts with Wyatt.

“I’m on my way over. We need to talk about some new developments you both need to know about and I think you should hear it in person.”

Trying to maintain a sense of calm and humor for Isabella’s sake, Wyatt asked, “We’re having sandwiches. Do you want to join us?”

“No, thanks. Unfortunately, I’ve lost my appetite. You better eat up now because after I tell you what I just found out you won’t be hungry either. I can guarantee it. I’ll be there shortly. Bye.” And he hung up the phone.

Dave’s cell phone rang before he had time to put the car in reverse.

“Hi Dave, you sittin’ down?” It was Tim who worked on background searches.

“Why, what’d you find out?”

“Well, a couple things. First, there’s no missing persons report filed on Isabella Donnelly. Second, our operative tells me Spike is just outside your back door in Norfolk. And no info back on Terrell yet, but I’m still working on it.”

“Thanks for the info, Tim. Let me know as soon as you find out anything.” Sighing heavily, Dave closed his phone.

Chapter 25

Wyatt tried to take a couple more bites of his sandwich, but his desire for food waned. His mouth tasted of dry anxiety. He looked sideways at Isabella, who was sitting staring straight ahead and not eating either.

He moved to sit beside her. He was trying to think of something consoling to say to her when she suddenly wrapped her arms around him.

“Something terrible happened, didn’t it?” she said through quivering lips.

Taken aback by her change in behavior, Wyatt tightened his arms around her, gently pulling her back toward him. He could get used to feeling her in his protective arms.

“We don’t know for sure yet. Dave’s on his way here to fill us in. Listen, you already made it through a tough time with your abductors and you’ll make it through this too. You’re stronger than you think.”

He looked in her eyes, lifted a finger to brush away a tear on her cheek. So vulnerable, he thought. He truly loved the feel of her in his arms, and when they’d kissed earlier, he’d almost lost control.

He lowered his lips to her welcoming mouth. Her lips moved beneath his, kissing him back. His heart rate spiked, a sudden kick in his chest thudding vigorously down to his groin. He put his tongue into her hot open mouth, his lips absorbing her like a sponge, while her hands caressed his neck, moving in and out of his hair.

Pushing her down onto the couch, he nibbled on her ear and kissed her neck. Neither heard the sound of a doorbell in the distance. Their hearing dulled, so engrossed with each other’s scents and tastes.

The ringing doorbell, now accompanied by heavy banging, got their attention and simultaneously they realized it came from the front door. They pulled apart and sat up.

“It’s probably Dave, but stay here while I check. I’ll be right back.”

Wyatt walked up the stairs, taking two at a time. He quickly looked out the window and recognized Dave’s unmarked car in the driveway. He saw the look on Dave’s face and knew immediately that something terrible had happened. He opened the door and a somber Dave entered. They talked in the foyer before turning to go downstairs.

When Dave and Wyatt returned to the family room, Wyatt noticed Isabella had piled up the sections of the newspaper. Dave nodded to her and sat on one side of the couch while Wyatt crossed the room to sit down with Isabella as they waited for the bad news they knew would come.

Chapter 26

Dave looked at them, saw Isabella's swollen, pink lips. He also noticed how comfortable they seemed to be together. He wondered if their bond would be broken with what he had to tell them. He cleared his throat and took a couple deep breaths. He didn't know any other way to tell them what he had learned except to just say it, put it out there in front of them straight up. He ran his hand through his hair and rubbed the back of his tired neck while looking in his lap. And began.

"First of all, we found some interesting information out about Michael. He was arrested a few years ago on various charges including fraud. He's also known to have affiliations with a gangster named Spike out of Denver, but he conducts 'business' all over the world. We have reliable information from a very trustworthy source." He looked at Wyatt's face for comprehension, and when Wyatt nodded, Dave continued. "Spike recently, well as recent as a month ago, moved his operation to Norfolk. He's expected to leave the area by late Tuesday evening."

"What does any of this have to do with me?" Isabella asked crossing her arms over her chest, her right hand partly covering her mouth.

Dave took a deep breath. "We think Spike is behind your abduction. He probably hired someone like this Joe person to abduct you, bring you here to Virginia to be delivered to him. He planned to pay someone in Denver for you but left before the deal went down. When he set up in Norfolk, he contacted the kidnappers to make the delivery. And when they attempted to deliver you to him, you

escaped. We think Michael could be involved somehow but haven't quite been able to make the connection."

"This can't be happening to me. This kind of thing happens to young women who spend time in local bars and get into trouble. Not someone like me. Not a second-grade school teacher, for heaven's sake." She ran a trembling hand through her messy hair and with wild eyes looked back and forth between Wyatt and Dave while thumbing her nervous fingers on her knee.

"How or why would you think Michael is involved in this? He's just an old boyfriend."

"He *may* be involved and only because of his previous association in or with this gang," Wyatt answered.

"Exactly what is it they *want* from me?" Isabella asked tremulously.

Dave looked at Wyatt, then back at her.

"Usually, human trafficking is when someone recruits people, transports them, or keeps them as a slave, primarily for sex. Most of the time, they use some kind of force or fraud," Wyatt explained.

Isabella shrank back into the couch, covering her face with her shaking hands, not wanting to hear anymore, not able to believe, or to comprehend.

"But why me? I don't understand."

"We're still putting it altogether. This is just preliminary information."

Wyatt reached for her other hand, running his rough fingers back and forth across the top of her smooth silky hand, and she relaxed.

"Dave, tell us what else happened. I know there's more and I want to hear it all."

Dave hesitated, and then stuttered. "Remember Wayne Richards, who, who worked Vice about six or seven years ago?"

"Yeah, he got married and put in for a transfer. Why?"

"He, uh, it was his badge number you gave me earlier, remember?" After an awkward pause, Dave looked at Wyatt. Seeing

the incredulous look on his face, he continued. "I asked him as a favor to patrol the park this morning. Apparently, Richards did a very good job, too good a job. They found his half-naked body in the woods a short distance from the parking lot, dead from a gunshot wound to the head."

Wyatt said slowly, "Oh my God! What happened?" When Dave wavered, he continued, "Come on, man, spill it. I need to know."

Dave, reluctant to say the words, knew Wyatt needed to know. "Richards just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. He'd been undressed down to his underwear, his uniform removed from the crime scene, along with his squad car. We think whoever shot Richards could be responsible for abducting Isabella. We also think he's still out there looking for her."

Wyatt had stood and had begun pacing while Dave was talking. When he realized what had happened, he turned to Dave. "So you think whoever killed Richards and the guy who came here this morning could be the same person? Since he had Richards' badge on he probably had his entire uniform and car."

Dave nodded. No words were necessary.

Wyatt sat down. He looked at Isabella. Her face was full of confusion and fear, and tears ran down her cheeks. *Good, let's keep it that way. The less she knows or understands the better off she'll be.*

He reached for and squeezed her hand. She felt a warm sweet sensation of security wash over her. He seemed to be saying, *"I'll take care of you."*

"This guy, this murderer, must be very self-confident to do something like this in a public place in broad daylight. Jesus Christ! And then to have the balls to come here looking for her?" Wyatt said as again began to pace the floor looking from Dave to Isabella.

"That's what I figure. I think the guy is desperate since he's got a deadline, a delivery date. He's expecting a big payoff from Spike for delivering her, and from what we know about Spike, he's ruthless. This guy has nowhere to go that Spike won't find him. And once he

becomes this violent he'll take risks, become reckless. And make more mistakes. The more chances he takes, the more mistakes he makes, the more opportunities we have to catch him."

"What about Richards' family? How are they holding up?"

"Chief's on his way over to his place right now to talk to his wife. I know it's going to be really rough on all of them. They're a very close family. His wife and kids were his life."

"I'll try to help them out financially. I know money won't help with this kind of loss, but at least they'll know one of our own cares about them," Wyatt said.

Chapter 27

Isabella felt numb, strangled, weighted down, and burdened. Her mind was scalded, and her life out of control. She couldn't understand all the ramifications of what had happened, but she did know a police officer had been killed, a man who loved his job, loved his wife, and loved his adorable children. And it all happened somehow because of her, because she had been abducted and had escaped.

This is my entire fault. But what did I do? I still don't know what I did to cause this Spike guy to want me. I don't even know him or anyone in a gang. Why couldn't he pick on someone else? Why does he want me? None of this makes any sense.

She shuddered thinking about what could have happened to her had she not escaped! She covered her ears with her hands to try to drown out the conflict. She couldn't bear the thought.

She remembered Wyatt saying something about one of their own. What did he mean, "one of their own"? She stood, her hands becoming fists on her hips, and looked at Wyatt.

"Wait a minute. Wh-what do you mean one of our own?" she asked with tight lips and narrowed eyes.

Wyatt shrugged.

Her voice shook with anger. She was assured he had deceived her. "I asked you if you were a cop and you told me no. Did you lie to me?"

He stood and began to pace again. He picked up his water bottle and took a long drink. He offered a drink to Dave, who declined. Dave leaned back on the couch in a relaxed mode, cavalier but

anxious to hear Wyatt's explanation. Wyatt looked at Isabella, waiting patiently for an answer, her eyes following his every move.

"Remember I told you I grew up with Dave, knew him all my life?" She nodded and he went on, "We, we also worked together. We were partners for about seven or eight years until about five years ago. Then I started working at my father's company and the rest is history."

Stunned. Speechless. A feeling of betrayal traveled through her heart. She felt as if she listened to the proceeding with a surreal feeling of detached anxiety. While getting to her feet she asked incredulously, her voice cracking, "You mean you're a cop? You lied to me."

"I worked with Dave as his partner years ago, yes."

They stared at each other but neither said anything. She tried to wrap her head around this bombardment of information. She couldn't believe it. Wyatt had been a cop years ago. She wanted nothing to do with cops. People died when they were around cops, she knew that as a fact. Up close and personal.

"Is that it? Is that all you're going to say?" Dave asked Wyatt.

"Yes, that about does it," Wyatt said as he nodded.

"Now that everything's out in the open, Isabella, I think you should consider coming into the federal protective custody program. You'll have the entire police department at your dis—"

"No, no, no," she screamed at him, waving her hands. "I don't trust a bunch of cops to babysit me, or protect me, as you may call it. People die when they're around cops!"

Wyatt and Dave exchanged puzzled looks. Wyatt grabbed a soon-to-be-out-of-control Isabella by the arms, walked her back to the couch, and forced her to sit.

She shook all over from anger and fear. She couldn't breathe, a great feeling of hopelessness washed over her as she felt the familiar ache of loss deep within her heart.

“Why?” he said softly. “Why don’t you trust cops, especially to help you?”

She was quiet for a moment. Then, when she finally spoke, it was in bursts and her voice cracked, brittle with anger. “My father,” she faltered, “died, was sh-shot while in your so-called protective custody program.” She pursed her lips in anger and fisted her hands. “So I know firsthand how well *it doesn’t* work,” she managed to spit out.

“What happened?” Wyatt asked, gently.

“He-he-he was shot,” she whispered as she hung her head.

“By whom? Start at the beginning and tell me everything. Maybe there’s a connection to what’s happened to you,” Wyatt offered in a soft, calm voice.

“First, he was stalked by someone no one ever was able to identify. Then he was assaulted and mugged. And when he tried to force an investigation with the local police department to be able to press charges, other things started happening.”

“What kind of things?”

“Ohh, things like bricks with notes attached saying, ‘Give up, old man’ thrown into our front window. Somebody threw something at his car breaking the windshield *with him inside* almost killing him. He ended up with a fractured skull from that little ‘incident.’ But Dad persisted, wouldn’t give up. Finally, the police suggested Dad enter Witness Protection or at least accept additional police protection so they could ‘protect him’ and ‘keep him safe.’ Well, it didn’t work. He was shot on our front porch, standing right beside me while being ‘protected.’ Within two days he died.”

Dave and Wyatt looked at each other, disgust written on their faces. “Listen to me”—he gave her a gentle shake—“it’s not going to happen like that, not here. I will personally guarantee it with my life.”

Dave offered support as well. “That’s right. It’s not going to happen here. We have great officers with specific training for just such cases. They know what to look for, who to look for, and all the ins and outs of your particular circumstances. They’ll ensure your

safety with their lives if necessary. No harm will come to you. Wyatt and I can't force you to do anything you don't want to but if you come with me now I'll do everything I can to make sure you have the best protection available."

Isabella glanced at Wyatt and then at Dave. They both looked ready to fight, to battle anyone in their way to keep her safe. Confusion, fear, and dread raced in her veins. She did feel safe with Wyatt. He made her feel safe, safer than she'd ever felt with anyone. He had kept her safe so far, had believed her, and had gotten her help. He followed all of Dave's suggestions. Also, his training as a police officer would be an asset, not to mention his street smarts. He should know what to do to protect her.

Timid, not able to look him directly in the eye, she stared at her clenched hands in her lap. "Wyatt, can I stay here with you?"

Dave and Wyatt looked at each other, incredulous. Wyatt nodded.

"Wyatt, you can't keep her here alone. I'll see if Olivia Winters is available. Besides, with all these doors and windows all over the place you'd be target practice. And you're only one person. Especially since the killer already thinks she might be here. He's going to start searching for her again. Probably why he was at the park today and why he came here earlier today."

Wyatt paced, back and forth, back and forth, one hand on his hip, the other playing drums on his lips, his head down, deep in thought.

"You're right, Dave. I can't keep her safe here. But you know where I can, don't you?"

Dave nodded and stood. "Yes, but Wyatt, think about i..." Wyatt interrupted.

"I have, Dave, and that's where you come in. You of all people know how to keep anyone from coming after either one of us."

Wyatt looked sternly at Dave's face. He knew from working with Dave for years that Dave knew arguing with Wyatt would be futile once he had made up his mind. Maybe removing Isabella from the

immediate search area would actually make their job easier. “Okay, when?”

“How about three a.m.? I take the Jeep, go out the side, and take the scenic route.”

“To where?” Isabella asked with fear pasted on her face.

“A safer place,” Wyatt and Dave said simultaneously.

“Okay, three a.m., no patrols.”

“Don’t worry. You have my back, remember?”

They shook hands and headed toward the stairs and the front door. Dave looked back at Isabella, who had not moved from the couch but sat staring at both of them as if in shock, full of questions.

“Be careful now, okay?” Dave said as he waved to her, continued up the stairs with Wyatt following close behind.

She heard the deep rumbling of male voices at the top of the stairs but couldn’t make out any of their words. Scared and confused though she was, there was no way she’d ever trust a cop again. A chill chased over her, raising goose bumps on her arms. She didn’t want to depend on anyone. But Wyatt wasn’t a cop. He *had* been a cop. He was a very smart, non-judgmental, compassionate, caring businessman. And he would be able to keep her safe, right?

She needed to get control of her life again. She needed to take care of herself. She needed a plan.

Chapter 28

A small-time mobster like Spike dealt mainly in prostitution, money laundering, and car theft. Every now and then, for a large purse, he would buy and sell some people. He usually didn't mess with people anymore, not since his last stint in prison and not in the United States either, but he had a buyer for a blonde girl who would pay a large sum. And right now, he needed all the money he could get his hands on.

He wanted the other girl for himself for a while. He liked petite girls with big tits, and he wanted this girl particularly. He had wanted her ever since he saw her for the first time. She was walking out of a little coffee shop near an elementary school somewhere on the outskirts of Denver.

Unfortunately, he had to leave Denver but left a few men in there to clean up, finish collecting some debts, and they should be arriving any day now. Then they would move the entire operation somewhere new. He didn't quite know where to go yet but had some great ideas and was leaning toward Peru and Central America. There was so much more opportunity there. He wanted to talk to Dan, before he made a decision. He considered Dan his right-hand man and had left him in charge in Denver.

Sam, though, could quickly replace Dan. Sam always seemed to be on the lookout for his best interests while Dan had gotten a little lazy and selfish. He wouldn't tolerate a mutiny in an organization with only one boss, him.

He explained to Sam how the cops had started snooping around in his business and made it necessary for him to move his operation

from Denver to the current location in Norfolk. Sam just looked at him without expression. Spike rolled his eyes, thinking Sam didn't understand a word he said let alone how he worked. And he could see similarities with Sam and Joe already. Spike walked around his desk while rolling his special gold-tipped pen up and down in his short fat hand. He looked at Sam again and sighed loudly.

"I got a job for you, and I need you to make sure you get it done right the first time, you hear me?" Spike waited for a response from Sam before continuing.

Sam nodded. "Yeah, boss, I understand."

"There's no room for mistakes with this job. I need you to make a little trip to meet up with Joe. He's in Stoney Creek, just outside of Suffolk. He's already screwed up this job and let one of the girls escape. How that happens when you're guarding someone, I don't know. Anyway, we need some damage control. You need to find the girl. I don't care, don't even want to know of the how's or what-for's, just find the girl and get her back to me by midnight tomorrow night. Then you have to make absolute certain Joe isn't around to tell anybody about it. I'll pay you the same amount I planned to pay Joe for the girl plus a little extra for making sure Joe don't talk anymore. *But*—and this is a big but—*no screwups*. And I mean no, nada, zero, zilch." His voice rose until he was shouting and a vein in his forehead throbbed violently. "Do you understand what I'm saying, Sam?"

Sam nodded his head and muttered, "Yeah, Boss."

He continued, quieter. "Let's go over this one more time so there won't be any misunderstandings. Joe is in Stoney Creek looking for the girl right now. You need to find Joe. Here's his cell phone number." He handed Sam a piece a paper with a handwritten number on it. "And make sure you find the girl. Then get rid of Joe. I don't care how. I don't even want to know how. Bring the girl back to me by midnight Tuesday night. You can't be late either. We have to leave by then. Understand? You know what happens if you slip up, don't you? I'll send Dan after both you and Joe, and *neither* of you'll be

talkin' to anybody. There's no place you can run fast enough to keep Dan from finding you both. Understand?"

With his eyes, Sam followed Boss as he paced around the room, primarily in front of his oversized desk. He shrugged and looked at Boss. "You can count on me, Boss."

Spike scrutinized Sam and then yelled, "What the fuck are you waiting for then? Get your ass outta here and bring back that girl."

Sam scrambled for the door. Spike sat in his chair thinking about how he got the name boss. Why not 'godfather' or even Spike but most of his employees often referred to him as Boss, short for Boss Hogg, the character from *The Dukes of Hazzard*, due to their similar builds. He knew they had to get out of Norfolk soon because the cops had already started snooping around and asking questions. He didn't want to give them enough time to set up another sting. Attorney's fees were drying up his reserves rather quickly.

"Mel," he bellowed, "get the supplies loaded on board the boat and fueled up. We'll be moving out at midnight tomorrow."

Chapter 29

Joe drove by the park, barely able to get through the traffic jam. He knew he would have to hide the cruiser until he found the girl. He'd been in the back seat of a cruiser so many times he knew where and how to use all the extra controls. He brazenly turned on the flashing blue and red lights to get quickly through the traffic at the park. He waved to another cop he passed going the other way.

He turned off the flashing lights and continued driving toward the outskirts of town to find a vacant or deserted house. He stayed within the speed limit so he wouldn't draw any unwanted attention. He hoped he could hide the car and spend the night too. He had gotten tired of all the city noises anyway.

A short distance out of town Joe found an unused dirt road on the right leading off the main road. He decided to take it and see where it would lead him. He drove about a mile, up down, and around on the curvy, grass-covered road. It would be getting dark soon.

He could hear the overgrown bushes and brambles scrapping the sides and the bottom of the car, but he didn't care. It didn't belong to him anyway. In fact, he had never owned a car. Since he was about nine years old, he'd taken advantage of his God-given ability to help himself to any kind of transportation available to him.

Car theft was the least of the crimes Joe committed, and now he had murder to add to his rap sheet, and not just murder of anybody but of a cop! He took a deep breath. He was proud of himself and felt himself better than his ol' man any day.

His old man was in the joint somewhere for stealing cars, but only because he got caught. Joe had a two-part plan. Don't be stupid, and

don't get caught. He would show his old man that he had turned out better than he ever said he would.

His biggest problem plaguing him now was finding somewhere to lie low for the night.

The road he'd turned onto hadn't been traveled in some time. It had deep ruts and holes that the car had bottomed out in a couple of times already. Looking ahead, he saw it a rougher terrain with deeper ruts and holes and would only be getting worse. He looked around on both sides of the road—if it could be called a road—at the scenery and kept driving.

After rounding a turn, he slowed and came to a stop. His eyes widened in surprise and his mouth opened in wonderment. Perfect! On his left, he saw what once was probably someone's nice little house but now was a barely standing, ramshackle shack with a sagging roof, its windows broken out, and overgrown trees leaning toward the faded wooden building. Perfect for cover, he could put the car on the far side out of sight and get a good night's rest. He could also think without anybody yapping or squealing around him. Then he would come up with a plan and somehow, find the girl first thing in the morning, get her to Boss by midnight Tuesday, get paid, and get outta town.

He would change his name. He never did like Sneed for a last name anyway. He would alter his appearance, so much that his mother, if she were alive, wouldn't recognize him. Maybe he would even shave his head.

Then he would disappear somewhere Spike would never find him. He would build his own organization soon, and then he would take care of Spike.

He drove to the back of the house and couldn't believe his luck. It was perfect. The overgrown trees provided complete coverage to hide a stolen car. He parked the car and took out a flashlight to get a closer look for tracks of the four-footed, four-wheeled, and two-legged

kinds. He didn't see evidence anyone had been around there for a long time.

He walked through the open door hanging by one screw on the inside onto a wobbly, weak, wooden floor and shone the flashlight around. The inside walls were still intact, no furniture except a few remaining table or chair legs for kindling. He didn't need any furniture. He usually slept on the floor anyway, had for most of his life.

He walked around the other rooms. One appeared to have been a kitchen at one time with an old pump handle sitting on a piece of wood beside what probably had been a sink but now was only a dark hole. He reached to open a cupboard door and the door fell off from its hinges into his hand. He looked inside for any food or crumbs left behind by the former human occupants but found nothing.

Another room, a bedroom with a window opening toward the back of the property, no closet, no furniture, just some pieces of newspaper or trash that probably had blown through the window opening during the last storm.

He heard some scurrying behind him and quickly turned. Shining the flashlight in the general area of the sound, he saw an ugly, long-tailed rat scavenging for food. It scampered away into the receding darkness outside.

Joe decided to make his bed under the front opening beside the open doorway because it faced the road. If he was being followed, he wanted to be able to see them coming before they saw him.

Joe lay down on his back and folded his arms behind his head. He had to think.

Chapter 30

After Dave left, Wyatt and Isabella sat in silence, both in deep thought. Isabella had a ton of questions she wanted to ask but feared the answers. She tried to come up with reasons why she should trust Wyatt. He hadn't lied to her about being a cop. He just hadn't told her. And she hadn't asked about his past. He didn't know everything about her past. Neither knew each other well.

She lowered her head, studying her hands while she thought. She chanced a peek at him. He had moved to the desk, and she heard the clicking of keys on his laptop. He stopped to look back at her. Neither said anything for a moment or two.

Finally, Isabella got up the needed courage. "Wyatt, I need some answers."

He looked at the laptop, then back at her. "I'm sure you do, and I'll be glad to give them to you but first I need to finish what I'm working on. Then we'll talk. I'll just be a few minutes."

She waited patiently, pacing in front of the couch, similar to Wyatt's actions.

He finished within minutes, closed his computer, and turned to her. "Okay, Isabella, you have my undivided attention. What can I answer for you?"

Isabella looked him directly in the eye. "I want to know when you planned to tell me you were a cop. And what's happening at three in the morning? I'm not used to someone else making decisions for or about me or my life. I need to know where I'm going and what I'm doing. I barely know you and to be perfectly honest, I'm not sure I can trust you."

Wyatt slowly got up from his chair, walked toward her and grasped her hands as she stood in front of the couch.

“I have no reason to hide anything from you. I’m not sure I have all the answers you’re looking for either. Sometimes it’s safer not knowing.”

She nodded. “Okay, I can agree with you on that point.”

“I didn’t think you needed to know I was a cop because it was in the past and I knew you had an aversion or some kind of fear of them for some reason from the first time I met you. I wanted—no, I needed to find out why first. I thought it might be more due to embarrassment from something you did in your past, in your high school or college years. I had already told you Dave and I worked together as partners years ago. I worked on growing my dad’s company. That’s when you found me.”

She looked deep into his eyes and not only didn’t see any deceit, as if she could recognize it, but only saw sincerity and sympathy. “But you and Dave know each other so well. Usually when you leave a job, you leave the people you work with behind as well.”

Wyatt turned around, picked up his water bottle, and took a long drink while contemplating his answer.

“Dave and I grew up together, we’ve been friends since kindergarten, and we’ve been through a lot. When you’re partners you rely on each other with your life if necessary, and cover each other’s back, so to speak. You create a bond, a special bond, and many times, that special bond is never, ever broken. And sometimes you do keep good friends.”

She nodded her head a little hesitantly.

“Then what’s all this about a safer place and going somewhere at three? You can’t just leave me here, Wyatt.”

He looked around the room at the large windows and doors as if someone could be watching. “We, you and I, are going to leave here and go to a safer place. I think you’ll like it there. It’s remote and very secure and we can both relax. You don’t need to know any more

about it right now. In the meantime, it's getting late and we need to think about something for dinner. How does lasagna sound to you?"

"It's one of my favorites, but what do you mean by a safer place?"

"Here, we're too close to the park and your kidnappers. We'll be safer when we're away from the immediate area."

When she continued with questions about where, he finally said, "You'll need some clothes for a couple of days, so why don't you take this time to go upstairs to the quest room, the room my sister uses, and see what clothes she left behind in the closet you can wear. You'll need at least two or three days' worth of clothes and some nightwear, of course. I'll get dinner started, and we can talk more while we eat."

She looked at him, studied him, but he had already dismissed her and she knew he wouldn't waver. She turned and proceeded to follow him up the stairs, then continued to climb to the third story.

* * * *

Wyatt didn't think he could feel as protective of someone he just met but he felt like he had known Isabella all his life. He knew her tells when she was frightened, sincere, or overwhelmed. He wanted to spend more time with her and looked forward to going to his mountain retreat. He sighed, bowed his head, and rubbed his eyes. He had a lot of work to do, not a lot of time to do it in, and needed some peace and quiet.

He wished he could share everything with her, tell her his innermost concerns, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. But not yet.

Chapter 31

Isabella walked into a bright and beautiful bedroom decorated in soft, light pastels with matching print valances and comforter on a king-size bed. A night table sat on each side of the bed, a sitting bench at the foot of the bed, and a beautiful wood dresser on the side wall under a row of long and narrow windows.

She paused when she noticed the window, then slowly walked to it and looked out. Good, it faced the street, not the woods. She loved the woods and all the trees around, much like her childhood home in Colorado.

Her mother, she thought, must be frantic. She wondered if she had filed a missing persons report for her or if she had realized she was missing yet? She hoped the police would find her mother safe and that she hadn't missed her at all. If she could, she would do anything to spare her any agony.

She walked to the bedside table, picked up the phone, started to dial, then quickly hung up. What if her mother's phone had been tapped? What if they were holding her mother captive waiting for her to call or were threatening her mother for information? What if they were monitoring Wyatt's phones? And they found out where she was, then what? She decided she had to wait, talk to Wyatt about her mother. She would have to trust him for now.

She sat down on the bed and closed her eyes. Wyatt's face came before her eyes, and she inhaled deeply, butterflies jumped in her stomach whenever he came near her. She lost all her reasoning while her other senses became enhanced. She could recognize his scent, the feel of running her hand through his hair, the sight of his deep blue

eyes. She especially enjoyed his kisses. She could almost feel his arms around her and his hands moving up and down her back.

She was so entranced by her attraction to him that she could feel the warmth of his breath on her neck and could hear his deep even breathing. It seemed so real, his breath so hot.

What? She opened her eyes. He was sitting beside her on the bed.

“Are you okay? You looked so far away, as if in a daydream.”

She pulled a pillow from the bed in front of her chest. “Y-yes, yes, I’m just, just thinking about my mother and how upset she must be.”

“Really? Do you always have a flushed face and a dreamy look on your face when you think about your mother?”

She gave him an incredulous look. What now? Could he read her thoughts? She quickly stood. “Where is the closet?”

When he pointed to the door on the wall behind her, she walked around the bed into an enormous walk-in closet. When she turned around to look back at him, she nearly bumped into him. He had followed her into the closet and stood behind her.

“This closet is huge!” she blabbered to cover her embarrassment. “It’s about the size of my bedroom in my apartment at home. Did your sister decorate this room too? It’s beautiful and very light and airy.”

“No, I did this room myself for Amy when she visits, but she left her handiwork in the closet.”

She turned back to the closet, which contained an entire wardrobe with any type of clothing for any activity, fancy party or cocktail dresses, jeans, sweats, skirts, sweaters, silks, satins, so many belts and bags, and too many shoes to count.

“There are so many things in here. Does Amy have any clothes at her place in New York?”

Wyatt threw his head back and laughed—a deep, loud rumble that echoed off the high ceilings. She looked at him and smiled. It comforted her to hear him laugh, his face lighting up—similar to the picture on his desk—revealing beautiful dimples on both his cheeks.

“What’s so funny?”

“She rarely ever wears anything twice, especially the things here. My sister wouldn’t miss these clothes if you took every single piece and never returned them.” He handed her a lightweight duffle bag. “Go ahead, help yourself.”

She stared at him, disbelieving, turned back to the closet dumbstruck.

“Wait, don’t get the wrong impression. She’s a very successful businesswoman. She’s probably a lot like you. When she finds a pair of jeans she likes and they fit good, she buys two or three pairs. Then she leaves one pair here so she can ‘travel light’ when she comes for the day or for any length of time.

“She travels all over the world on buying trips and sometimes she’ll leave from Norfolk. She always leaves extra clothes here in case she decides to stay here longer.”

She looked back at the clothes neatly hanging or folded on shelves in the cedar-lined closet. “But, Wyatt, your sister might need these when she comes to visit. I really don’t want to impose on either you or your sister. No, no, I couldn’t really. I’ll wash the clothes I wore here and wear them. Where did you put them?”

Wyatt, a little insolent, replied, “Sorry, I burned them.”

She was shocked at his audacity. “Why? Why would you do that to them?”

“They were rags, that’s why. Especially after all the rips and holes you got in them while running here.”

Isabella looked around the closet, beginning to acquiesce.

“This is going to be hard. Clothes have never really been important to me,” she mumbled to herself.

* * * *

Wyatt hadn't heard what she said. He had gotten lost standing so close to her. She smelled fresh and sweet. He remembered how her lips felt when he kissed them, and the sound of her soft moans.

He couldn't understand what happened to him when he got near her. He couldn't think clearly, he could barely remember the name of his hometown. The vision he saw when he walked in to the bedroom a few moments ago flashed before him. Beautiful, sitting on the bed, eyes closed, her face softened in the light, looked as if in a fairytale daydream. *What? What am I thinking?*

He came to his senses when he heard her saying his name but didn't know if it was in his daydream or real. She stood with her hands on her hips, a smirk on her face, looking at him waiting for an answer.

"As I said, help yourself, but pack light. I'm sure Amy won't mind. In fact, she'd be flattered someone of your character has her same great taste in fashion. I'll go get dinner started in the meantime." He turned and walked out the door.

* * * *

She heard him say from a distance, "Take your time."

Isabella went through the closet, overwhelmed with so many choices, but finally chose a pair of slacks, a pair of jeans, a sweatshirt-like top, and a two-piece sweater set. She tried on a pair of shoes and voila, they fit. She looked around for undergarments, but saw none.

I hope, I hope I can find a bra. She put the clothes from the closet in the duffle bag and threw it on the bed on her way to the dresser.

She opened the top dresser drawer filled with fancy silky, satiny, lacy panties. She picked out a couple pair she found not too revealing and looked comfortable.

Another dresser drawer held bras but all were two sizes too small. *Damn these big boobs.*

The third drawer held socks. She picked out a pair in case of a cold night or if the weather changed like it often did at home.

In the fourth drawer, she found nightgowns. Not the cotton, simple t-shirt ones she usually wore either, but soft satiny and lacy ones with thin straps. She felt their softness, settled on one with wide straps and a matching full coverage robe. She folded them with care, put everything neatly back in the drawers, and put her final choices in the duffle bag.

Thinking she should help Wyatt with dinner, Isabella picked up the bag and headed down the stairs. She could hear him working and whistling in the kitchen. Her dad had been a whistler when he puttered around the house, and the sound reminded her of him, of home and security, some of which she felt now.

Thinking about Wyatt made her face flush and her blood run hot. She stumbled over her words, about to say that no one ever made her feel the way he did when he was close to her or just looked at her.

She hadn't said that out loud, had she? She looked at Wyatt, who was studying her face and her lips.

Chapter 32

Wyatt reviewed all the information they had gathered. They had missed something, he knew it, and it continued to haunt him. He had reviewed everything again for the third time, researched all relevant and available databases, and printed applicable reports from prior activities and abductions. He now had a better idea of Spike and his operation and he knew what he had to do. Why? That was the unknown question.

Wyatt had put the lasagna in the oven to reheat, had some bread ready to go in shortly, and had started putting a salad together when he heard her coming down the stairs. He looked at the bay window and the open view to the woods and realized that it would be dark soon, which would enable all eyes to see into the eating area in the kitchen. He picked up their salad plates, headed to the dining room to meet her, and closed the swinging door behind him.

Wyatt came in from the kitchen as Isabella reached the doorway of the dining room. He put down the salads on the table and held out a chair for her.

“Thank you,” she muttered, smiling, awed by his chivalry.

While he poured the wine, he smiled at her. “You just bring out the best in me.” He sat down to her right at the head of the table.

“It’s very good. My compliments to the chef,” she said.

They both ate in companionable silence for a few minutes until Wyatt became overcome with curiosity.

“Tell me about your home in Colorado, where you were born, how your parents met.”

“Well, let’s see. I’ve told you most of it already. I was born in a very small town outside Denver, called Cameron Lakes. My parents didn’t think they could have any children, so I was a big surprise. My parents were high school sweethearts, had been married about thirty-five years when my father died. Since I was an only child, I was very close to both my parents but my mom and I became even closer after Dad’s death, until I started seeing Michael. When we became serious and yet...” He looked into her eyes. Wyatt became mesmerized by her, while time stood still, unable to hear the seconds ticking by on the grandfather clock, struck with emotion.

Wyatt cleared his throat, looking down at his almost-empty salad plate. “I—I guess...I guess I should check on the lasagna.”

He stood, and strode into the kitchen. He berated himself, becoming just plain angry. He had to get control of his feelings instead of acting like a high school kid with his first crush. He wouldn’t be worth anything or be able help her if he didn’t, like he couldn’t help Rachael.

Although Dave had argued with him many times about Rachael knowing ahead of time what she had gotten herself into, that she had her eyes wide open when she trained as a cop. She knew the risks. She knew the odds when she decided to go undercover. She knew her chances of being killed just like every other cop.

He still blamed himself. If he had been able to see the true Rachael he maybe could have saved her from herself.

Beeeeeeep! The blessed oven timer blared interrupting his inner-directed tirade. He shook his head to clear the clouding, unwanted thoughts and grabbed the oven mitts. In a matter of minutes, he and Isabella were enjoying the great smell and taste of Lean Cuisine lasagna.

“What do you think? Do you like it?” After he sprinkled cheese on top, he waited a minute or two for it to cool.

"It's very tasty and one of my all-time favorites. I've never had it quite like this before though. I usually don't put the extra cheese on top." She giggled.

She glanced at him, his look, that of a little boy who had been caught with his hand in the cookie jar. They both laughed.

"You caught me. I'm not much of a cook, but I hate to eat out all the time." He wiped his mouth with a napkin and settled it back on his lap. "This frozen dinner and a salad is about all I can do."

"Well, you did a great job. Thank you very much, Wyatt, for everything." Isabella blabbered. "For taking me in, believing in me and feeding me. I don't know how to repay you!"

He watched her soft, warm lips move while she talked, remembered how hot and wet they'd felt on his. She talked, saying something about repayment for something. He could think of a couple ways of collecting—one of them in bed. He looked at her face. She had stopped talking, waiting for an answer to an unheard question. He tried to remember her last words. Wyatt regained his composure.

"Let's wait and see how everything works out. We can talk about repayment later. Tell me about your father."

"I really don't like to talk about him. The memory alone upsets me. I still miss him, I always will. But his death was so totally unnecessary, and unjust. It makes me so angry."

Wyatt heard defiance in her voice. "What did he do for a living?"

"He and my mother owned an insurance agency, Donnelly Insurance. They worked together most of their married lives. After my father d-d-died, my mother sold the agency and the house. She moved into a small but comfortable two-bedroom condo, and I went off to college."

"What made you decide to become a teacher?"

"I've always loved children, their inquisitive minds, watching them learn new things. I babysat a lot as a young teenager, and I'm so glad I did, because I gained so much experience to put to use in my everyday job. Oh my God!"

“What is it?”

“What about my job? What will the children think when I don’t show up? And when they hear about what happened to me?”

Wyatt comfortingly calmed her down. “This will be just a little more experience to put to use in everyday life. Later, when you can put everything in perspective, not right now, of course, but you can use this experience to help kids become aware of strangers, or of getting mixed up with the wrong crowd, or going to the home of a stranger. There are all kinds of ways to use this experience to your advantage, as well as theirs, and good for everyone.”

“I just hope and pray you’re right. What about Mom?” Her lips quivered. “Have you heard anything about her? She’s really all I have left now.”

Wyatt rubbed the top of her hand resting on the table and gently squeezed her fingers. “You have me now too.”

She quickly removed her hand from under his and stared down at her almost-empty plate. She wanted to believe Wyatt, that he would take care of her, but after her most recent experiences she found it hard to trust anyone, anyone at all. “It’s so easy to say ‘I’ll take care of you,’ but can you really?”

“I will take care of you, keep you safe. You can trust me, I promise.”

He picked up the half-empty wine bottle. “Would you like a little more wine? It’ll help you relax so you can get a couple hours of sleep before we leave.”

“Yes, but just a little.”

He topped off her glass and he watched her settle back with her glass of wine in her hand. “I hardly know anything about you except that you grew up with Dave and used to be a cop. What about *your* family, *your* business?”

“Hmmm, let’s see. My parents were also high school sweethearts but more like Romeo and Juliet. Neither of their parents approved of them together, especially of their marriage. They came from different

backgrounds, and their parents disliked each other. They both went to different colleges but they kept in touch with each other. After graduation, they ran off; eloped, if you will, and got married. It took a couple years for my grandparents to accept their marriage. They did, but not until after I was born. Then about two years later my sister Amy came along.

“She and I grew up together with just each other for friends, along with Dave and Dan since we all lived out of town. My dad was an engineer, started the family business, making a small part for airplanes. That small part resulted in substantial government contracts that, in turn, resulted in plants located all over the country.

“The company grew. Dad bought a large parcel of property and started the land development end of the business. And that’s how Bowman Industries & Land Development got started.”

“Do your parents still live here in the area?”

Wyatt hesitated, swirled the wine in his glass, watching it cling to the sides. He took a long deep swallow to wet his suddenly dry mouth.

“No, unfortunately, they were both killed in a car accident about three years ago while on vacation in Florida. So I do know what it’s like to lose a parent, to feel the grief and loneliness. My parents were both only children, so all I have is Amy, and of course good friends like Dave.”

“I’m sorry Wyatt, I had no idea.”

“It’s okay. I had three or four really good years working with Dad before he died. He always said he wanted me to run the company. That’s why he sent me to college. But I wanted to be a cop. He didn’t stop me from doing what I wanted to do, but I’m glad I had those years with him. He taught me so much in a short period of time. I really got to know him as a man, an honest, hard-working, shrewd businessman, not just my dad.”

A short time later, Wyatt got up and started stacking and carrying dishes to the kitchen. Isabella got up, a little unsteady on her feet,

thanks to the wine, to help him with the dishes, but he stopped her by putting his hand on her arm.

“No curtains at the big window in the kitchen, remember. Anyway, I’m just going to stack these in the sink for Hannah, my housekeeper. She’ll take care of them in the morning. I’m not sure what I’d do without her. Sit down and relax. Drink the rest of your wine.”

When Wyatt joined her a few minutes later, he poured them more wine and they talked more about their families.

“While I was away at college, my mother became involved in a number of charities. She gave so much of her time to help others as a way of healing,” Isabella wiped a tear from her cheek, “while she tried to get over or through her own grief. I don’t think you ever get over it. You just go on, move forward. I think that’s what kept Mom going without my father.”

“After my parents passed away,” Wyatt said, “I had to take over the entire business. Before then I had only been involved with the property development entity. I hired Matthew as a manager to reduce my workload.”

“Why didn’t you ever get married? Or are you?”

“I almost did. We were engaged but it didn’t work out. So I kind of gave up on relationships, in general.”

“What was her name?”

“Rachael, her name was Rachael.” Wyatt took a sip of wine. He didn’t tell her Rachael had been killed in the line of duty, or how she had betrayed him, or how he felt responsible for her death. That could wait for another time, he thought. “What about you? Why aren’t you married?”

Isabella hesitated, shrugging. “When I found Michael in bed with another woman, I blamed myself. I cried and cried, I felt so down on myself and so depressed. I thought I wasn’t sexy enough, not fun enough, and not rich enough, that it must have been my fault. When I finally got tired of being miserable I decided to move on, and I

pushed all those memories behind me. I became determined to be a new me, someone not as vulnerable, someone stronger and independent. I guess I wrapped my heart in a shell so it'd never be broken again, by another man, at least. So now you might understand why I am wary of you and non-trusting of all men."

He had sat quietly while listening to her, and when she finished he slowly nodded in understanding. He knew what it felt like to be betrayed by someone you loved, someone who you thought loved you. He also knew how to harden your heart with a protective coat to keep it safe from further cracks or breaks.

"I understand." He drained the glass of the last of the wine. "By the way, did you pack a jacket? It can get cold in the mountains at night and you'll need it?"

"No, I didn't." She finished her wine and set the glass down. "I guess I better go see if I can find one."

She backed away, waiting patiently in the dining room for Wyatt to end his phone call. She had finished putting the sweatshirt in the bag and was draping the red fleece jacket across the top when Wyatt joined her.

He glanced at his watch. "Let's try to get some sleep before we leave. I already put some things we'll need in the jeep in the garage so with your bag, I think we'll be ready to roll. You can have Amy's room, okay?"

"Okay, I'm really tired but I'm afraid I won't be able to sleep. So much has happened." She kept her eyes directed at her fidgeting hands in front of her. "I'm having a hard time grasping it all."

"Well, just lie down and rest. You can always sleep in the Jeep later," Wyatt said as he leaned back against the door frame.

She nodded, turned to start up the stairs, and then looked back at him.

"Good night, Wyatt, and thanks again for everything."

He studied her face, committing it to memory, unable to find the right words he wanted to say. "Yeah, sure, you too."

He listened to her footsteps on the stairs. He liked the sound of her soft treading on the staircase. It felt so natural, even though he usually only heard those of his own or of Amy. He heard the bedroom door close.

His thoughts slipped back to last night, to how it felt lying beside her, feeling her warmth. He wanted to feel her soft skin under his fingertips as he caressed her thighs. He wanted to feel her moist warm lips under his tongue. He wanted to feel so much more. Too much more!

He shook himself out of his fantasy. He made a quick scan of the house, checking all the doors and windows to make sure they were all locked. None had been opened and left unlocked. He entered the code on the keypad to activate the rarely used security system and crept up the stairs to his empty bed.

He stood in the hall in front of her bedroom door listening, waiting until he saw the light under the bedroom door go out. He hoped she got some sleep because one of them had to, and he didn't think it would be him. He needed a cold shower.

A short while later, he lay on his bed. He closed his eyes listening to the quiet sounds in the house. All the events of the last twenty-four hours and their possible ramifications for future actions that could change so many lives, including his own, ran through his head. He realized that he looked forward to the changes, even though he didn't know exactly why or what those changes would be. He soon dozed off and dreamed. "*Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.*"

The clergy's words were a dulled echo in the early morning mist, as Wyatt stood ramrod straight in front of the coffin holding the remains of his fiancée. He glanced at the crowd gathered around the mahogany casket, colleagues, parents, relatives, and friends who had come to pay their respects. The police honor guard stood to the side, ready to make a final tribute to one of their own.

The hair on the back of his neck bristled as if someone were watching him. He turned his head and found her father staring at him.

Wyatt stared back into the bloodshot, hate-filled eyes of a man who had befriended him and had welcomed him into his home, and into his family. A man who didn't know the truth or the circumstances surrounding his daughter's death, a man who probably would never know or understand the truth. A man who blamed Wyatt for his daughter's death.

Wyatt knew her father would not, could not, ever forgive him.

Maybe rightly so. He blamed himself too and couldn't forgive himself. She'd been killed in the line of duty, under his watch.

He should have made her quit the undercover operation when he first became suspicious. He wanted to get her out of there. They had even argued about it. But she refused. He should have known what to expect. He should have known.

His heart ached, and guilt filled his body, once again choking the air from his chest.

With each honoring volley, his heart shivered.

After he took one long, last look at the coffin, his eyes filled with tears. He hung his head low, his shoulders slumped, and tucked his hands in his pants pockets.

He turned and began the trek to his car, leaving the cemetery and the hateful look on her father's face behind.

But not forgotten.

Chapter 33

Wyatt couldn't quite identify what woke him from his recurring dream. He lay rigid, fully alert, his eyes still closed, he listened to the sobbing, shrieking, and screaming coming from Isabella's room.

Worried her kidnappers had somehow gotten through the security system, he jumped up from his bed, grabbed a robe, and hurried to her room. Usually a very light sleeper, he believed he would have been wide awake at the first entry. He didn't wait to think, and he flung open the door.

The moonlight spread across the bed allowing him to observe the sight of her tossing, turning, and screaming in the throes of a nightmare. She'd kicked off the light sheet and blanket, and her nightgown was pushed up to her waist, revealing skimpy lace panties. She screamed his name.

He rushed to the side of the bed, sat down beside her and grabbed her shoulders. "Isabella, Isabella, wake up, sweetheart, its okay now, honey, I'm here."

"No, no, get away from me." She pushed him away with her arms lashing out at him.

"It's me, Wyatt. You're all right, Bella. You're safe now. You're just having a nightmare." He reached out and grabbed her arms.

Her eyes popped opened, and her eyelids fluttered. She looked around the room and finally focused on him. Trembling and sobbing, she swallowed, rose on her knees, threw her arms around his neck, and leaped into his arms. He was her life preserver.

When she tried to speak through her sobbing explanation, her voice sounded muffled against his bare chest.

“It seemed so real, they just kept chasing me. I kept running and running, but they still followed, getting closer and closer, Wyatt.” She hiccupped. Her tears fell down his chest. “They’re still coming after me, I know it. I don’t know when or how but they are. And Joe told me he’d kill me if I tried anything or gave them any trouble.”

She looked up into his eyes. “I don’t want you or anybody else to get hurt. What am I going to do?”

Wyatt rocked her as he had his sister when she had awakened from a bad dream after their parents’ deaths. “Don’t worry about me. I can take care of myself.” The not knowing what could happen tore at his heart. “It’s okay, sweetheart. I’ll take care of you.”

She began to calm down but continued to clutch his neck and shoulders.

“They won’t hurt you. I won’t even let them get near you. I’m here for whatever happens and I’m not leaving you to those animals, I promise.”

* * * *

As she looked up at his comforting blue eyes, her mind wrestled with all the feelings and emotions running through her. She wanted him to protect her with his strength. She wanted him to make her feel safe like only he could. As his scent overwhelmed her, pushed away her fear, she burrowed against him. She could smell his woodsy, piney aftershave and could feel his warm skin against hers. His broad, muscled shoulders felt so powerful beneath her fingers, and when she glanced at his full masculine lips, a quiver slid down through her tired, aching body.

She held her breath as he gazed at her through the narrowed slits of his darkened eyes. And when his lips met hers, she reveled in their softness and warmth. His kiss grew desperate and hot as his mouth devoured hers making her burn with desire. She wanted his touch, needed him to put out the raging fire burning deep inside her, and so

much more. She ran her fingers up his neck and played with his thick hair.

He gently pushed her down on the bed, kissing her face, licking away the tears still wet on her cheeks. He traced her neck, her lips, her shoulders, and her breasts with his mouth. He pulled her to him and lay beside her. He couldn't get close enough to her.

Low guttural sounds rose to his lips as he deepened his kiss, and she opened her mouth and tangled her tongue with his. He moved his hands up and down her back, along her sides, spreading heat everywhere he touched. He rested one hand on her right breast, lightly squeezed her already erect nipple between his thumb and index finger. It hardened even more sending jolts of electric sparks deep inside her. She quivered and thrust her breast toward him, wanting more.

He flicked his tongue in and out of her mouth, then down along her neck. She tilted her head back, accepting his touch, and a loud moan escaped from her kiss-swollen lips.

He lowered his head to her breast, caressed his tongue back and forth on her nipple before he took it in his mouth, and began to suck.

A fire erupted within her, encompassing her body. She needed him to extinguish the blaze before her body burst into flames. She pulled him closer to her, unable to get enough of him.

She could feel his erection, hard, and throbbing against her stomach. So many emotions inundated her, making her feel dizzy. She hadn't felt such heat and wanton desire in a long time, and she ached for more.

He continued to kiss her breasts, and then slowly lowered his mouth to her breast. He reached under her skimpy nightgown with his hand to find her soft feminine curls. When he caressed her hot, wet folds, inserting a finger inside her, she arched toward his hand, wanting more. He gave her more, adding another finger to the first. She was so hot and so wet and so ready for him.

Then he moaned into her ear. "I want you, Isabella. I want you now."

She was hypnotized by his darkened blue eyes, and he filled her with so much passion, so many sensations that she couldn't find the right words to answer. She pulled his lips back to hers, greedily engulfing them. She stroked her tongue in and out of his mouth showing him what she wanted from him.

He lay between her legs, sucking her breasts. He vigorously rubbed her throbbing nub with his finger and thumb as he stroked his fingers in and out.

She gasped for air, dizzy, her head spinning. She ground against his hand, demanding more, wanting more, wanting him inside of her. She reached for his pulsing manhood and felt the hardness and smoothness. She gently caressed it, with butterfly-like touch, sliding her hand up and down.

He moaned and moved to enter her, placing his erection against her entrance. She lifted her hips up to meet his as he plunged into her with one long hard stroke. They looked in each other's eyes, and she felt awed by the drowning sensations, enthralled by the pleasure. He thrust hard, reaching deep, filling her, increasing the throbbing need at her central core. The sensation was one she'd never felt before.

Hot and wet, she squeezed his throbbing length with her internal muscles. She ran her hands over his chest, around his neck, down his back. She wanted to touch all of him, everywhere. She pulled him closer, plundering his mouth while she plastered herself against him.

Moving together, she met his rhythm and arched her back to meet his every thrust. His heart pounded against her chest, a perfect matching beat to hers. Gasping for air, he smothered her guttural moans with his passionate kiss. A kiss ending their flight of ecstasy simultaneously.

He rolled to his side and collapsed, holding her hips and taking her with him while he stayed inside her. She couldn't speak while she watched him try to catch his breath. Struggling to comprehend what had just happened, she attempted to make sense of all the emotions

running through her. From the expression on his face, she suspected he was having a few of his own doubts.

Several minutes later, when their breathing had leveled out, and he'd become lax, he slipped out of her, leaving her empty. He reached for the light covers at the foot of the bed, pulling them up and over both of them, and pulled her closer to him. He nuzzled her neck, kissed her cheek.

"Relax and go to sleep. I'll protect you. Everything is fine."

Isabella relaxed as she reveled in the feel of his arms around her. She had never been loved so thoroughly. She was so warm and cozy. It felt right, lying in his arms. She was safe as only he could make her. She slowly drifted off to sleep.

* * * *

Wyatt awoke a few hours later to find Isabella snuggled next to him. He looked at his watch and realized that they had to get going and on the road. He wanted to spend a few more hours with her lying close by his side, watching her sleep. He had never had such a heady rush go so deep down. He knew it had to end, for now anyway.

Then he surprised himself. He picked up her hand, moved it to his lips, and began kissing each and every finger. She moaned, moving closer to him. She slowly opened her eyes, and searched his eyes. He tilted her head and kissed her softly. A jolt that almost hurt went through him. He heard her gasp as she kissed him back. He felt happily shattered by her.

"Wyatt, what are we doing? I'm not sure this is right."

"Are you sorry?"

"No, it was the best sex I've ever had, and we are both consenting adults. But I think last night was a onetime thing. I had a nightmare and needed to be consoled and we just got out of control. I don't think I want it to happen again."

He kissed her again. “Neither of us can deny we are physically attracted to each other. Let’s just see where it goes. Right now we need to get dressed and get going, we don’t have much time.” He started to get up but turned to her for one more kiss which she welcomed.

They dressed in the dark, descended the stairs and entered the garage for the next step of their journey.

Chapter 34

As she followed Wyatt into the dark garage, Isabella looked around. She paused to allow her eyes to adjust to the dark and to get acclimated to her surroundings. With only the dim light of the moon streaming through the small windows to lead the way, she couldn't see much of anything.

When her eyes conformed to the dimness, she could see the huge garage had two double garage doors, three cars parked in those spots. At the opposite end of the garage doors was a built-in work bench with various tools lying on top, and the many large, built-in cabinets appeared to be very organized. A corkboard along the backside wall above the workbench held other tools and implements.

A dark-colored Jeep sat perpendicular to the parked cars and the garage doors. Isabella looked at the hard-top Jeep facing a side wall without a door. The Jeep looked like it could travel off-road and probably had four-wheel drive. She wondered how Wyatt intended to maneuver it out of one of the garage doors without moving any of the cars.

Wyatt threw her duffle bag in the back along with a couple of other things and got in the driver's seat. He looked back at Isabella. "Come on, hop in."

"How are you going to get the Jeep out?"

"I've got it covered. Come on, get in."

She jumped in, shut the door behind her, and buckled her seat belt.

He turned the key and the engine began to purr, barely making a sound. He pushed a button on the visor, and the wall in front of the

Jeep, the actual side wall of the garage, opened out soundlessly, lifting up just enough for the vehicle to be driven under.

Wyatt drove out of the garage and over the well-manicured yard. He pushed the button on the visor again. When Isabella looked back toward the house, she saw the exterior side wall of the garage, with shrubs attached, go down flat to the ground as if never disturbed.

Amazed, she looked at Wyatt, raising her eyebrows in question, but he raised his hand putting his finger to his mouth, indicating silence.

They continued across the yard, out along the side of the woods overgrown with trees. Not driving on a real road, it appeared to be a cut out trail in the woods. It hadn't been maintained, so grasses and weeds had grown over the tire tracks. Wyatt handled the Jeep on the rough terrain expertly in the dark without much noise or notice.

They traveled the path—couldn't really call it a road—in silence for about a half hour, and Isabella began to think they had been traveling in circles throughout the woods. She thought for sure she had seen this area before because many of the larger trees looked familiar.

At one point, they seemed to be out on a dirt road that hadn't been traveled for a long time. Wyatt continued driving while she looked around. She could see farther in the distance now by the light of the moon since this area had been cleared of the taller trees.

Open farmland on both sides wasn't tended or worked and appeared deserted along with the tumbling-down remains of a house, which probably, at one time, had been a very nice home for someone. The quiet sounds of night animals, prey and predators, foraging in the bushes and fallen trees along with the quiet hum of the Jeep were the only noises.

* * * *

Joe had been awakened to the wooden floor boards he lay on vibrating. He peeked out the window above his homemade bed. He followed the vehicle with his eyes and cursed the darkness. The moon didn't light the area enough for him to be able to make out anything except the outline of the vehicle. He thought it held two passengers, but with the dark, tinted windows, he couldn't be sure.

He watched until it passed out of sight, and then slowly sat back down. He wondered why someone, anyone, would be traveling on an untraveled road in the middle of the night by the fading light of the moon. He concluded it could only be because they had something or someone to hide.

He decided it would be easier to follow the tire tracks at the first light of day. It would also lessen the risk of being seen following. Having made his plans, he lay back down and slowly dozed off for a few more hours of much-needed sleep.

Chapter 35

They drove up and down and around the mountain roads behind Wyatt's house for what seemed like hours. It was indeed much colder up in the mountains now and almost daylight. So Isabella grabbed the red fleece jacket and quickly put it on.

They soon came to a dead-end, which was a wall of overgrown brush and trees.

Isabella looked at Wyatt, about to ask, "What now?" when he reached up and pushed a button on the visor of the passenger's side the car.

The brush wall straight ahead lifted forward, allowing Wyatt to drive the Jeep right underneath. He hit the button again and the "wall" of overgrown brush lowered to the ground behind them, without a sound, leaving behind no indication anything had changed, similar to the wall of the garage.

She couldn't withstand the suspense any longer. "Okay, Wyatt, where are we? Tell me!"

He looked at her, then behind them, still cautious about being overheard.

"Okay, we're almost there. My dad was a very inventive engineer, always tinkering with new ideas. He built this place as a vacation getaway, but he also wanted it to be a safe haven for his family. When you grow a large company as quickly as he did, you can make some enemies along the way.

"He was kidnapped and held for ransom about six or seven years ago. Dave and I, along with assistance from our unit, were able to apprehend the perp before anything happened, but it was a very scary

and frightening experience for my family, as I'm sure you can relate. It remained a bone of contention with Dad, and he wanted a more hidden, safe, obscure home for his family if case something similar would ever happen again. So he invented the invisible garage door along with the hidden entryway into the compound, among many other similar things.

"He just never got to use them. He made the compound self-sustaining and had the entire area wired for panoramic video surveillance. We just need to turn on the generator and push a few more buttons. Over the years, I spent a lot of time up here. I can slip in and out without leaving any tracks and without being noticed. And I can contact the outside world if I choose to from up here too."

* * * *

Isabella sat there listening, fascinated with all the planning and forethought that had gone into this project. His father had been ingenious and had lived and died before his time.

"How far are we from town?"

"Not that far at all, and with all the backtracking I did, I don't think anyone will be able to follow us."

"I thought we were going around in circles." She giggled.

Wyatt chuckled softly and nodded.

They had meandered along at a slower pace while he talked. When they came around a bend in the road, pulling in front of a beautiful, stunning two-story log home, Isabella was amazed with the beauty of it all.

The sun coming up over the eastern ridge began to light up the area. The two front steps led up to a wraparound porch that had a gorgeous etched-glass double-entry front door and two-story-tall windows on each side. There were tall, angular windows above them from the top of the doors. Rockers on the front porch looked very inviting as they moved back and forth in the light breeze.

Isabella sat in astonishment. The house, hidden among the tall, overgrown trees, fit into the level spot in the terrain, as if it had been there long before the trees.

Wyatt grabbed a couple of bags from the back, opened the passenger door, and ushered her to the front door. He opened the front door, went in, and Isabella followed close behind.

She stood in the elevated foyer while she observed the two stories with an open staircase along the left-side wall. A unique wood hand rail continued up the stairs and across the center of the room, allowing for a loft upstairs. A beautiful jewel-toned tapestry hung over the railing. A window seat built into an alcove at the bottom of the stairs was covered with soft, thick, comfortable pillows. *A great place to snuggle up with a good book.*

The rich, smooth honey-colored hardwood floors led to the large stone fireplace, which took up most of the side wall opposite the staircase. A dark cognac brown leather sofa and side chairs with a four-inch leather fringe along the bottom edge gave the room a western flair, extremely soft and comfortable-looking too.

Beyond the stairs and beside the tall windows appeared a dining area with a glass-top table, which reflected the trees outside. The table legs, made of a natural light wood, matched the adjacent kitchen cabinetry. The huge natural colored granite island in an exaggerated L-shape separated the kitchen from the dining and living areas.

Isabella turned around, looking behind her. Bookcases surrounded the double windows. She glanced toward the fireplace, sunken first floor, then back toward the kitchen.

She wondered if they had any food. Did he bring any with them? And since she now felt a chill, she wondered about electricity or heat? Wyatt had mentioned a generator, and she hoped it would be enough to keep them warm.

Wyatt had gone beyond the kitchen. After a minute or so, he returned to the foyer, picked up their bags, and took them up the stairs.

While Isabella tried to grasp the beauty around her, she thought this house seemed more like Wyatt, very strong and manly yet warm and homey. She could definitely see his handiwork everywhere. She heard his footsteps on the stairs and looked up at him.

He was so handsome as he stood on the stairs. He had taken off his lightweight jacket and was wearing a black turtleneck sweater and nice-fitting jeans. His broad shoulders and narrow waist reverberated with sexy and strong masculinity. He took her breath away.

Opening his arms wide, he asked, "Well, what do you think?"

Surprised by his question, she stuttered. "It's-it's so majestic, yet so homey. I love it! Kind of a mix of rugged and safe, like you."

"Thanks. That's what I like to hear. Come on upstairs with me and let me show you around."

She shivered and rubbed her arms.

"Are you cold? Do you want me to build a fire to take off the chill?"

She shivered again, her teeth chattering, and nodded.

Wyatt covered the distance to the huge fireplace quickly, and within moments, the warmth from a blazing fire was spreading throughout the house.

After they had warmed up, he showed her the bedroom, and the bath downstairs and the small office behind the kitchen containing the electronics and the computer "guts" to the compound's operations. He had already turned on the generators and the computers with five monitors attached, which activated the security system. They would be notified of any trespassers within the area.

He showed her the panoramic view from the downstairs windows before they headed up the stairs where he showed her two large master suites, each with its own attached bath and huge walk-in closets. Both rooms were fully furnished with king-size beds and matching dressers.

They admired the beautiful views from the upstairs windows, walking out onto the outside deck, sitting down on chairs. The views were breathtaking.

Isabella inhaled the clean, fresh mountain air, cool and refreshing.

They went back downstairs. Wyatt started coffee while Isabella warmed herself in front of the fireplace. She soon felt right at home and joined Wyatt in the kitchen. She started opening doors and drawers looking for mugs, spoons, and sugar. She was relieved to see the cabinets well stocked with food and every kitchen utensil or gadget that could be the envy of any gourmet chef.

They soon were sitting in front of the fireplace sipping coffee and eating toasted English Muffins. When they were finished, Isabella put their mugs and plates in the kitchen sink.

As she turned around, she saw the sun coming through the upper windows and shining on the large, thick round rug in front of the fireplace. The rug's center medallion, a design of blues and yellows, brightened and warmed the entire room. A spectacular vision of rainbow colors reflecting off the many windows.

Wyatt stood in the middle of the rug, his face highlighted, brightened and relaxed, as in the picture with his sister. She was flabbergasted by the wonder of him. She felt as if the rug revealed the feelings of her heart, which was filled with love.

By the time the fire started to die down, the sun had warmed up the air outside, and Wyatt suggested they take a walk. He needed to check on a couple things anyway. She pulled on her red fleece jacket and slipped into comfortable shoes. They opened the door and went outside. They walked and talked comfortably together with his fingers loosely laced through hers.

Occasionally Wyatt pointed out a particular bird or a certain flowering tree or bush that he, Amy, or Dave had planted. He showed her the place where they played football, being the grassiest area around, even though it still had a slight slope. Time flew by as they became lost in each other's company. They hadn't realized they had

been gone so long until Isabella yawned. They decided it was time for a quick lunch and maybe a nap.

* * * *

Dave made sure there were no patrols around Wyatt's property between two and four that morning, as they had agreed. In the meantime, he also received some disturbing information.

Matthew Miles, Wyatt's recently hired sales manager, had a connection to Michael Terrell. They were brothers, believe it or not. Matthew had used the last name of Miles for many years, so the association or relationship didn't show up on any background check. Now, digging deeper into his and Isabella's relationship, he became curious about Matthew's past and wanted more information.

He also received a report back from the local police department outside Denver. They had tried to contact Anna Donnelly, Isabella's mother, by phone with no answer. When they visited her apartment, there was no response to the doorbell or knocking. Talking to some of her neighbors they found out that no one had seen her coming or going for the last couple of weeks or so and thought she had gone on a cruise or an extended trip somewhere. The neighbors admitted it was odd she had been gone so long without telling anyone, especially since she was extremely involved with her church and a number of charities.

The police department had proceeded to get a search warrant for her premises. When they forcibly entered her home, they found her alive and well. Extremely scared but alive and well.

Very upset and frightened about her daughter being missing, possibly killed, it took considerable convincing and many promises of Isabella's well-being before Anna could be persuaded to talk. But once she got started...

She told them Michael Terrell had threatened to kill her *and* Isabella if she told anyone anything, saw anyone or even stepped

outside her door. He brought her food and anything else she might need, usually in the middle of the night.

When asked by the investigating detective, Cleaver, why she hadn't called the police, she had told him that Isabella was all she had left, that she *knew* Michael was serious about killing her, and that she thought he had killed before.

She hadn't seen Michael for about three days, she never saw a car or anyone else during her time in 'lock-down'.

"When was the last time you saw Michael?" Detective Cleaver asked Mrs. Richards.

About three days ago."

When Detective Summers arrived he spoke with Mrs. Donnelly and told her that her daughter was safe for now.

Of course, Mrs. Donnelly wanted to go to be with Isabella right away. The police located her in Stoney Creek, Virginia. And of course the questions on everybody's lips was how, when, where and why did she end up there.

They all agreed that Mrs. Donnelly needed to come with them into police custody to keep her safe until they could further investigate. And thanks to Dave giving Detective Cleaver the heads-up on what Mrs. Donnelly's reaction would be, they were able to convince her it was for the sake of her daughter. Det. Summers talked to her again, explaining that once they got her into a safehouse she would be able to talk to her daughter. With a little more persuasion she acquiesced and went with them.

Dave felt good when he read the report indicating Isabella's mother was safe in police custody. But the getting-something-accomplished good feeling had been short-lived, quickly replaced with a sick-to-his-stomach feeling. A countrywide BOLO—Be On Lookout—for Michael Terrell, alias "Mick the Man," along with an arrest warrant for murder had been issued by the Denver State Police.

Now, not only did they have to contend with Joe, Amanda, Spike, and his dangerous cohorts in crime, but also now Michael, who may

or may not be a part of Spike's organization. *Let's not forget about the not-cleared-from-suspicion Matthew Miles.*

He received a location confirmation on Spike in the Norfolk area and notification that Amanda had been picked up along the interstate outside Stoney Creek and was in custody. Charges were pending because she was still being questioned.

He felt certain she would soon be spilling her guts especially since he considered her to be merely a pawn in the game. The district attorney's willingness to make a deal for immunity would definitely help, and he was sure that could be arranged.

Work history verification on Isabella revealed a man introducing himself as Michael Terrell had called Lakes Elementary to inform them he and Isabella had eloped and that she would no longer be working there.

Boy, this guy had really tied up all his loose ends, hadn't he?

But he hadn't counted on Wyatt, who had received all the same reports via his BlackBerry.

Dave knew where to find Wyatt. He had been there many times and had even helped Wyatt and his dad with the building and design of the security system. He didn't want anything going down within the compound, destroying the integrity of its safety. With all the precautions, the security systems set up and in place, he felt assured no one could get close to disturb let alone destroy.

Chapter 36

Joe woke before sunup and went outside to relieve himself. It was his first priority. His second priority was finding food. He was starving. He knew there wasn't any food in the house. He had already looked last night. But after scavenging around in the cruiser, he found some cheese crackers. He woofed down the crackers for breakfast, got in the car, and proceeded to follow the road or path that the vehicle of interest had traveled just a few hours earlier. Up and down and around the mountain he drove, thinking, at least, it had to be the same road.

The fog began to dissipate with the rising sun, but with the grown bushes along the side of the road and the sharp switchbacks, he couldn't see very far in front of him. The heavy foliage blocked his view so he couldn't see any tracks on the road, not even his own. At one point, he thought he drove off the road and onto a foot path. He soon began doubting he was even on the same road.

Sometime later, Joe arrived at a dead end. He couldn't get through the brush ahead. It appeared as if the road had only been cleared to this point. He parked the car and got out. He looked around but didn't notice the spectacular view. He didn't see any tracks of any kind, no sign of anyone having driven here recently, no bent grass, nada. He decided that he must have made a wrong turn somewhere.

Getting back in the car and backing up into the brush, he began driving in the opposite direction. He noticed a number of small roads cutting off from the "main" road. He could spend a lot of time on each one of the small roads looking for that particular Jeep but right now he didn't have many options. He took the first side road he came to.

Chapter 37

Wyatt had taken all available weapons and ammunition he thought might be necessary to defend his property. He put his .22 revolver in his shoulder holster and pulled on his light jacket. He wanted to be prepared for any and all possibilities.

While he and Isabella had been out walking, he had checked the perimeter of the compound as well as the tree-mounted cameras. Everything appeared to be working properly. At one point, he thought he heard the rumbling of a car engine, but couldn't be sure because of the branches and leaves rustling.

Isabella busied herself with lunch preparations while Wyatt checked on the security monitors. He read his e-mail and realized he needed to call Dave. He sat down in front of the monitors while he waited for Dave to pick up.

Dave and Wyatt talked, discussing and considering their options and alternatives. Dave received an e-mail from Sam, who had been working undercover as a member of Spike's gang for the past few months.

"Spike sent Sam to Stoney Creek to find 'the girl' who Joe supposedly or allegedly 'lost.' Sam needs to bring the girl, aka Isabella, back to Norfolk by midnight Tuesday. Apparently, Spike is moving on again, so we need to make our move before then. Sam also got orders from Spike to off Joe in the process, so Sam has to find Joe and keep him under wraps until we can deliver Isabella."

"Any word about the other missing girl, Megan, from Denver?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. Hughes and his team located the house in town where Isabella and Megan were held. He and another team

went there to fingerprint and collect evidence. Also, Sam has information for Hughes which could lead us to her. We'll get Megan, too. I'm sure."

"Good, I sent an e-mail to our good buddy Val at HQ requesting an investigation into Richard Donnelly's death. I'm interested in hearing the results."

"Me too."

Wyatt had been watching the monitors while talking to Dave and noticed a movement outside the main entry gate. A police cruiser pulled to a stop and parked. A man dressed in a police uniform, got out, looked about, returned to the car, and left.

"Did you send someone here in a cruiser?" Wyatt asked Dave.

"No, I wouldn't do that without you knowing about it. Why?"

"Well, a cruiser just pulled up and parked at the northeast gate, a white man, about five-eight, one hundred eighty pounds, white shirt, dark pants. What do you make of that?"

Dave put him on hold for a minute while he shuffled around a pile of papers on his desk until he located the one he needed. He quickly reviewed the report and went back to Wyatt on the phone.

"Uh, Wyatt, they haven't located Richards' car yet. What do you think the chances are that the car belongs to him? That would mean whoever has..."

Wyatt rubbed the back of his neck where his hair was standing on end. "I know what it means. They're here already." He drummed his fingers against his lips while he continued to watch the monitors, as the car drove away.

"Dave, uh, the car's leaving now. I have the alarm system activated for any intruders into the compound and that'll give me an hour or so before anyone gets to us." His voice changed, taking on a stronger, harsh, affirmative tone. "And if or when they do, I'll be ready."

By then he'd have a more definitive plan. In the meantime, Wyatt reached for the handle of his gun in his shoulder harness under his

arm. Just the touch of the cold metal made him feel much more secure.

Dave and Wyatt talked for a few minutes more before Isabella walked into the office. "Lunch is ready, whenever you are," she whispered.

"Come in the back way, okay? I'll see you tomorrow."

Chapter 38

As Isabella and Wyatt sat down to eat, Isabella asked, “How do you feel about grilled cheese sandwiches and tomato soup?”

“That’s my favorite. How did you know?”

“It’s one of my favorites too, and that’s good ’cause it’s what I made for lunch.”

After Wyatt had taken a couple bites, he said, “Oh, by the way, I have some news. Dave’s coming tomorrow morning to give us updates on everything he’s learned.”

She studied Wyatt’s face as he ate, wondering what else Dave had found out, what Wyatt hadn’t told her. She quickly became angry. She stopped eating, staring at him while her anger increased. Her brows furrowed, her lips became tense, and her shoulders became rigid. She had to trust him, a stranger who made her more than aware of all her senses. She expected him to trust her as well. With everything.

The day they spent together had been beautiful, beginning with watching the sun rise over the mountaintop; exploring the stunning terrain; the bright blue skies against the panoramic vista of tall trees, some in bud and others leafed out, swaying in the cool spring breeze. Wyatt had talked about the different species during their walk, and she had been amazed at his substantial knowledge of the area.

Isabella began cleaning up the lunch dishes and the kitchen when she shivered, suddenly chilled. Wyatt started a warming fire. She had been quiet since their conversation.

“Do you mind if I make a cup of tea?” she asked quietly.

“Of course not, help yourself. The house is pretty well stocked, so you should be able to find some tea bags in the first door to the right of the microwave.”

“Thanks!”

* * * *

Joe traveled every side road he came across and still no signs of any traffic or any recent travel. He had gotten nowhere. He was beginning to think he had been driving around in circles all day. He hadn't had anything to drink or eat except some cheese crackers early this morning. Both he and the car were running on empty, and now, as luck would have it, it was starting to get cool.

He had no idea of his physical location and knew it would soon be nightfall. He stopped the car to look around. He needed to find a place of shelter for the night. He didn't want to go back to the shack he had used the night before, didn't think he could find it anyway. He decided to get back onto the wider path and head back up the mountain.

After traveling a few miles the car began to jerk and sputter, and then died. Out of gas. End of the line.

He tried to get the car off the road as far as he could, but the high banks on both sides prohibited much success. He would have to hoof it from here to find shelter.

He got out of the car and started walking along the path. He could see a number of tire tracks now but couldn't discern his own. Since he had gone back and forth so many times most of the day, they all looked the same.

The sun had gone behind some clouds and the temperature began cooling down fast. He buttoned up the light weight jacket he had found in the cruiser and kept walking, looking for some kind of hidey-hole.

He soon found a thick grouping of pine trees in a small clearing. The ground beneath the trees was covered with pine needles and would make a soft bed while the overhang would keep him warm. He could start a small fire in the clearing, if necessary, to get some warmth back in his bones.

Reaching the trees in no time, he sat close to the newly started fire and sucked in all the much-needed warmth. Joe watched the smoke drift up above the treetops.

* * * *

Wyatt entered the computer room and partially shut the door. He turned on the monitors and watched “Intruder, Intruder” blink across the screen. He had turned the volume down earlier or there would have been a large siren going off right now. He had to act now. He couldn’t wait for the arrival of Dave and Sam so they could put their plan into action.

Wyatt read a couple of e-mails, one bringing a smile to his face, then turned off the monitors after another final check and walked out of the living 2room. Isabella sat in front of the fireplace curled up in one of the chairs with a book in her hand, fast asleep. He lightly covered her with a blanket, put another log on the fire, picked up his jacket, and quietly went out the front door.

Wyatt headed to the southwest corner of the compound. He knew this area very well. He and Dave had often come here and played catch and football because it was the most level part of all the property. He stopped a moment and listened. Someone was following him.

He quietly crept around in a circle coming up behind Isabella. He moved stealthily closer and then grabbed Isabella from behind.

He tried to whisper in her ear. “Shush, it’s me. Don’t make a sound.” He removed his hand from her mouth and saw that she was trembling and gasping for air. He pulled her to him and held her

tightly. "What are you doing here?" he whispered. "I need a few minutes to myself."

"Wyatt, I'm scared. Where are you going? I don't want to be alone."

"You'll be fine at the house. I need a couple of minutes alone. Come on, I'll take you back to the house. Why don't you make us something warm for dinner? I'll be back shortly."

He stood at the edge of the tree line and watched her walk the rest of the way to the front door and go into the house. He turned around quickly and headed back in the opposite direction. He had some catching up to do.

Isabella paced inside the house while looking out the windows watching Wyatt turn and walk away. *I wonder what he's up to.*

She sat down on the couch thinking what he might be doing, why he couldn't trust her enough to confide in her, and she didn't like where her thoughts led her.

She stood, grabbed her jacket, and once again left the confines of the house. She had to find out what he was hiding from her, why he was being so sneaky. She glanced around at the surrounding trees and paths and decided to take a roundabout way to meet him in the middle instead of following him directly.

Although she didn't know the area as well as Wyatt, she did have a good feel for it after her brief tour earlier today. She could now see the differences in the trees and the size of the mountains since her disorientation was less and less with each waking moment.

Thinking that maybe he had gone there for some quiet time, to think, she decided she would start by going to the area where he and Dave had played football.

Once she found the level spot he had pointed out to her earlier, she glanced around, listening intently for anyone about. She only heard the leaves rustling in the slight breeze. She studied the area, and making a 360-degree turn, she noticed a slight ravine before a higher,

steep bank. She could see much more from on top of the bank, so she started making her way down the ravine and up the other side.

Once she arrived at the top of the bank, she looked around in awe of the view. She thought she could see for miles. She didn't see anyone around so she sat down to catch her breath. She needed some alone time too.

She pulled her knees up to her chest and wrapped her jacket around them. Clouds blocked the sun. The increasing wind made the already cool air cooler. A storm must be brewing. She leaned her head onto her knees seeking her body heat.

Suddenly, her short hair was grabbed from behind. Her head whipped backward. Pulled to her feet, a hand covered her mouth. A burly arm wrapped around her waist. She was being dragged away from the top of the hill.

She screamed for Wyatt to stop it, screamed that she was sorry, but her words were muffled. With another deep intake of breath, she realized it wasn't Wyatt's clean woodsy-scented hand over her mouth. The smell was of cigarette smoke and sweat and was familiar to her.

Oh. My. God. Joe. He had found her! Again!

Chapter 39

Joe couldn't believe his luck. While out looking for firewood, he glanced up and couldn't believe his eyes. The girl he had been searching for sat in front of him on top of an incline. Now was his chance.

Slowly, he made his way toward her backside. When he could reach her, he had grabbed her hair. He had covered her mouth with his other hand and dragged her to his new campsite. She fell on her way down a slight hill, ripping a hole in her sweatpants but there was no slowing down.

He kicked dirt onto the fire to eliminate any smoke signals. He had found some old plastic wiring on the ground while out gathering wood earlier, and it would come in real handy right now to tie her up.

She started to kick her feet and flail her arms at him.

"I've had enough of you, missy. You stay still or I'll slit your throat right here and now and throw you in the bushes. No one will find you for days or months, maybe even years."

When Joe removed his hand from Isabella's mouth, she started to take in a deep breath. But before she could make a sound, he punched her in the face. She fell to the ground. Her head hit the rock-hard dirt and she collapsed. He made plans in his head while tying her up. They would spend the night here, and in the morning, he would find a way to get her to Norfolk. He would call Spike with the good news and see if he had any ideas. He hadn't failed after all.

Joe didn't waste any time securing her for the night. He dragged her limp body to a tree and propped her back up against it. He pulled a dirty handkerchief out of his back pocket and tied it as a gag around

her mouth. He pulled her arms behind the tree and tied them together with the wire he had found. Then he tied her feet. He stood back and admired his handiwork.

Her head had fallen forward. Her lip dripped blood on her jacket. He picked her head up by her hair. Her face was already swollen and turning colors, her lip bleeding.

Good! Next time she'll remember to listen to me an' do what I tell her.

* * * *

Once again, Wyatt headed to the southwest corner of the compound with a rope around his shoulder. He stopped a moment, listening intently. The hair on the back of his neck bristled. He wasn't alone.

He crept around in a large circle and came up behind where he had last found Isabella. No one was there. He listened intently and looked around furtively, his sight and hearing sharpened. He looked for tracks. His heart lurched when he saw two sets of footprints. The larger ones were deep and noticeable in the now-wet ground while the smaller ones were indistinguishable as if their owner had been dragged through the dirt.

He looked back toward the house but couldn't see it clearly enough to determine if Isabella was inside. He had no choice. He had to follow the tracks, but first he had to check on Isabella.

His heart beat rapidly as he raced toward the house. Before he even opened the door, he knew in his gut what he would find. He searched the entire space, his ears listening to the slightest sound of movement, but there was none. He quickly made his way to the computer room and looked at all the monitors, turning their views so he could see all of the surrounding area. He reviewed the last thirty to forty-five minutes sequentially from each camera in the area he suspected.

He sought and found the sight he so much didn't want to see. Isabella tied to a tree, her head lolling to one side. Her captor stood in front of her with a smile on his face, obviously very proud of himself and his success.

How had the son of a bitch gotten to Isabella before I got to him?

Wyatt noted the location and realized they were a short distance outside the compound. He checked the computer log, which listed any intruders within or close to the outside perimeter. From the log, he was able to ascertain when and where Isabella had breached the infrared security line. It would take him about twenty minutes running at full speed to reach her.

And as God is my witness, he had better not have hurt her in any way.

He grabbed his cell phone, another clip of ammunition, and another weapon from his bag before he headed toward that area. He ran to the location of the footprints and began following them. He had learned a lot about tracking in his profession, but a hurricane left smaller tracks than this guy.

There was an indentation indicating the smaller person falling to his or her knees and then only appearing on the ground now and then. Obviously, Isabella had been dragged or half-carried most of the way.

He slowed as he got closer to the area where she was being held. He needed to even out his breathing so he could come upon them as discreetly as possible. He moved closer to the pine cropping where he had last seen the intruder on the monitor.

Without making a sound, he sneaked low to the ground, searching the area and listening intently for any sound. Isabella sat a short distance away with her back tied to a tree, her head hung limply to the side, her mouth gagged.

He saw a movement out of the corner of his right eye. He slithered up to a tree behind the trespasser to observe him without notice. The idiot stood there taking a leak, oblivious to his surroundings or his Peeping Tom.

Wyatt noted his jacket and pants were the same color as the Stoney Creek Police Department. Something about the color made the hair on the back of his neck stand on end.

He silently drew his gun from his ankle. His senses heightened. He walked silently up behind Isabella's abductor.

"Don't move or you're dead." Wyatt held his gun to the intruder's head and took off the safety. "Put your hands on your head."

The man stood perfectly still, didn't move. He quickly complied with the request, especially after Wyatt actually hit his head with the barrel of his gun.

Wyatt kicked his feet apart and searched the man's pockets, patting him down with one hand while the holding the man's hands together on his head. He found a gun in the man's waistband, removed it, and put it in his waistband. He proceeded to frisk him, looking for additional weapons, and found a large pocketknife in the side of his boot.

"Who are you?"

"Joe, Joe Sneed."

"Can't you read the No Trespassing signs?"

Joe shrugged.

"What are doing on my property?"

"I was lookin' for someone."

"Who?" Wyatt asked without turning him around.

"What do ya mean?"

"Who were you looking for?" Wyatt enunciated each word to make sure he understood them.

"M-my old lady. We had a fight. and she runned off. That's her over there tied to that there big tree." Joe's voice trembled.

Wyatt stood still. He'd heard that voice before, in his own backyard, and again at his front door. Finally, it all made some sense.

He jerked Joe around. He stared at him through narrowed eyes. Wyatt remembered that it had been Joe who had done all the talking in his backyard during the chase for Isabella *and*, as he looked closer,

he realized Joe looked like the cop who had come to his door to check on “things.” In fact, he still had on the same shirt and pants now, only he had covered them with a department-issued jacket. Therefore, he could be and probably was Richards’s killer.

Wyatt looked at how slovenly Joe was dressed. Half of his shirttail tucked, half undone, and pants worn far below his waist. A real disgrace to the uniform. He continued pointing the gun at his head. “Are you a cop?”

“No.” Joe directed his eyes to the ground, his filthy hair hanging across his dirty unshaven face.

“Why are you wearing a police uniform if you’re not a cop? Where’d you get it?”

Joe, once again, only shrugged.

Livid, outraged, Wyatt had to use a great deal of inner strength to stand calmly waiting for an answer when he wanted nothing more than to pull the trigger to kill the son of a bitch right now.

Joe turned suddenly and made a run for it.

Wyatt smoothly lifted his hand holding his gun, aimed, and pulled the trigger. Joe fell to the ground with a gunshot wound in his left leg. Wyatt quickly pounced on him, punching Joe in the face, knocking him unconscious. Before Joe knew what happened to him Wyatt had him tied up to a tree tighter than a shoelace, a big, dirty rope in his mouth.

Wyatt paced in front of him and glanced at Isabella. He looked at him with so much revulsion for the kidnapper, cop killer he was, he kicked dirt at him before he could get a grip on his emotions.

“I should kill you right now and put you out of your misery,” Wyatt said, still pacing. “But that would be too easy for both of us. I want to see you suffer, just like you’ve made all those girls suffer. Oh yeah, I have you all figured out, and this time I have witnesses who, I can assure you,” he glanced at Isabella, “won’t be afraid to testify. I’m not through with you yet.” Wyatt sneered at him as he walked away, taking his cell phone out of his pocket.

He called Dave, requested backup, gave him the GPS coordinates area address, and snapped the phone shut.

He ran to Isabella and checked for a pulse. He was relieved when he heard her strong, steady heartbeat. He cut her restraints. She fell motionless into his arms. He ran his trembling fingers over her arms and legs feeling for any broken bones.

He patted her cheeks, rubbed her hands. "Bella, can you hear me? Wake up, Bella. It's Wyatt. Don't leave me now, Isabella. We were just getting to know each other. You're safe now."

She remained motionless, her swollen eyes closed, dried blood on her lip.

The thought of Isabella not being in his life frightened him like nothing ever before. He'd promised to keep her safe. He'd promised to take care of her. He'd failed her.

Memories of his loss and betrayal of his late fiancée spun through his head. It was a blur, burning a huge hole in his chest where his heart had been. He broke out in a cold sweat. His shoulders slumped as he laid his head against Isabella's neck. Tears filled his eyes and ran down his cheeks unchecked.

Thunder sounded in the distance. He knew if they didn't move now they would be caught in the storm. Wyatt turned back, looked at Joe with disgust. "If I were you, I'd be praying for a bear or another wild animal to find you out here before I get back."

He picked Isabella up in his arms and laid her head gently on his shoulder. He started back to the house. Wyatt spit out the side of his mouth, trying to get out the remaining bad taste.

Chapter 40

Isabella felt cold drops of water hitting her face. She smelled rain and fresh pine. She could feel arms around her, carrying her. Then she was flooded with memories. Joe! He had found her again.

She tried to scream but nothing came out. It was too hard to breathe. She kicked her legs, flailed her arms, but they didn't connect with anything.

Then she heard the sweetest voice. "Shush, Bella. You're okay. You're safe with me now." He pulled her to him, holding her tightly, whispering words of reassurance.

"Wyatt, thank God, you found me! I was so scared. He found me. Joe took me again. I didn't know if you'd be able to find me, if you'd come for me," she whispered through trembling lips. "I don't want you to leave me alone again."

He softly covered her lips with his and caressed her back. "Can you stand?"

"I'm not sure. My head is still spinning. I might need some help."

"Let's get back to the house out of the rain. Then we'll test your legs."

Isabella held him close, running her hands through his hair,

Wyatt and Isabella held each other tight as he carried her to the house. Wyatt could feel Isabella shivering, her teeth chattering as they reached the house. He settled her on the couch, bundling her in a blanket. Wyatt added another log to the already steady fire to quickly warm up the room.

“You need to get out of those wet clothes. I’ll go turn on the heat in the bathroom upstairs and start a hot bath for you. Then you can relax with a hot cup of tea. How’s that sound?”

“That would be wonderful,” she managed to say through chattering teeth.

Wyatt helped her up the stairs to the bathroom and left her to get undressed and in the tub. When Isabella started down the stairs, he was starting up the steps with two cups of tea. She had towel-dried her hair, put on a robe and looked refreshed, except for her face, which was still quite discolored and swollen.

Holding an ice bag on her face, Isabella relaxed by the warmth of the fire. The hot bath, hot tea, and warmth of the fireplace had finally reached her inner core and warmed her up. The ice eliminated some of the pain in her face.

Isabella caught Wyatt’s scent before he sat down on the other end of the couch. He had showered and changed into nice-fitting worn jeans and a long-sleeved T-shirt. He slumped into the couch with a sigh, obviously relaxed.

She didn’t want to talk about what had happened or what could have happened if Wyatt hadn’t arrived when he did. But she at least needed to thank him.

“Thank you, Wyatt, for coming to my rescue.” She looked down at her clasped hands. “I don’t know what I would have done had you not been there, let alone imagine what Joe maybe had planned for me.”

Wyatt stared into the fire, at the flames going higher and higher up the chimney as if trying to reach the sky.

“So how did this happen? Did I get outside the perimeter of the compound somehow where Joe could find me?”

“That’s exactly what happened. I found you by reviewing all the activity on the security cameras.”

“Are you going to just leave Joe out there? What if he gets untied and comes after me again?” She got up from the couch and ran to

look out all the windows and to make sure the doors were locked. She chewed her lower lip waiting for Wyatt's reply.

"Bella, stop. You don't need to be worried. I called Dave already, and he's sending some officers to pick him up. They've probably already found him and have him in custody, so you can sit back down and relax, okay?"

She sat on the couch but with hesitation. She didn't like the idea of Joe being so close. She didn't want to think about it anymore either.

"So tell me, do you like it here in the mountains better than in town?"

"As a matter of fact I do. I don't care for the intense heat in the middle of summer in the valley, but the temperatures here in the mountains stay pretty comfortable. I even enjoy the cool night air. It's refreshing. Of course, the snow in the winter is picture perfect. It's beautiful and so peaceful. What about Colorado? Do you like it there?"

She watched the flames licking up the walls of the fireplace and took a sip of her hot tea before she answered.

"Yes, but it's different. It's much drier and the weather's not very dependable. Sometimes even in June we could get a large amount of snow and damaging hail throughout the summer. And in winter we could have days with seventy to seventy-five-degree temperatures."

"What about your apartment? What's it like?" he asked.

"It's small but perfect for one person with one bedroom, one bath, just the right size for me. I'm not home a lot of the time since work keeps me busy, I try to work out or run everyday but it's perfect for my needs right now. Easy to clean, too. And what I like about it most is that it's all mine." She smiled with pride.

Isabella had calmed down, and settled in, and finally warm, was enjoying the conversation when Wyatt noticed her looking toward the uncovered windows, as if expecting someone.

“You don’t need to worry about Joe or anyone else getting near us. I turned the volume up on the security system so if we have an intruder anywhere on the property the alarm will sound, so just relax. I’m enjoying this time with you, and it’s great to be able to get to know you better.”

Isabella, although relaxed, found herself more afraid of the emotions emanating from the man sitting next to her than of the potential intruders peeking in the windows. The man who risked his life to rescue her from Joe. The man who could make her forget how he could break her heart. The man who could make her forget the seriousness of her predicament. The man who she could easily get used to being with and having around all the time. The man who she thought she was falling in love with.

She watched his lips as he spoke, thinking about them kissing her lips, her ears, and her neck. She could taste him and smell his scent. When he talked, gestured with his hands, she could feel his strong hands caressing her, and she quickly became aroused. Her nipples hardened, piercing through the light fabric of her shirt, aching for his touch. She felt a tickle in her pelvic area that only he could reach. She began to get more anxious with every passing minute, tired after the early morning start and knowing they would be getting ready for bed soon.

Wyatt might be able to protect her from her kidnappers but who would protect her heart from him? There was no way to protect her completely, nowhere to hide her heart, which, she realized, she had already given to him.

He had told her that very few people knew about this place, that he had never brought Rachael here. In fact, Dave and his sister Amy had been the only other people to come here. So why had he insisted on bringing her here?

She finished her tea while watching Wyatt. He appeared in his own world, in deep thought as he stared into the fireplace. She got up

and went to the kitchen to put the dirty dishes into the dishwasher. “Do you want anything while I’m up?”

“No”—*just you*—“but thanks anyway. I’m good,” he said as he looks at her with a hungry look. “Every time I think about what might have happened to you I want to wrap you up in my arms and never let you go. Even when I get a trace of your scent, your perfume, or hear your voice I get aroused,” he whispered.

Isabella returned to the couch, and curled up in his open arms. She felt so warm, relaxed, and content.

* * * *

Both deep in their own thoughts when Wyatt’s cell phone rang, it startled both of them. His caller ID indicated that it was Dave.

“Not sure you checked your BlackBerry for new info so I thought I better call you and let you know. Sam is coming along tomorrow. I know how you feel about strangers within the compound, but I know you’ll want to talk to Sam personally and go over the plan.”

“I agree with you. We’re both anxious to get going on this so we’ll see you tomorrow.” Wyatt clicked his cell phone closed and relayed the information to Isabella.

“Who’s Sam?”

“Sam’s an undercover operative, and the less you know about him, the better off we’ll both be. We’ll put together a plan with his help.” Wyatt wondered what kind of plan Dave and Sam might have in mind because he knew he would have one of his own.

“I assure you that whatever kind of plan we devise, it’ll be a safe one. After tomorrow this nightmare will be over.”

Chapter 41

When she heard him say, “After tomorrow this nightmare will be over,” happiness and elation ran through Isabella. But the mere thought of not being with Wyatt after tomorrow quickened her heart.

She didn’t like the feeling. She sat up, studying Wyatt’s strong jaw and suddenly lunged at him, throwing her arms around his neck and pulling him close.

She welcomed him into her arms, embraced him, pulling him close to her. She closed her eyes, trying to memorize his scent, the feel of his hard body against her, the softness of his kisses. He smelled so good, and he fit so right in her arms. She couldn’t get enough of him. She didn’t want this night to end.

She finally pulled away from him but only far enough to look at his face, deep into his eyes, her heart pounding in her ears, a quickening in her loins.

“We shouldn’t do this. It isn’t right,” she whispered.

And when Wyatt kissed her, she lost herself in his hot, wet mouth on hers. She forgot momentarily about anything and everything except how good it felt to have his lips of hers.

How could this be wrong when it feels so right? She put her arms about his neck, ran her fingers through his hair, and gently turned her head to break the kiss. She had become breathless and needed some air.

“Wyatt, Wyatt”—she kissed him again and again—“what are you doing to me?” She panted as she felt him kiss her neck, lick and suck her ear lobe.

“I can’t stop thinking about you, Isabella. I can’t get enough of you. I want you, all of you, now,” he moaned, pushing toward her.

She arched her back toward him and felt his very evident erection through his jeans. She put her hand on his crotch and rubbed back and forth.

He moaned deeply, quickly put her aside to remove his jeans, pulling her hard against him. They both gasped for breath as he pulled her top over her head. She ripped the buttons open on his shirt, quickly removing it. He kissed her neck, made his way to her breasts, and took first one, then the other into his mouth.

She moaned, arching against him, gasping his name, wanting more of him.

She felt him open her robe, and feel her sexy, satiny panties and caress her legs. She moaned as he pushed his hand between her legs, feeling her hot, soft mound. He moved his hand deeper into her soft hot, wet folds until he found her clitoris. He flicked his thumb back and forth over her it until she squirmed, screaming his name.

Isabella became breathless. She gasped, wanting more, so much more. His touch alone created delicious tendrils of electricity spiraling through her and became too tempting to ignore. She closed her eyes and groaned. Where he touched, blood rushed, sending sparks, fireworks bursting.

Wyatt kissed her face, her neck, and her breasts, all the way down her stomach to her soft mound of curls. He slowly lifted her to the softness of the rug in front of the fireplace.

She sucked his lips and his ear lobes while running her hands up and down his muscled, hairy chest. She bent to lick his nipples, he groaned, lunging toward her. She took hold of his smooth and hard cock with both hands and rubbed up and down its length. She licked the tip with her tongue, and then took it into her mouth, sucking deeply.

She heard him make a deep guttural sound in his throat as he pulled her up, kissing her again, pushing his tongue into her mouth,

sucking her tongue, touching her everywhere. She couldn't breathe. She wanted him to be inside her and now. He used his fingers to separate the hot moist folds, and inserted a finger. She knew she was so hot, so wet, and so ready for him. He prodded her with his finger inside her, in and out, in and out. She shoved herself against his hand, whimpering, calling out his name.

He quickly removed her panties, slipped on a condom, and moved on top of her, aligning his body with hers. Slowly, oh so slowly, he entered her. She lifted toward him, taking all of him, engulfing his cock. He began moving within her at a frantic pace, heard her deep breathing, thrusting in and out, in and out. Beads of sweat appeared on Wyatt's forehead.

With her head spinning, Isabella grabbed the nearby blanket and scrunched it in her hands in sweet torment.

Wyatt put his hands behind her back and lifted her, rolling them both over so now she was on top of him. She bent her legs to straddle his body, impaling herself deeper onto his shaft. He reached up with his hands rushing her taunt nipples with his fingers. His tongue followed his fingers, first blowing on her breasts, flicking his tongue across the light tip of her breast. Her nipples ached with pleasure.

Her skin ignited in a haze of heat, every nerve ending between her thighs. He placed his hands on her hips and lifted her up and down, up and down, impaling her deeper with each move. Instantly, the fire melted her insides. Liquid warmth seeped from between her pulsing folds.

He gently rolled her onto her back and drove into her, relishing the feel of her hot, wetness against his hardened flesh.

She cried out as his cock thrust deep into her. He felt so solid, so strong. Panting, she opened her eyes and looked at his face, observing his darkened blue eyes and softened features. He smiled.

He wrapped his arms around her and thrust deeper, jolting her with another wave of pleasure. He groaned and began pumping them both to climax.

Wyatt tensed, then released, crumbling down on top of her. They both exploded in rapture, breathless, sweating but sated. She relaxed the lock of her legs around his waist. She hadn't realized she had put them there.

They lay together, he still inside her, each listening to the other's heart beating, as their bodies relaxed. He gently moved to her side, pulling her with him, and untangling their legs, they snuggled. Neither of them said anything. No words could describe the emotions racing through her.

She interrupted his thoughts. "Wyatt, when you touch me or come near me it's like I'm on fire. I lose all my senses. I can't think, all I can do is feel your nearness. I've never felt this way before. I've never climaxed like this before either."

He thought for a moment while he looked into her eyes, "I don't know, Isabella. I've never, I've never"—he fumbled for words—"I can't seem to get enough of you."

"Days ago I sat alone, trapped in a small room with ruthless people and now, all these, these emotions are tumbling through me. I don't understand. I can't grasp all that's happening. I can't believe it's happening to me," Isabella whispered.

Wyatt reached up, grabbed the blanket from the end of the couch and tossed it over them. Pulling her closer to him, he nuzzled her neck. She felt him relax, his arms slightly loosening their hold on her, his breathing deeper. He was almost asleep when he muttered, "I want to keep you."

She remained awake for some time after hearing Wyatt's deep breathing, assuring her that he was sleeping soundly. She thought about what he had said and wondered if he meant it and how it made her feel; to be wanted by someone the way she wanted him. She soon drifted off to sleep, dreaming of him.

Chapter 42

Sunlight came streaming in the tall windows filling the room with radiance. Wyatt had gotten up a couple of times during the night to check and put more wood on the fire and each time, when he had returned, he made love to Isabella again. They both appeared insatiable. They simply couldn't get enough of each other.

He felt alive again, as if a teenager having sex for the first time, exhilarated and liberated, unburdened with the unwelcome baggage of Rachael's betrayal and consequential death, as well as the deaths of his parents.

He lay by her side watching the sun glint off her dark auburn hair. He gently stroked her cheek with the knuckles of his hand, and she moved closer to his side. He ran his fingers down her arms. His hand surrounded her breast, gently kneading, squeezing the nipple, which instantly became hard and stiff.

She moaned, pushing herself against him while reaching for him. He quickly entered her, pumping into her while she matched his every thrust. He kissed her eyes, neck, and breasts. Their pace accelerated, both breathing rapidly.

She called out his name.

"Say it again, Isabella. I love to hear you say my name."

She obeyed, right before bright lights exploded before her eyes and she climaxed. He soon tensed and then he released.

They lay in each other's arms while the bright green leaves in the trees danced in the bright, clear sunlight pouring in over them. Wyatt finally got up, pulled on his jeans, tossed another log on the fire, then made his way to the kitchen to get a pot of coffee going. Isabella

wrapped herself in the blanket and sat in wonder in front of the fireplace. She wanted to ask Wyatt what he meant last night when he said, "I want to keep you," but she feared his answer, especially in the light of day.

After some fresh coffee and toast, they showered and dressed. Wyatt took his laptop to check e-mails and again checked the monitors while Isabella went to get comfortable with a good book.

Chapter 43

Wyatt sat with his laptop on the couch near Isabella. Wyatt's cell phone rang startling them both, and they jumped apart.

"Wyatt, we're about ten miles out," Dave said.

"We'll be waiting," Wyatt told him before he snapped his phone shut.

Wyatt greeted both Dave and Sam and introduced Sam to Isabella. Sam was middle-aged with shoulder-length light brown hair, bluish-green eyes, and he wore a diamond stud in his left ear. His tight t-shirt revealed his well-toned pecs, and the rolled tight sleeves of his shirt exposed his large biceps. His tight-fitting jeans and tall biker boots added to his scary-looking, but handsome, appearance.

"Please, sit down. Would anyone like some coffee, hot tea or something to drink?"

"I'll take a coffee, Wyatt. I'd love something stronger but I'm still on the clock," Sam answered.

"Me too," Dave said.

"I'll get it, Wyatt. Do you want a cup as well?" Isabella asked.

"Sure, that's great. Thanks!"

"Wow, this is a real nice place you got way up here, Wyatt," Sam said as he looked around the house.

"Thanks, Sam, I like it and its privacy, and I want to keep it that way," Wyatt said, staring at Sam.

"No problem with me, Wyatt. I wore a blindfold on the way here and will leave no footprint when I'm gone." Sam stared into Wyatt's eyes as if making a pact.

After coffee for everyone and a little chitchat about the drive up, Dave and Sam looked at each other.

“Dave and I talked on the drive here. We’ve already gotten all the necessary approvals like we discussed on the phone earlier, but there’s just one detail we need to consider and finalize.” Sam looked back and forth from Isabella to Wyatt and settled on Isabella as if waiting for a response.

Isabella looked at Wyatt, who was pacing in front of the fireplace, refusing to look at her. “What is it?” she asked Sam.

“Isabella has to do it,” Sam said.

Wyatt and Isabella looked at each other. She jumped up and exclaimed, “What are you talking about? What do I have to do?”

Wyatt grabbed Isabella’s shoulders and gently pushed her down into a chair, calming her down effortlessly.

“Let me explain,” Wyatt said, soothingly. “Sam’s been able to infiltrate Spike’s organization. He knows how he works, how he thinks, and which leg he puts in his pants first. Based on all the information and evidence he’s gathered, we have reason to believe Spike hired people to abduct not only you, but others as well. And he’ll pay those people handsomely once you’re delivered. We’re still trying to put all the pieces together as to why he chose you but I’m sure that’ll come out in the end.”

“Anyway,” Sam interjected, “I have to deliver you, the girl Spike’s paying for, to Norfolk by midnight tonight.”

Sam began outlining the detailed operation while Wyatt paced in front of the fireplace, one hand in his pocket and the other hand playing drums on his lips. He rubbed the back of his neck with hands as if trying to remove a stubborn pain.

“I don’t like it. It’s too risky and too dangerous. We’ll get a female officer to do it. What if Spike goes berserk and hurts her? What if something goes wrong?”

“Wyatt, she’s all we’ve got at this time. You know better than anyone else how hard it is to get cooperation from witnesses. They’ve

been through so much and their lives threatened and their families lives, threatened...”

“You’re preaching to the choir, Sam. I know, I know. But we’re talking about Isabella here. Not just some woman they picked up...” Wyatt let his words drift off as he realized what he had said.

Wyatt looked at Isabella. She looked numb and confused. She probably couldn’t fathom doing what Sam suggested she do. She sat in the chair as if she were watching a scene in a movie about somebody else’s life.

Dave and Sam looked at each other, then at Wyatt.

“I think we need to talk, Wyatt, alone,” Dave said as he grabbed Wyatt’s arm and headed out to the porch.

Wyatt looked at Dave and Sam authoritatively. “I don’t think that’s necessary at all.” He dismissed them with a wave of his hand.

“You’re too close to the subject. I don’t think you can be as objective as necessary, Wyatt,” Sam said, risking Wyatt’s wrath.

Wyatt stared at Sam until Sam looked away. No one said a word, while Wyatt stared in the front window, his fingers rubbing across his lips.

She finally stood up and opened the closed front door. “I’ll do it. I’m the one who was abducted, who has to be delivered, bought and paid for. I should be the one making the decisions, completing the plan and making this whole thing work out, not you. I’ll go undercover. But you have to promise me you’ll be on hand to rescue me at a second’s notice if I say so,” she exclaimed.

Dave, Wyatt and Sam all exchanged glances. Wyatt stared at Isabella. Had she lost her mind? He was having second thoughts. What if something did go wrong and he couldn’t get to her in time? Feelings needed to be kept personal and failure was not an option, he reminded himself.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Wyatt finally acquiesced.

“Yes, I’m sure. My life will never be the same after everything that’s happened, after everything he’s done to me, my mother, and so

many other women. Just think of poor Megan. Where she might be now? I want to make sure he doesn't have the opportunity to do the same thing to anyone else."

Wyatt continued his pacing while Isabella sat anxiously, staring, wide-eyed at him. Sam finally interrupted the deafening silence in the room.

"Okay. We need a minimum of an hour to get to Norfolk and get set up, right Dave?"

Dave nodded and Sam continued.

"We can have the warrants and teams ready and in place within the same time frame. I have the necessary equipment in my car parked in Norfolk. We can stop there, get ready, and get to Spike's around eleven p.m."

"We also need to get someone up here from the forensics team to go over the squad car before it's moved," Wyatt said.

"I can take care of that with a phone call so there won't be any invasion into the compound. I'll have them come in off the main road and forensics should run into the car shortly afterward," Dave said.

Wyatt agreed. He liked the idea his safe harbor would not be compromised.

"We better get going then," Sam said. "Dave can make his calls on the way, and I have to make a switch before we get near the city. Don't want to be identified and lose my cover yet, you know."

After making arrangements to meet at a designated place and time, Dave and Sam left.

* * * *

Isabella sat confused, stunned. So much happening and so fast. She didn't understand the plan in detail since they talked so much cop mumbo-jumbo, so she kept running their conversation around in her head.

Wyatt startled her when he came up behind her as she stood on the front porch watching Dave's car drive away. Wyatt put his hands on her shoulders, and caressed her arms. She leaned back against him and he asked, "What are you thinking about?"

"How confused and scared I am. I know I can't run away from this anymore, and I really want to put this behind me but only parts of it. I want to keep the parts with you in it. And it's so beautiful and peaceful here. I'm not ready to leave this part yet either, but I know I have to."

"You play your cards right, after all this is behind you, you can come back, how about that? I know the owner and can get you a really good deal. I'll even go further and make it a promise." Wyatt turned her around to look at him.

"It's a deal *but* only if the owner tags along!"

"I wouldn't have it any other way!"

He retrieved their bags, and after a quick security check, they left, leaving the property from a different, but similar, entry or exit gate.

They talked about different sites along the way, and as they neared Norfolk, they both became quiet.

Isabella asked Wyatt something she had been thinking about for quite some time. "What happened with Rachael? I know you said you were engaged, but what happened?"

He looked straight ahead for a moment. At just about the time she thought he wasn't going to answer, he said quietly, "She was an undercover operative in a prostitution ring we busted. She got killed during the sting operation. I found out then she had been prostituted herself, got caught in the crossfire, on the wrong side of the law."

Isabella was shocked. She had assumed Rachael had died a hero's death in the line of duty. While he had so much integrity and honor, and Dave and Sam looked to him for answers and assurance, she didn't understand why Wyatt would feel responsible for her death.

"Why do you feel her death is your fault?" She studied his face.

“I talked her into it. I talked her into going undercover, playing the part of a prostitute. I never thought she would go to the other side. So I blame myself for maybe pushing her over the edge so to speak.” He didn’t seem able to meet her eyes.

“Wyatt, it’s not your responsibility to take care of everybody, and you’re certainly not responsible for their actions. She knew the rules, and she chose to break them, not you.”

Isabella checked the time, which had passed quickly. Her thoughts of the plan and its many pieces were coming together as a jigsaw puzzle in her mind. And there couldn’t be any missing pieces.

“Are you sure you want to do this, Isabella? You know you don’t have to, you can opt out at any time.”

“Yes I’m sure. I’m scared but I want to do it. Just tell me what I need to do.”

“Sam is very good at what he does. You need to follow his lead in everything. You need to be afraid of him even though you know he’s there to protect you. Otherwise, his cover could be blown, endangering his life as well as yours and everybody else’s on the task force. The entire operation could be jeopardized. Part of his persona is mean and rough. After all, he is a hit man and therefore lacking in compassion concerning anyone’s life.

“Sam will have some sort of video recording pin or button for you to wear, and we’ll be able to monitor you both by sight and sound through the laptop inside the car. And at the first sign of *any* danger to either you or Sam we’ll abort the mission and come in and get you both out.

“You need to come up with a code word or phrase you can use if, for example, you take your jacket off and the camera is removed or if you fall and you’re in greater danger than we think. You just need to say the word or words, and we rescue you and abort the mission. Do you have any ideas?”

Isabella thought for a few minutes and then said, “Vancouver.”

“What? Vancouver? How did you arrive at that word? I’m really curious.”

“Because I’ve always wanted to go there, and when I say, ‘Vancouver,’ I want you to come and get me immediately so I can make sure I’ll have an opportunity to get there someday.”

“Okay, so even if things look really bad from our end unless you say, ‘Vancouver,’ we don’t make a move until we have all the goods on them, right?”

“That’s right.” Isabella nodded.

“Also, there will be disguised operatives and team members all within two to three blocks with hearing capabilities, and they’ll do whatever has to be done to save you and complete the mission.”

“So let’s make sure I have this straight. All I have to do is pretend to be afraid of Sam? I think that will be the hardest part of it all.” She said with a smile on her face.

“You’ll have to tell me once you see Sam in full undercover mode.”

“And then I’ll wear a button or pin that’ll record everything I say and do. You’ll be able to hear and see it too so you can help me if I need it, right?”

“That’s right.”

“And if something goes wrong I say the magic word and you come and get me.”

“Right again.”

She asked a few questions for clarification throughout the conversation. And after Wyatt answered them he said, “I really admire you. You are a very strong and gutsy woman and I am very proud of you.”

“Thank you. Are you sure you’ll be there if anything goes wrong?”

“I promise you, I will not let anything happen to you. And Dave and Sam wouldn’t let you participate at all if they thought you would come to any danger. So they will be looking out for you too.”

Chapter 44

A short time later they arrived at the rendezvous location, which appeared to be an underground parking garage deep within the city. They parked behind Dave's unmarked car, parked beside another newer model car with the trunk open.

Wyatt got out of the car and talked to both Sam and Dave with frequent glances from all three back at Isabella still sitting in the car.

She finally opened the door, slowly got out and walked to stand beside Sam.

"Are you sure?" Wyatt asked her one more time.

She nodded. "Let's get it over with. The sooner I get this behind me, the sooner I can get back to my own life."

Wyatt looked into her eyes, and when she looked at him, she saw sadness. She wasn't sure why.

"Okay, Isabella, let's get you ready," Sam said.

Isabella glanced at Sam. Pure and true fear washed through her at the change in his appearance. What she had thought to be a rather attractive smooth face now appeared rough with pox scars as well as a large ugly scar running from his forehead, down across his left eye, and ending at his chin. His hair on the top of his head was mussed, and the longer part was pulled back into a ponytail at his nape. He had added a gun to his waistband and held a long-barreled pistol or a cutoff shotgun—she didn't know which. She hardly recognized him. He had definitely become a formidable foe.

Sam handed her what looked like a clear button cover. "Fasten this onto the second button of your jacket. The camera/microphone

will be able to pick up all conversation within fifty feet, as well as video.”

Sam and Dave checked the feedback on the laptop, made a couple adjustments, and then checked with each member on the mission.

Dave received a call on his cell. He said, “Okay,” and closed the phone. He looked at Wyatt. “Everybody’s in place and we need to get going.”

Wyatt looked at Isabella.

“Now remember. Dave and I’ll be just down the street. We’ll be able to reach you within a matter of seconds. As soon as we have a viable confession, we can move in *and* I’ll say when. Nobody, and I mean nobody”—as he looked around at the other officers in hidden spaces—“moves before I say so, okay?”

Wyatt went to Isabella and took her in his arms. “Are you still okay with this?”

She nodded and he kissed her.

“I’ll be right here waiting, listening and watching,” Wyatt said reassuringly.

Sam beckoned for Isabella to come to him and when she did he turned her around and roughly tied up her hands. He smeared some dirt on her face and ran his dirty fingers through her hair.

“You have to work with me, Isabella. If I shove you or say something nasty to you or about you, take it personally. Pretend you don’t know me and you definitely don’t like me.”

“Right now, I don’t know you at all,” Isabella said, “and I don’t think I like you much either.”

“That’s good. Let’s keep it that way.”

Sam led her to his car and helped her get into the backseat. He jumped in the driver’s seat and they quickly drove off.

Chapter 45

Isabella lay on her side in the backseat, her heart beating so loud in her chest that she thought certain Sam could hear it. She was scared, no doubt about it, but she was more determined now than ever. She was in too deep to turn around. She couldn't if she wanted to.

Wyatt and Dave trailed a short distance behind and parked a few cars behind Sam. They watched as Sam helped Isabella out of the car and then roughly took her arm to lead her into the house.

A small, narrow, Tudor-style house with large windows to the left of the front door had a small amount of light shining out through the drawn shades.

Roughly gripping Isabella's arm, Sam opened the door, pulled her inside into a foyer, and shut the door. To the left of the front door stood a young swarthy-looking man to whom Sam said, "Hey, kid, Boss around? He's expecting me."

"Sure, just a minute." The kid opened the door, stuck his head in and bellowed, "Yo, Boss, Sam's here witda' goods you ordered."

They heard Boss mutter something like, "It's about time." When the door opened wider, Sam towed Isabella into an open living and dining room area, very tastefully decorated.

A short, stout man in a white suit sat on a couch facing the front windows but which also separated the living and dining rooms. He had a cigar in one hand and a short glass of something amber in color in the other. His balding head had only grayish white hair around the bottom; a round, bulbous nose, dark, beady eyes with dark circles and

bags underneath; thick jowls around his chin, or *chins*; and a huge, round belly.

When Isabella drew back at the sight of Spike, Sam pulled her back and put her in front of him.

“Jus’ settle down, little missy. We come a long way for the boss, an you ain’t gonna ruin it now.”

When Sam spoke, she barely recognized his voice and became more frightened. Trembling, she looked around furtively, her eyes welling up with tears, for a way to escape and saw a door on the other side of the room. She thought about what they had done to her. She thought about Megan and wondered how many others he had done this same thing to. And she thought about Wyatt’s promise of being right outside listening and watching every move made. She lifted her head and stood tall.

Sam looked at Spike, who pushed her a little more forward and said, “Here she is, Boss. Just like you said, big tits and all.”

Wyatt, watching and listening in the car with Dave, just looked at Dave and rolled his eyes. After a few attempts at getting off the couch, Spike stood. He walked slowly toward her and then all the way around her, looking her up and down as if she were a new car. She expected him to try to kick the tires at any moment.

“Yeah, she’s a beaut all right,” Spike said.

Isabella tried to move her arms in front of her but since they’d been tied behind her back she only managed to thrust her much-lusted-after breasts out even further. Filled with humiliation, she cringed. She felt like a piece of meat ready to be devoured. He disgusted her, and she thought she would vomit if he touched her.

“Yup, Miles’s right. You’re quite a looker and worth every penny I’m paying for you. It won’t be long till I get you trained to do anything and everything I want. You’ll learn that I take care of things what’re mine, and if they ever cheat me or if I happen to get tired of them, I’ll just sell them to someone else and move on,” Spike proclaimed.

Spike walked over to a bar and poured himself another drink. He turned around, took a sip and snorted like a pig as he addressed Sam.

“Did you take care of Joe like I told you too?”

“Yes, sir, you don’t need to worry ’bout him no more.”

“Good. He was a no-good nobody from the start. I shoulda never hired him to do this job.” Then he shifted his attention back to Isabella. “I’ve got a big surprise for you, little lady, wait’ll you see.”

“What is it, Boss?” Sam asked.

“None of your goddamn business,” Spike said as he handed Sam a fat envelope. “I’m done with you.” He raised his hand, which had been holding a drink but now held a gun.

Isabella and Sam saw the little white pistol appear at the same time. Sam quickly pushed her away, and she fell. She heard a blast, heard Sam moan as he hit the floor and then silence.

She lost her breath as she hit the floor. She breathed deeply and opened her eyes to the red brick of the fireplace hearth. She cautiously sat up, looking over to where Sam had been standing. She saw Sam lying nearby on the floor, not moving. Expecting to hear Wyatt’s footsteps at any moment, she looked back at the door, but she only heard the labored breathing of Spike as he waddled toward her.

She looked around for somewhere to hide. She tried to crawl behind a nearby chair but couldn’t make it. Spike was on her like a rash, hauling her to her feet.

“Now for your surprise,” Spike said pointing a finger.

She followed Spike’s fat finger to a stairway leading to the second floor. Her knees buckled. She couldn’t breathe, her fear so great. Spike held her tighter so she wouldn’t crumple to the floor.

Chapter 46

“Michael,” she stuttered, “what, what are you doing here?” She stared in disbelief. She’d hoped to never see him again.

“Hello, baby. Wasn’t sure you’d remember me,” Michael said as he slowly ambled down the stairs with a drink in his hand. “Did you miss me? I missed you. I waited since high school to get you in my bed. Yeah, that’s right. If your old man hadn’t gotten in the way, I would have had my way with you then. I would have been your first. But no! Your old man had to mess everything up. Can you believe he had the balls to threaten me with statutory rape if I even came near your sweet little virgin ass? And he wouldn’t stop. He had the local cops dogging me day and night. So I had to take things into my own hands and kill him off. Yeah, that’s right.”

Isabella started to scream. “No, no, I can’t believe it. You killed my father? Why? What did he ever do to you? How could you do that?” Isabella struggled, trying to free herself from Spike’s strong grasp.

“He gave me no choice. He was in the way anyway. I couldn’t have you, so he had to die. I had to leave the country for a few years and lay low till my friends got it covered up real good, but then I came back and got you anyway. I finally got what I wanted.

“And then what’d you go and do? Move out and stiff me, that’s what you did. So now, it’s payback time for you. I’ve already paid all I’m going to pay for you. Especially after you ran off and left me with all the bills to pay just because me and Tiffany got a little thing going. So now I have some payback to replenish my coffers, so to speak. So

when I got in touch with Spike, he agreed to help fix us both. I need money and you need to be taught a lesson.

“Spike and I go way back, actually met him in Guatemala, ain’t that right, Spike? And he’s paying me real good for someone like you, a real good-looking gal with big tits, that’s what he likes. And now you get to learn your lesson. You’re his, see. You belong to him. You’re his slave, all day and all night long. You do *what* he tells you, *when* he tells you, and you get to live. No options and there’s nowhere to hide from him either. See how your lily-white prissy ass likes that now.” He walked his way toward Spike and Isabella.

“Well, now that you’re both reacquainted, let’s wrap this up,” Spike spoke up, while still holding a trembling, speechless Isabella.

He picked up the fat envelope from the floor where it had dropped from Sam’s grip as he fell to the floor. He handed it to Michael.

“Here’s the money, just like we agreed. Now get out of here. I don’t want to hear from you again, ever,” Spike bellowed.

Michael made the mistake of looking in the envelope, leading Spike to believe Michael suspected Spike of foul play. Or thought he would cheat him out of his fair share, which, naturally, set Spike off into a murderous rage.

“Don’t worry. You won’t see me again. I’m headed to parts unknown,” Michael lamented.

Spike raised his arm, still holding the little white revolver, and took aim at Michael.

“Yes siree, Bob, you sure are.” Spike smiled as he pulled the trigger.

Michael groaned and fell in a heap to the floor. He didn’t move again.

Isabella’s teeth chattered as she shook. She could hardly breathe. She stood still, staring at where Michael had fallen, unable to move. Where the hell was Wyatt? Why hadn’t he come for her?

“Vancouver, Vancouver,” she yelled as loud as she could, until Spike slapped her hard across the face.

Spike roughly grabbed her arm to keep her from falling to the floor and started hauling her up the stairs. “Shut up, you bitch. Ain’t nobody gonna come runnin’ just cause you’re screamin’. I got Kid and Max at both doors, and they won’t allow anyone in unless I tell them, so you’re wasting your breath. Ain’t nobody gonna save you now.”

She kept waiting to hear running footsteps following them up the stairs but only heard the grunting and heavy panting of Spike dragging her along.

Filled with horror, a bitter taste of her blood in her mouth, she kicked with her legs and tried to grab hold of the stair railing with her feet and hands to forestall or at least slow his progress. But Spike overpowered her and dragged her up the stairs.

* * * *

Watching and listening in the car, Wyatt and Dave saw Spike shoot Sam, heard Isabella scream, and saw Sam fall to the floor.

Wyatt thought Isabella might be hit as well so pulled out his gun, ready to go in when Michael appeared on the screen.

“Stand down, everyone, I said stand down,” Wyatt said into the radio.

Wyatt and Dave watched, listened and waited as Michael admitted murdering her father and explained her destiny with Spike, how he and Spike had met, how he got paid, and what he had done for it. Ready to move in they saw Spike’s gun and heard the shot simultaneously.

Wyatt jumped out of the car and ran toward the house. Just the thought of that pig putting his hands on his Isabella made him sick. He had to get to her and get her the hell out of there. Then he would take care of Spike himself.

He heard Dave yelling for him to wait for backup and to not go in alone but it fell on deaf ears.

As Wyatt ran toward the house, he thought quickly. He had come alone. He hoped and prayed he would not be too late. He thought about where she might be? How badly was she frightened? Was she hurt? Had he touched her? He gave no thought to rules or regulations or for the safety of his own life, his only focus right now was on getting her back.

Dave put the team into action and quickly took off running after Wyatt. But Wyatt was out of sight already in the house.

A young kid stood inside the front door Wyatt flung open. He look at him, and Wyatt raised his fist, sending one blow to the jaw. The kid fell to the floor in a heap. His gun drawn and at the ready, he cautiously opened the inner door and looked around. He saw Sam lying on the floor, quickly ran to him checking for a pulse. He sighed with relief when he felt one. He had been shot in his left shoulder and would probably be okay after some recuperation.

"I'm okay, just go get her," Sam mumbled.

"Just relax, Dave's on his way. We'll get you out of here, just hang in there a little bit longer," Wyatt assured Sam.

Wyatt looked toward the stairs and saw Michael lying in a pool of blood. He walked over, checked his pulse, looked at Sam, and shook his head. Michael was dead.

When he heard Isabella screaming upstairs, he quickly stepped over Michael's body and ran toward the sound of her voice.

Reaching the landing at the top of the stairs in record time, he stopped to listen, looking around at a set of double doors slightly to his left and two single doors to his right. He heard some shuffling and murmurs as if Spike had tied something or stuffed something into her mouth muffling her screams. He crept toward the double doors and pushed one open with the barrel of his gun. Wyatt saw red. His outrage burst through him and exploded like a firework on the Fourth of July.

Isabella was lying on a huge bed covered in white, on her side with a sock in her mouth, her hands tied behind her back. Spike lay

half on top of her, trapping her between him and the bed. He had unzipped her jeans and pulled up her shirt and was rubbing his corpulent hands over her bare breasts.

Wyatt's heart beat uncontrollably, and his breathing became erratic. His rage, unlike any he had ever felt, consumed his entire being. He had no control over his thoughts or his actions as he crossed the room in two strides to stand before Spike. Grabbing him by the scruff of the neck, he turned him around to face him with a strength he didn't know he possessed. He punched Spike in the stomach. When he doubled over, Wyatt slammed his knee, with all his might, into his face. Spike fell backward onto the side of the bed Isabella had just vacated. Wyatt pulled Spike up by the front of his shirt and hit his face again, and again and again....

Someone was grabbing his arm and yelling, "Stop it, Wyatt, you're going to kill him. Stop it." Through the red fog in his mind, he recognized Dave's voice and slowly began to relax and stood still. Spike slumped to the floor. Wyatt looked for Isabella, found her cowering in the corner of the room crying, and raced to her.

She was crying hysterically when he helped her sit on the bed and quickly untied her hands. She threw her arms around him, and he pulled her close. She sobbed openly leaving a wet trail along the front of his shirt.

"I tried to scream Vancouver, but he slapped me. What took you so long, Wyatt? I knew you would come, that you would keep me safe. I knew, but what took so long?"

He had found her. He had gotten to her in time. He didn't want to let her go. He wanted to hold her forever. He didn't want to leave her to complete all the endless paperwork.

Chapter 47

After a lengthy questioning session by numerous detectives, Isabella talked to her very happy and relieved mother.

“Isabella, your statement’s ready for your signature. You’ll need to be available for any further questioning and possibly for the trial. I hope that won’t be a problem, right?” Dave asked.

“Of course not, Dave, that’ll be the easy part.” She smiled.

“I’ll send Officer Nancy Collier in with it in a minute. Also, I made special arrangements for you to fly back to Denver right away. You could be home in about six or seven hours.”

“Can I see and talk to Wyatt before I leave, to say good-bye?”

“Well, since this was his operation, he has to file all the paperwork. He could be quite a while. But I’ll see if I can reach him for you.”

Isabella’s heart jumped into her throat. He had lied to her. He was still a cop.

“Just one more thing, Isabella. I know after all you’ve been through, this may be hard to believe, but you were really very lucky. The last case we worked, a woman a little older than you boarded a plane on her way to spend three months with her boyfriend’s family in his alleged hometown. Her boyfriend had lavished her with expensive gifts and had paid for her plane ticket. To her surprise, when she arrived at the airport, her ‘boyfriend,’ or trafficker as we call him, confiscated her identity, passport, driver’s license, social security card, credit cards, and even all her money. He locked her in a closet without any food or water for days before informing her that

she would be working as a sex slave. She had been raped repeatedly, beaten, and threatened with death.”

“How did she get away?” Isabella asked, lips trembling.

“She finally got hold of a cell phone and called the police, and we were able to get to her when we raided the building.”

“How does that make me lucky?”

“You ran into Wyatt.” Dave left the room, closing the door behind him, and onto his search for female officer Nancy.

Chapter 48

Isabella watched the moving company transfer the last few pieces of her furniture into the truck to be taken to storage. With Michael out of the picture she had become very close to her mother again and had decided to stay with her for a few months, during the summer anyway. When school started in the fall, she would decide what she wanted to do then.

She and her mother, after enduring so many traumas separately, wanted the support each could lend the other, especially as the trial approached. When she explained her abduction to her supervisors at school, which didn't take much since it had been leaked out to all the news media in the country, they were more than happy to offer her old job back. Wyatt had been right. Good things could come from bad experiences.

She had received a call from Dave last week and had found out the investigators determined Matthew Miles had legally dropped his last name of Terrell after Michael had been arrested numerous times. Michael had learned of the name change and had used the name Miles as one of his aliases, to his advantage, as well, and Matthew was in the clear after all.

Spike was being held without bail on charges of first-degree homicide, and Dave thought he would be put away for a long time. Kid and Max, two of Spike's gangsters, were young men who had made a couple of wrong choices along the way, which would land them short jail terms and long probations.

Amanda had been granted immunity for providing state's evidence. She was back in Colorado but remained on probation.

Joe Sneed was being held without bail on first-degree murder of a law enforcement officer, kidnapping and aggravated assault and faced the death penalty.

There had been a huge turnout for the memorial service for Wayne Richards, the police officer shot in the park and one of Dave and Wyatt's fallen comrades. Wyatt's company had made a sizeable contribution to college funds for his children.

Isabella apologized for not attending the funeral.

Sam was on the mend and back on the job sitting at a desk with his arm in a sling. He wanted some down time and needed to wear the uniform again and get back with his family anyway. It was time.

They had also found and rescued Megan as well. She had been on a boat waiting to be shipped to Columbia. They had gotten to her just in time, thanks to Sam's undercover work and Wyatt's quick actions.

She asked Dave if he had heard from Wyatt and he told her he hadn't. He knew Wyatt had turned in his badge and weapon and resigned from the force. He said Wyatt just wanted to concentrate on his company. Dave hadn't heard from him for a couple weeks.

They ended their conversation with good wishes and pleasantries.

Chapter 49

Isabella hadn't been able to get Wyatt out of her mind. She had hoped that once she returned to Cameron Lakes, back with her mother and familiar surroundings, her life would be back to normal. But she didn't know normal anymore. She hadn't been able to get a good night's sleep since she came back. Every time she closed her eyes, she would see Wyatt's face, his beautiful blue eyes. In her dreams, she could smell his cedar, woodsy scent and could feel his warm lips on hers. She shook her head to end her daydream. She had to get on with her life.

* * * *

Isabella went back to packing her final few small boxes and suitcases with her clothes and personal belongings she would need while at her mother's. She had fortunately been able to sublet her apartment for the remainder of her lease to a nice, young woman. She had finished in the bathroom and was walking into the kitchen when she heard a knock at the door.

* * * *

Wyatt couldn't eat, couldn't sleep. Everywhere he looked, everything he touched reminded him of Isabella, his beautiful and passionate Isabella. The kitchen chair she had sat in, the cup she had drunk from, the bed she had slept in, where they had made love the first time.

He had been coming in the door and remembered vividly the look on Isabella's face when she had heard of his deceit, that he was still a cop, although now a detective which was significantly different. He had been working on the task force with Dave since Rachael's death. Hell, he'd worked himself to the bone to forgive himself for something that couldn't possibly be his fault. She made the wrong choices. Sure, he felt he owed it to her, but none of it would change anything.

But now, after seeing his betrayal on Isabella's face, he couldn't live with himself. And considering how he had lost control, almost killing Spike. He couldn't justify his killer unprofessional behavior or actions in anyway except that he loved her, that he would die for her. He wanted her even now after weeks had passed. After, he had hoped he would be able to forget, but he hadn't. He had gone to his retreat, his refuge, but only found more memories, deluged with more emotions. He had to see her. He had to have her in his life. *She isn't making this easy for me*, he thought.

* * * *

Michael, then Joe, instantly came to mind before she remembered Michael was dead and Joe was in jail, both permanently out of her life.

She crept cautiously to the door and peered out the peephole. Isabella's heart jumped into her throat. She immediately started sweating and wringing her hands. She turned away and ran her fingers through her hair and down the front of her linen shorts, trying to brush away some of the wrinkles. She turned again and opened the door.

Surprised to see him, yet she couldn't find any words to say. She studied his handsome face and noted the dark circles under his eyes. She wanted to throw herself into his arms, smell his masculine scent, feel his heart beating in his chest, and taste his lips. But, he had betrayed her, he had deceived her, he had lied to her about so many

things. How could she ever trust him or believe in him again? She finally found her tongue.

“Hello, Wyatt.”

“Isabella. You look wonderful. Can I come in?”

“Of, of course, come in,” she said. “I’m surprised to see you.”

He walked in, noticing the almost vacant apartment, heard her close the door behind him.

“Where are you going?”

“Well, for the summer anyway, I’m moving back in with my mother, a little security for both of us. What about you? What brings you to Denver? Another abduction or missing person?”

“No, I’ve resigned from the force. I wanted to tell you in person.” He turned to look at her, and when she turned from him, he continued. “I know you probably don’t believe me, and you have every right. I should have told you the whole truth, but I wasn’t sure how you would react. I know it was a shock to learn I was a detective, but you never asked, and I thought, at the time, it would be better for you not to know. I’ve made some enemies along the way.”

She thought a moment, turned and put some books into a small box on the counter, and said, “I guess it doesn’t really matter what I believe or don’t believe or what you should or shouldn’t have told me. That was in Virginia, and a long time ago. Now I’m back in Colorado trying to fit into my old life.”

“Is that what you want, your old life?” Wyatt asked her.

“It’s what I have now and I’ll have to make the best of it.” She went on with her packing, her back to him.

He walked the few steps to her, took the books out of her hands, and placed them on the counter. He turned her around to face him, put her face in his hands, looked into her eyes, and said quietly, “I don’t want my old life back. I don’t want to go back to being alone and working day and night. I want a new life, with you, for both of us. I want you in my life. I love you, Isabella.”

Once again she could form no words in her mouth, could not utter a sound. *What is wrong with me?* He had said the three little words she had been hearing in her dreams night after night, day after day for weeks. Her heart began beating rapidly, and she could barely breathe. She searched his eyes for any hint of deceit but found none.

“Are you sure, Wyatt?”

“Yes, I’m sure! I love you. I think I fell in love with you when you woke me up and ran into my house. I want you there to wake me up every day and every night. I want to keep you and take care of you forever.”

He had been caressing her arms up and down when she suddenly launched herself into his arms and hugged his neck.

“I love you, Wyatt.” She smothered his face and neck with kisses, tasting him, smelling him, savoring him. She spoke softly. “I don’t want a life without you either.”

He moved his hands to both sides of her face and tipped her head back with his fingers. He looked into her eyes and then kissed her lips. She ran her fingers through his hair and around his neck.

And there was nowhere to hide...her heart!

One year later

Isabella kept running and running, trying to find somewhere to hide. She looked around surreptitiously, but she could not find somewhere she would be safe.

She felt someone softly kissing her lips, then her neck. She slowly opened her eyes and looked into the face of her husband.

“You were dreaming again, sweetheart.”

“Yes, but this time—”

A baby crying interrupted.

“I’ll get her and bring her to you. Brianna’s probably hungry and needs her mama anyway.” He leaned down to kiss her lips once again and she pulled him close.

“Wyatt, this time I stopped running because there’s nowhere to hide. You have captured my heart, my soul, all of me.”

“I sure did, beautiful, and I’m not going to let you go.”

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lorelei Confer lives on a peninsula in the mid west coast of Florida with her husband, two cats, and AJ, her long haired Chihuahua.

She wrote her first story in the fourth grade in the form of a play which actually was produced by her teacher for parents and students. She continued writing and majored in English in College. She practices every day to improve her craft.

An author of romantic suspense, she loves reading almost as much as writing. She has filled her book shelves with her favorites, i.e. Harlan Colban, Eliza March, Johanna Lindsey, Kathy Carmichael, Terri Garey, Karen Rose, LuAnn Rice, and Bobbi Smith just to mention a few, as well as all the classics.

She loves hearing from readers so please visit her website:
www.loreleiconfer.com.



Siren Publishing, Inc.
www.SirenPublishing.com