

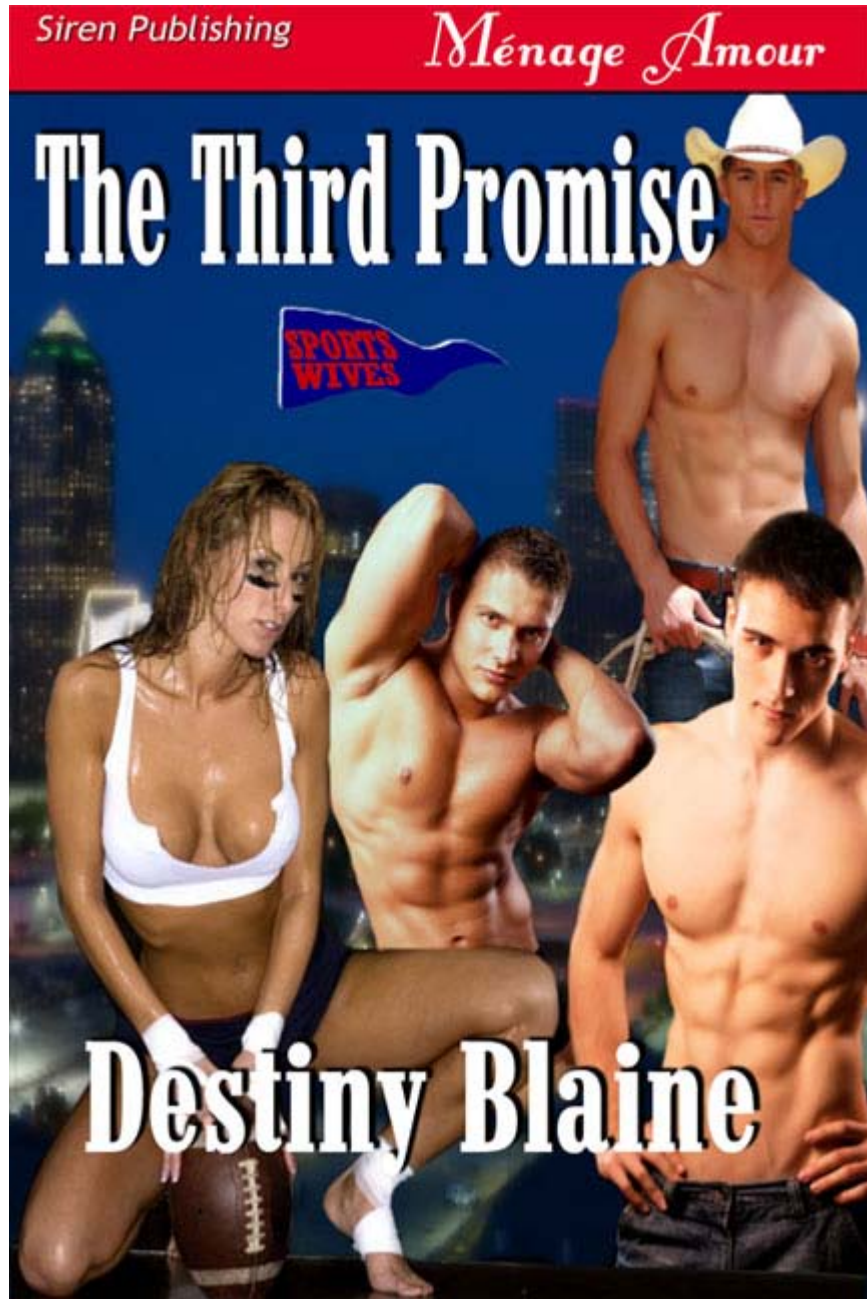
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Ménage Amour

The Third Promise

SPORTS
WIVES

Destiny Blaine



Sports Wives 6

The Third Promise

Suzy has always wanted more. Now, she has all she can handle and she still wonders, "Is it enough?" When the Giovanni brothers introduce Suzy to a close friend, she gets her answer and finds herself wondering. Does Branson Braxton have anything to offer a woman or is he only interested in an eight-second ride?

A man hell-bent on keeping his friends safe, Branson Braxton goes out of his way to protect the Giovanni family. Soon, he finds he's devoted and attracted to Suzy Giovanni. He'll do anything to protect her and goes out of his way to love her.

Genre: Contemporary, Ménage a Trois/Quatre, Western/Cowboys

Length: 23,822 words

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A SIREN PUBLISHING BOOK

IMPRINT: Ménage Amour

THE THIRD PROMISE

Copyright © 2011 by Destiny Blaine

E-book ISBN: 1-61034-060-4

First E-book Publication: January 2011

Cover design by Jinger Heaston

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PUBLISHER

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DEDICATION

This one is for the bookies, gamblers, cowboys, and players.
And the women who love them

THE THIRD PROMISE

Sports Wives 6

DESTINY BLAINE

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Prologue

I once dreamt of marrying a guy. Not just any old male would do, but a tall, dark, and handsome fellow, a man with big arms for holding me, smooth, eager lips for kissing, and a body meant for rambunctious loving. I don't recall seeing two of these guys in my dreams, let alone three, but sometimes fantasies improve after little girls grow up and become naughty women.

I've always had a problem with wanting more. Five evening gowns were better than four, seven Louis Vuitton bags versus six certainly made sense. And when another diamond or any other gem landed in my jewelry box, well, who was I to complain?

Years ago, I earned quite the reputation among professional football players and their wives. I savored the gossip rather than resented those behind the tongue-twisting rumors. Much of what leaked to the press held some measure of truth. In fact, I coveted the title of materialistic gold digger with an insatiable appetite for young, handsome football players.

I gave the press plenty of stories. Why not? If a woman has been talked about, she's certainly not forgotten. Back then, I loved the spotlight, funny how things suddenly changed.

Life tossed a few curveballs my way. Actually, that's not entirely accurate. I was hammered with *every ball* imaginable. Yes, go ahead—use that imagination.

In a nutshell, I've been in many beds, most of them belonging to a football player, married and divorced, married and widowed, committed to my deceased husband's brother, and then ultimately reunited with a dead man walking. Sounds fun, right?

Ah, but that's just the beginning.

My name is Suzy Illiani Giovanni. I'm in love with and committed to Marco and Alanzo Giovanni. They're better than any fantastic imaginary heroes—handsome, sexy, accomplished, tremendous lovers, and hopelessly devoted to me.

These two extraordinary men make all of my dreams come true.

Well, almost.

Chapter One

“Good hell, that was hot!” Marco breathed, falling against the bed.

I rolled onto my stomach and eyed Marco’s lifeless form and flaccid cock. One down. One to go. The story of my life.

Alanzo yanked me from the mattress. “I’m not through with you yet.”

“Good,” I purred, fully anticipating wall sex, the kind of sexy fucking guaranteed to tear down the shower walls.

Shaking my hips a little, I crooked my finger back and forth at the bed-bound Giovanni. “Don’t tell me you’re finished. I know better.”

Marco chuckled, using his hands to cover his secret weapon—what I’d dubbed his dick after he’d gotten me pregnant back-to-back even with birth control in proper use. “You’ve worn this old man out.”

“But not this one,” Alanzo said suggestively, dragging me to the master bathroom.

About the time Alanzo reached for the spigot and I grabbed a few towels, a loud thud landed against the front door.

Sudden fear washed over Alanzo’s face. “What the...”

“Giovanni! I know you’re in there! Open this damn door!”

Another five or six thumps rang out before Marco and Alanzo were fully dressed and I was wrapped in a lime green silk robe Alanzo draped over me in passing.

“Stay here, Suzy,” Alanzo instructed.

Marco pursed his lips. The worried look creeping across his face was well warranted. We’d anticipated this day for some time. The tabloids had begun to shine a light on a possibility we didn’t want

anyone to consider. The headlines over the weekend had read, *Is former PFC Quarterback Marco Giovanni Dead or Alive?*

We'd been on the run from Marco's past for several years. No one, including Anna—my annoying mother-in-law—knew where to find us. Everyone believed Marco was dead except for the Teller family and Anna.

Another strong knock against the door and I jerked. Was this the day we'd always feared we might face?

My men weren't exactly criminals or thugs, but they each drew a gun from under the mattress when they headed for the front door. Amazing what a man will do when he realizes a threat exists on his doorstep. Marco and Alanzo had gone to extreme lengths to protect our family, but even with precautions, an ever-present reality lingered. Geoff Alberto, a very powerful man, wouldn't stop until he found one, if not all, of us.

"Did you tell Mom where we moved?" I heard Alanzo ask Marco when they rushed down the hall.

"No," Marco snapped. "Suzy, go get Maggie and Heather."

My stomach became one tight knot. Our youngest children were sound asleep in the nursery. Our oldest, Cameron, would be walking through the front door any minute. He was down the hall with his teenage sitter where the girls would've been if they hadn't been stricken with chicken pox.

"I'm waiting, Giovanni! I'm unarmed. Open this damn door, you moron!"

"Wait!" I cried out, stepping from the bedroom. "He said, 'Giovanni.' He doesn't know there are two of you in here."

Marco and Alanzo swapped glances. "She has a point," Alanzo said.

The world, for the most part, still had reason to believe Marco, the former Dallas Rascals quarterback, was dead. Apparently, whoever was on the other side of the door came there for Alanzo. How anyone could've found him existed as the multimillion dollar question.

After Alanzo gave Marco a quick nod, Marco ushered me into the nursery, careful not to close the door all the way. He kept a bird's eye view of the small foyer.

Minutes later, Alanzo disappeared into the hallway.

"What the hell?" Marco grated out. "Is he out of his mind?"

Using Marco's shoulders for balance, I stood on my tiptoes and peered over his broad frame. "He's doing exactly what you would do."

"And what is that exactly?"

"He's keeping a potential threat away from our family."

I felt Marco tighten under my touch. "And who does he think will look out for him?"

"You have a point," I said, pushing by him. "And since you're dead, it makes sense for the living to provide backup."

"Suzy!"

"Stay with the girls," I said, hurrying away before Marco could stop me.

"Suzy! Get back here!" he blurted out in a throaty whisper.

"Dead men don't talk, Marco. Shh!"

Thank goodness Heather's notorious squeal rang out all at once. Like her father, she enjoyed a peaceful sleep, and when she couldn't find uninterrupted dreams, the little darling made sure everyone understood her displeasure.

"Suzy, damn it!" After a grumble, I heard him say, "It's okay, Heather. Daddy's here."

I took a deep breath and studied my reflection in the oval gold-trimmed mirror located next to a large plant in the foyer. Clutching the silky robe together at the collar, I opened the door and stepped into the hallway.

Much to my relief, I discovered Alanzo embraced with a very handsome man—dude was a better term. He wasn't pretty boy cute but rather hard, sexy, rugged, and undoubtedly in dire need of a shower. The caked mud on his worn jeans kind of did it for me.

Staring down at his manure-coated boots, I slowly lifted my gaze and took in the man under the dusty cowboy hat. He wasn't the kind of fellow someone like me dismissed because of a little dirt and grime.

Our visitor flaunted the kind of body a woman found pleasure in undressing. Tight thighs, tighter bulge, and I'd bet on a few ripples under his shirt. His dimples and smile suggested plenty. He had a certain way about him with the opposite sex. I'd played the field enough in my lifetime to figure that one out prior to any formal introduction.

After the stranger and Alanzo slapped each other on the back, both men turned around and caught my speculative eye. Our guest immediately looked pleased, like he realized I'd already stripped him down to snug briefs.

"I see we have company?"

Maybe he planned on staying awhile or at least for the night. Who was I to question a good thing? Any friend of Alanzo's was certainly a friend of mine, especially when he looked good enough to saddle and ride.

Grief, what was I thinking? Nervously, I reached for Alanzo, certain if I didn't, I might grab hold of our visitor.

Alanzo bracketed his left arm around my waist. "Branson Braxton, meet Suzy Giovanni. Suzy, this is Branson. We grew up together back in Kansas. He moved to Oklahoma about the same time Marco signed with the Rascals."

Branson stepped away from Alanzo. When I extended my hand, he lifted me up and twirled me around, planting a wet kiss on my cheek.

"Save the handshake for strangers, darlin'," he drawled. "I'm practically family."

"Yes, well, I'm glad to finally meet you," I said, resisting the urge to use the back of my hand and swipe away the drool staining my cheek. "I've heard a lot about you."

I didn't dare mention how he'd been my guys' hero. It was bad enough that Marco and Alanzo thought that Branson Braxton was some kind of living legend all because he once took three or four women to his bed—two of them New York models. And evidently, he kept them there for several days.

"Well, aren't you going to invite me in?" Branson asked with a wide grin on his bow-shaped lips.

Alanzo and I swapped a quick look of concern. After hesitation, he quickly nodded, as if to say Branson could be trusted.

"Have I come at a bad time?" he asked.

I couldn't help but giggle after checking out Alanzo's disheveled hair. Branson, if stories held merit, had a pretty good idea of what he'd interrupted.

Alanzo cleared his throat. "So, tell me, how'd you find us?"

"I've been working on it," he allowed, giving Alanzo nothing more.

"How have you been 'working on it,' Branson?" Alanzo wasn't a big fan of quick, short answers.

A few butterflies took flight in my stomach again. If this cowboy found us, how long before someone else followed behind him?

"You left a cold trail, buddy. There were times when I almost gave up the search. Then you moved here, smack-dab in the middle of southeastern cattle country, and, well, I have friends in the right places. Good news travels fast around these parts."

"So you live here?" I asked.

"Sure do," he said proudly. "Here, Virginia, Texas, Oklahoma, and I have a few places down in Mexico—perfect kind of hideaways if you get my drift."

I did. And I didn't like it.

Why would a man dressed like an Average Joe have the need for several *hideaways*? Who or what was *he* running from?

My gaze met his and then moved lower. What the heck? Might as well go with it, I thought. I was married, not dead. I took my own

sweet time studying the cowboy, who practically struck a pose as if he expected a thorough examination.

Come to think of it, this guy probably needed several residences. My guess? He had a woman in every town.

Chapter Two

“Momma! Daddy!” Cameron rushed down the hall with babysitter Barbara following behind him. She waved from the midway point and never once dropped the phone from her ear.

Once Cameron jumped on Alanzo’s back and introductions were made, Cameron innocently said, “Where’s Daddy?”

I froze.

Alanzo reached behind him and grabbed Cameron’s thighs. “All right, stinker, don’t go pretending I’m a horse to the point you forget the daddy who takes you out for ice cream.”

Cameron had been coached on hypothetical situations like this one. Apparently, it took a long time to teach a little boy sneak-etiquette and the tricks of the trade for living undercover in plain sight.

“Not you, Daddy. My other daddy.”

Branson gnawed on the inside of his jaw. Before Alanzo tried to reason with Cameron again, I intervened and pulled Cameron off Alanzo’s back, tossing him on my hip in the process.

Branson ran his finger across the end of Cameron’s button nose. “Well, little guy, I’d say that good-looking fellow you call Daddy is probably inside hiding. What do you think?”

Cameron frowned. “He’s probably changing diapers. He gets shit-duty a lot.”

“Cameron!” I exclaimed. “Where did you hear such a word?”

Cameron cut his gaze toward Alanzo, and I quickly said, “Never mind.”

Apparently, my kid could remember a four-letter word but he had a problem grasping the idea of self-preservation by playing by the rules we put in place.

After an uncomfortable silence, Branson said, “Cameron, Suzy, it’s been a pleasure meeting you.” A beat later, he dropped his voice and addressed Alanzo, “Get your brother. This ain’t a social call.”

* * * *

After Marco and Branson reunited and the girls were introduced, Alanzo went out for pizza. It was the ideal time to point out the obvious. “Branson, you look like you’ve had a long, hard day. Would you like a shower and some clean clothes?”

His sapphire eyes sparkled with a shot of mischief, and after a guttural growl, he slapped Marco on the back, squarely between the shoulders. “If he’ll let you hold my soap, I’ll race you to the bathroom.”

Marco clucked. “She has all she can handle in two. That’s a promise.”

Branson looked from me to Marco and back to me. “What’s that?”

I felt stripped bare when Branson licked his lips and eyed me from head to toe. “You letting my two best friends take turns tapping that thing?”

“Here now,” Marco said. “You’re talking to my wife.”

“Since when do dead men have wives?” Branson moved an inch or two, closing the distance between us without a second to spare. “Besides, I have a feeling this one can handle anything that comes out of my mouth.”

He wagged his tongue, and after viewing the length of the damn thing, I would have to agree. In fact, controlling it wasn’t the problem, but rather whether or not I’d ever have the opportunity to enjoy what he felt compelled to show.

When I finally tore my gaze away from his mouth, I rejoined the conversation in time to hear Branson when he said, “Your brother and I shared women a few times. You know what they say—three’s a crowd, but four seals the deal.” He made a loud grunt and turned away before Marco retaliated.

I cleared my throat, worried the reunion between friends would quickly take a fatal turn. “Follow me. I’ll show you where to find that soap.” Adding sweetly, I said, “And I’ll show you where you can put it.”

“I’ll just bet you will,” he said with a smile.

Pursing my lips, I headed for the bathroom, aggravated. It had been years since I’d responded to anyone other than Marco and Alanzo. Was it the seven-year itch finally making its call, or did Branson and I have some kind of sudden chemistry impossible to deny?

Regardless of the reason behind the instant attraction, I felt like a young girl leading the way toward the master suite. The only thing I had on my mind was whether or not Branson thought I had a great ass. *That* should’ve been warning enough.

Alanzo returned with his arms loaded down with pizza boxes. “Where are you two going?”

“Here,” Marco said, grabbing the food. “You’d better tag along and supervise Suzy.”

Marco’s tone was suggestive of a man who wasn’t quite happy with the banter back and forth between his wife and best friend.

“Good thing you got here, Alanzo. Branson has already solicited my services for soap-holding.”

Marco reappeared in the bedroom while I retrieved a few towels. “Branson has a thing for Suzy.”

“I’d call it more than a thing,” Branson taunted.

“We don’t share,” Alanzo said.

“At all,” Marco added.

Branson snickered. “No problem, boys. I just wanted to give the missus something to think about. Trust me, tonight you’ll both reap the rewards. By the time I’m through with her, she’ll skip the foreplay and sprint for the finale. Give me a few minutes and I’ll take care of everything.”

Slapping a towel and washcloth against Branson’s chest, I started out of the room. Alanzo gave my ass a firm love pat, and Marco lightly pinched the side of my breast in passing.

“Well, ain’t y’ all plumb adorable?”

“Something like that,” I mumbled, hurrying for the kitchen and arriving in time to stop Cameron from shoving a large pepper down Heather’s throat.

“She asked for it, Mommy,” Maggie said, aiding Cameron by providing him with a solid alibi.

With hands on hips, I tried to look furious and play the mom-part to the best of my ability. “And just how does a three-month-old ask for a hot pepper?”

“She grunted,” Maggie explained, staying right with her story.

“Twice,” Cameron added.

“If she licks the pepper, she won’t feel the itch of chicken pox,” Maggie continued.

Good point. “You’re exactly right, Maggie. Instead of crying over the chicken pox, she’ll be squalling because her mouth burns!”

“I can’t help it, Momma,” Maggie continued. “She reached for it. Cameron only wanted to help.”

One thing about it, regardless of the generation, the Giovanni family stuck together.

“Okay, you two, go wash up. Dinner is served.” I yanked paper plates and napkins from the cupboard and watched Cameron pick a pepperoni off the largest slice of pizza. “That piece is mine,” he announced. “I touched it.”

“Yes,” I sighed. “I saw.”

“And he licked the pepper, too,” Maggie said, wrinkling her nose.
“I think he should eat the whole thing.”
So much for family loyalty.

* * * *

After dinner and several chants of, “I love you more than Jupiter and Mars; the earth, heaven, and stars,” I closed Cameron’s door.

“Three down, one to go.”

Branson was right. After his casual but provocative suggestions earlier, the headboard was going to bang a little bit later. We only needed to get Branson settled in for the night. My mind’s eye immediately recaptured the earlier image of his long, meaty tongue. Yes, the delicious idea of tucking Branson in bed held certain undeniable charms.

Good grief, what am I doing? Since Branson had arrived, I’d possessed one thought—Branson Braxton.

Redirecting my focus, I remembered all the reasons I was committed to Marco and Alanzo. They were the loves of my life, my soul mates. Hadn’t I been fortunate enough to have two men rather than one? Most definitely. Best of all, my hands were full with the Giovanni men. They were everything a woman could possibly want—in and out of the sack. In fact, I couldn’t wait to lure them off to bed again.

Branson had interrupted a great afternoon pastime. Maybe that’s why I had explicit thoughts churning through my mind. Why, sure, that made sense. My panties were wet, and I needed perpetual sex. I knew where to find a couple of volunteers to help out with my current dilemma.

I was off to find Marco and Alanzo. Surely Branson would understand if I shooed him away for a few hours. Plans quickly changed—a probable postponement of carnal activities obvious—

when I saw the concerned faces staring back at me a few seconds later.

“What’s going on?”

Branson cleared the table—so the man was good for something—and Marco patted his knee. “We have a little problem, hon. Sit down.”

My heart took off at eighty-five beats per minute. “Define little.”

Alanzo shot straight from the hip most of the time. He said, “Suzy, Francine’s father suspects something. He’s the one who leaked information to the press. He truly believes Marco is still alive.”

“What?” Forget the racing heart. That was the least of my worries. I stopped breathing and feared I’d never have a pulse again after hearing a reference to Geoff Alberto. I couldn’t stand the thought of such a vile man reentering our lives.

Just the mere mention of Francine or her father made me remember. I recalled what we’d left behind, what we’d sacrificed, and the kind of lives we couldn’t lead because of a past that Geoff Alberto refused to let Marco forget.

Sadly, as time wore on, we often convinced ourselves that we’d eventually be able to return home and reclaim our former lives. Apparently, we’d become pretty good at fooling ourselves.

“Geoff has a team dedicated to finding us. If one of his men can locate Marco, they’ll receive ten million dollars for their efforts.”

“And they have five million on Alanzo,” Branson interjected. “He’s wanted dead or alive.”

“What is this—the Wild Wild West?” I asked, agitated.

Branson slowly nodded. “You’d be surprised at what lengths a man will go to in order to destroy another.”

I kept shaking my head. “I don’t understand. Why would Geoff start looking for us again? Why would he believe Marco is alive when he never questioned his death? It’s been nearly seven years.”

“The doctor that delivered Heather is on his payroll now,” Alanzo told her.

“But you said we could trust him. You said we had every reason to believe we bought his silence!”

“Hush money is never guaranteed as a goods delivered situation, Suzy. Someone will always pay a higher price to break the silence,” Branson said. “Geoff has unlimited resources.”

“The doctor kept quiet for a few months. It doesn’t really matter about the doc’s greed, though. Geoff became suspicious because Alanzo has been moving money around in some offshore accounts. Now, Geoff claims to have proof that Marco is alive. He’s also made a lot of people believe Marco is mentally ill and he only wants to help him,” Branson explained.

“Ill?” I asked, shocked.

“Crazy,” Marco corrected.

“I understand that, Marco,” I said, sarcasm thick in my tone.

“Do you want me to put the rest of the pizza in the refrigerator or the freezer?” Branson asked politely.

I glanced up at my new enemy—the man who intruded on our lives only to bring devastating news. He was the devil in sheep’s clothing.

“Suzy?” Marco snapped his fingers. “The pizza?”

“I don’t give a rat’s ass about food! I’d like to freeze a few Italians, keep them on ice until I’ve had the opportunity to finish living out my life.”

Marco pulled me against him. “It’ll be okay, baby. We’ll have to move around more, but we’ll be fine. You’ll see. Trust me. Trust Alanzo.”

“Don’t you dare tell me to trust Branson.”

Branson looked stunned. He hurriedly finished his task of tidying up the kitchen, like that would change my opinion of him.

“Branson is only here to help,” Alanzo reassured me.

My gaze cut Branson’s way. I still resented him. I didn’t want to move again. I was tired of running. Plus, a babysitter was worth a lot,

and the kids loved Barbara. Now, we'd have to pack up and run again? When did it end?

"How in the hell can you tell me to trust anyone? Somebody is out there looking for us, and they're willing to pay for your heads!"

"That's a little dramatic," Marco said. "Worst case scenario, I'll be caught, taken back to Geoff, and warned that I'll be dead if I don't start playing football again. I'll hand him most of my earnings, and that will be that."

"Over my dead body," Alanzo said.

"Mine, too," Branson and I chirped together. Immediately, our gazes met.

Oh, Lord, here we go. From resentment to attraction, I had a hard time deciding what I wanted to feel, or already felt, for Branson.

One thing about it, I smelled trouble as easily as I could cock a loaded gun. I saw the kind of trouble that had a few bullets with my name engraved on them. Since I already had three children, I hoped Branson shot blanks, on the chance Alanzo and Marco decided to let me pull Branson Braxton's trigger.

Alanzo snarled, apparently reading my mind. "Don't even think about it, Suzy."

Noting how my breathing changed just from eyeing Branson's denim-clad bulge while thinking in terms of a cocked weapon, I said, "Too late. I'm starting to believe this family may need three strong men to protect us."

"My services don't come cheap, but I pride myself on happy customers."

"So I've heard," I snapped, remembering the fashion model story once again. Branson actually made the front page of *The National Blab-Tab* where the gals told all. Maybe that's why he earned my favor, too. What can I say? I loved to find out if rumors were true.

"Then you should have a pretty good idea of what you're wrapping your hand around if you grab on to me," he teased.

“Well it’s good to know you’re as cocky as these two. Besides, you don’t have to convince me. Your skills were appropriately documented for the whole world to see.”

Chapter Three

The men stayed up late reliving old memories and revisiting a past Marco and Alanzo most likely missed. I longed to return to some level of normalcy and often wondered how Marco survived without football. The game had been his life.

Occasionally, I returned to Texas and revisited Preston Hollow. Cassie Teller and her men—among them my ex-husband—would come over and keep me company during too-short visits. Our children would play together while we enjoyed catching up and gossiping about the new divas on the Professional Football Confederacy scene.

At least I had an outlet. Alanzo and Marco really didn't. They had to be so careful of what they did and where they went. It wasn't fair.

Geoff Alberto made sure Marco, and even Alanzo, couldn't live a public life. A very powerful man with mob connections, Geoff carried a lifelong grudge for the Giovanni brothers after his daughter lost her life.

Geoff blamed Marco because he had the horrifying luck of driving Francine when a drunk driver struck their car. Marco had been in love with Francine. They'd been enjoying prom night when Francine was killed.

Geoff didn't grieve his daughter's death. Oh, no, he tried to avenge it over and over again, making sure Marco paid for the Alberto family's loss. He managed to do that mobster style. If Francine couldn't live her life, Marco couldn't either.

The Alberto family refused to let Marco find happiness. Geoff damn sure didn't want Marco to enjoy financial gain or any fame Marco justifiably earned as an amazing football quarterback. Geoff

Alberto was the devil himself, always standing nearby, watching and waiting to collect on a debt that would never be repaid.

I was disappointed when I awoke to an empty bed and heard the men chuckling in the distance. I looked at the red digital numbers—three o'clock in the morning. At five, I rolled over again and discovered Heather and Cameron sprawled across my bed. Peering over their small heads, I eyed Alanzo. So much for putting the stud in front of the mare, as Branson might have said.

The night before, Branson worked his magic and finally charmed the daylights out of me. He was still the enemy, the bearer of bad news. I didn't forgive and forget easily. I'd had enough disruptions from outsiders to last a lifetime. But Branson was the kind of man a woman couldn't ignore—handsome, sexy, interesting, and funny.

Through conversation, I discovered Branson grew up with as much heartache as he did luxuries. He was one of four sons born into money, the offspring of a wealthy and legendary rancher, Pete Braxton. I had immediately recognized the name and remembered why about as soon as I spotted the quick change in Branson's expression.

The heart-wrenching sadness pooled in the corners of his eyes when he shared a brief accounting of what happened to his family several decades prior. Branson was a toddler when Mr. and Mrs. Braxton decided to take their boys on a fifty-state excursion. Branson came down with a bad case of the measles and mumps. Since he was so young, his mother and father left him behind with the family nannies.

On day one of the family's travels, they pulled into a campground, checked in, found their reserved camping spot, and were met by renegades later that evening, some sort of modern day bandits. Reporters later dubbed the event as a mob hit, and the news footage, from what I recalled, sure left that impression.

The reporters claimed Pete Braxton did what the men asked—which was transfer millions of dollars into an offshore bank

account—but they killed each of his boys and his wife, stating, “We said we’d let you go. We never said anything about your family.”

When Mr. Braxton returned home, Branson said he was never the same. He doted on Branson, but as Branson aged, he never felt like he quite measured up to expectations. Then again, who could? Pete Braxton had expected Branson to replace all he lost. That was too large of a bill to fill.

Through our late night conversation, Branson proved that my dearly beloved grandmother’s words of wisdom always held true. She used to say if someone found a clown with a great big smile, they were certain to find a man who had more reasons to frown than grin.

Grandma used to tell that story a lot and probably had reason to believe it. She met my grandfather when he was following around some second-rate, small-time circus. And he made the circus his home so he could eat three meals a day and sleep somewhere safe.

Branson probably didn’t worry about feeding himself, but I bet, like us, he never went to bed without checking the locks on the windows. And barricading the doors.

* * * *

Breakfast went as well as could be expected. The pancakes were perfectly round. The batter didn’t run when I spelled out the children’s names, and the eggs flipped without a problem. I had every reason to believe the day would be perfect until Alanzo motioned for me and I followed him into the bedroom.

As soon as the door slammed behind us, he dropped the bomb. “We’re moving, Suzy.”

“What? When?”

“Today and tomorrow.”

“Alanzo, please,” I began, already processing the loss of a battle I couldn’t win. “We can’t. The kids like it here. Cameron has friends

here. He loves his sitter. What about the girls? They're still covered in chicken pox. We can't pack up and leave on a moment's notice."

"We can and we will."

I felt the familiar feeling of being backed into a corner. I might as well accept the move because if I didn't, Alanzo and Marco would angrily persist until I saw things their way. We always fought about relocating, and this time, I just didn't have the fight in me. It was a losing proposition to ask them to wait a few weeks. In addition to Marco and Alanzo, Branson was in the equation. Did I really want to show my ass in front of their guest?

Okay, so flaunting my assets had crossed my mind a few times.

"Suzy, if we stay here, we'll be found within the next few weeks. Branson has been tracking the progress of Geoff's men. That's how he's been able to stay a couple of steps behind us. He found us because of his local connections, but he'd followed Geoff's fellows initially. That's how he knew where to start looking in the first place. Geoff could knock on our door at any moment."

"I don't understand. The threat has been here. It's not any different just because Branson came rushing in with new fear. He's not used to our way of life, Alanzo. Whatever he's told you, he's overreacted. That's all this is."

"No, Suzy. You're wrong."

"Why can't you be sensible? Think about this. We're going to walk away from the life we've built here, and in twenty-four hours or less we'll be moving to—"

"Blountville."

"Huh?"

"We're moving to a little town in East Tennessee."

"Define little. So far, every time the word comes up, there's very *little* appeal found in it."

"The population is around three thousand."

"Oh, my God."

“It’s better than three hundred, Suzy. Besides, it’s only for a little while.”

Damn. There was the word one more time. I’d probably die in the damn town.

“Branson trades real estate using one of his father’s dummy corporations. His company just bought a farm there. The property includes a large, nice home, and there’s only one way in and one way out. Locals don’t pay too much attention to transplants. There are two grocery stores, a few gas stations, and hometown festivities on occasion. It’s typical Small Town USA.”

“For a city girl, it sounds like hell.”

“Come on, baby. You may love the place. You can go to bake sales.”

I was anything but domestic.

“Take walks in the park.”

I preferred world-class gyms with state-of-the-art equipment.

“Who knows, you may even meet some new friends. Branson says we can live a public life there.”

“My luck, our new friends pee in their front yards and are missing their front teeth. And let’s not even talk about how they mispronounce the items in their vegetable garden.”

“You’re being ridiculous.”

“No, unfortunately, I’m being honest. I’ll need a southern dictionary before I go there. I’ll have to learn how to talk about maters and taters and God only knows what else.”

“We’re going, Suzy. I hope you’ll be happy there.”

“For how long?”

“Until we decide it’s not safe there anymore.”

A silence separated us, and in that moment, I resented the life Marco and Alanzo had allowed Francine’s father to inflict upon us. “If it’s so damn wonderful, then why do I get the feeling you aren’t too thrilled about this sudden move?”

"I've learned to make the most of our situation. You used to do that, too."

"Has it ever occurred to you why?"

His face was blank.

"It used to be an adventure. Now, we have the children to think about. They want roots somewhere. Don't you understand that?"

"They'll be fine, Suzy. It's all in how you present things to them. If Mom is okay with it, Cameron and the girls will be excited. You'll see."

"I can't get out of here that fast. The kids are demanding and—"

"I'm taking Cameron and the girls to Preston Hollow. It's the only way I can keep them content. You can get everything moved without the added stress of the children. Corby and company will assist with the kids until Branson and Marco help you get settled. Then, we'll join you in Tennessee."

"It's too dangerous in Texas, Alanzo. If you're going back there instead of me, I already know this. Why would you put our children at risk?"

"It's just for a couple of days. It's safer there than anywhere else. Branson has some ex-servicemen on his payroll. They'll arrive at the house later this afternoon, posing as renters, putting the word out that they're there on official business. He's instructed them to make a show out of their arrival—make it look like the government leased the place."

"And that's believable?"

"To someone like Francine's father? Yeah. It'll work. He steers clear of secret missions."

"Alanzo, who is Branson, really?"

"What do you mean, who is he?"

"How can he pull strings like this?"

"He's well connected."

"How?"

"A lot of folks owe him favors."

“Right. Favors. Are *we* going to owe him, too, when this is all over?”

A noise behind me announced an intruder. By the look on Alanzo’s face, my assumptions were right. Branson was behind me. I turned around and caught the blue-hot gaze of one hell of a man.

“I’ll take that payback when the time is right.”

“And what do you want exactly?”

“That’s easy,” Branson said, flashing a sly smile. “You.”

Chapter Four

The next morning, the condo looked and felt like an empty seashell. It was hollow, that was the best way to describe what had once been our home.

There was a low rumbling noise coming from the heat pump, and the subtle hum sounded exactly like the distant noise often heard in a large shell. It rang out like a song of desertion rather than hummed along like an inviting melody.

I looked around at the place I'd called home. In the last six months, I'd started to unpack the remaining boxes I often kept in closets. All of our family photographs had hung on the walls. Marco's awards and trophies had been placed. I'd even decorated Alanzo's office so he could resume his life as a bookie from the comfort of his own space.

Everything had come together. We were completely settled in and then *boom!* The clock stopped once again, and it was time to start all over.

"We're ready when you are, Suzy," Branson called out.

I made my way down the hall one last time. My gaze fell to the wooden doorframe leading to Cameron's room and I quickly looked away, unable to glance once more at the ink dots along the grain, noting Cameron's growth. He'd been such a little tyke when we first moved there.

Clasping my hand over my mouth, I fought to contain an outright cry. When the attempt failed, Branson came up behind me and squeezed my shoulders.

“You and the kids will be safe, Suzy. That’s important. It’s the only thing that matters to Alanzo and Marco.”

Tears streamed down my cheeks when I faced him. “And how can you be so sure? You don’t know!”

“I may not understand what you’ve been through, but I understand a parent’s need to keep their children safe. My father hovered over me. He paid for bodyguards and protection around the clock.”

“Maybe so, but you haven’t lived *this* life.”

With the pads of his thumbs, he swiped away the evidence of vulnerability—a side I rarely showed anyone, except Marco and Alanzo. After another passing moment, he squeezed my hand.

A hot flash of something mighty close to desire seared my skin from his one, simple touch. Quickly, I backed away.

“You have my word. You’ll have a good life in Blountville.”

At one time in my life, I would’ve told him how much I took a man at his word. Marco and Alanzo, even in tough times, remained true to their promises. Did this man have the kind of rough stock needed to hang with the Giovanni men?

I wondered.

While lost in those bright blue eyes, I also pondered why Branson wanted to help us. What kind of future could a man like Branson Braxton possibly hope to find by sticking his neck out for us? Didn’t he know what kind of life he’d find? Didn’t he care that he’d have to go on the run, too, if he stayed with us?

That question certainly hung high enough to keep things off balance. If I had to guess, Branson Braxton just didn’t give a damn.

“Want me to give you another minute?” he asked when I was reluctant to follow him outside.

“No,” I said, finally tracing the wood where Cameron had recorded his growth progress. “I’m ready. There’s nothing else here for me.”

Branson retrieved a cell phone and fiddled with it for a moment. “Tell you what,” he said, aiming the phone and pressing a button. “Let me go see if I can find a yardstick or tape measure.”

He disappeared for a few minutes, and I returned to the master bedroom, revisiting the more sensual memories for the last time. Teary-eyed, I turned to find him in the doorway again. He extended his hand and said, “Come on.”

Wiping my damp face on the sleeve of my shirt, I followed him back to Cameron’s room. “What are you doing?”

“I’m sure Cameron enjoyed seeing how much he’d grown, too. I’ll give you the date and his height. You jot it down. When we get to Tennessee, we’ll help him record his progress on his new bedroom door.”

I was touched. First, he took a picture, and now he was going to measure for accuracy. Cameron would be pleased. Unfortunately, I found another reason to believe Branson Braxton was irresistible.

Chapter Five

Blountville, Tennessee

Blountville wasn't *that* bad. On a positive note, the Bristol Motor Speedway was located nearby. On the other hand, we'd probably never go. A large sporting event wasn't typically where we showed our faces. Any cameraman from a major network might spot us.

The children would thrive in a small town. Everything a growing family needed was right there. Blountville sported a yogurt shop, two Mexican restaurants, and a couple of big-name fast food joints—one of which had golden arches and the other known for its kid's meals and burgers. What more could a family need?

I noticed a sandwich shop, a tanning and hair salon, and a place called B&L Auto which took all of about five seconds to figure out the place hailed as the local hangout. I took another moment to gape at the reasons why.

A legitimate business, Branson said B&L's father and son owners had service and smiles down to an art form. Shoot, if I wasn't a committed woman, I'd stop off there for the eye candy. Who would've thought southern boys could look so pretty waving at passerby traffic?

We continued driving up Highway 75 and I couldn't help but think of the metropolitan areas where we'd once lived. At the same time, I noticed five drivers waved as we passed them. At least the place was a friendly town.

"We're up ahead on the right," Branson said, taking a left on Muddy Creek Road.

A cow and her calf stuck their heads between two plank boards as we made a hard turn and headed straight up a steep incline. Even the animals were curious about the strangers invading their land, and a large bull provided a moo, too, adding his greeting.

Yes, indeed, for a dignified city gal like myself, I could find a few things to like about Blountville. Besides, our place was exactly as my guys promised—secluded.

Iron gates led to a private property off the main road. On top of a hillside, overlooking a gorgeous view of the mountains, a plantation-style home offered southern charm with its large, handsome columns and wraparound porch. The gleaming, white, house paint and bright red shutters might as well have screamed, “Look at me!” With personality and old-world sophistication, the house was impressive, to say the least.

Brick sidewalks wound a path through well-maintained grounds with various flowers scattered throughout the garden. Fruit trees lining the property signified a lot of thought went into the landscaping. Someone certainly made sure the homestead was something of a showplace.

“She likes it. I can tell,” Marco said as I rushed toward the house.

From the small stoop, I pushed the metal handle on the screen door and walked inside. Entering the galley kitchen, I glanced up at the copper pans and whatnots hanging high above a glorious center chopping block, something I always loved in my Preston Hollow home.

All that cookware would come in handy with our crew. Around the holidays, Anna Giovanni would be whisked away in the middle of the night just so her boys could find her in my kitchen sometime before the turkey needed a good stuffing.

Sometimes I felt like the poor bird by the time Anna finished trimming me. We had what I imagined was often the case in a mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship. A lot of love and an ounce of hate.

A den was attached to the kitchen, and it opened up to a formal dining room, a parlor, a full living room and den, another kitchen—the second one far better than the first—with a massive screened-in porch. And that was only floor one.

“Well?” Marco asked when I started up the back steps, opting for the stairs leading from the kitchen. Later, I’d feel like Scarlett O’Hara and descend down the magnificent front circular steps in make-believe fashion.

“I’m still taking it all in,” I remarked, fingering the wooden banister and wondering what kind of income afforded such old luxuries back in the day when this particular home had been built. What kind of parties had been thrown in this dated house? What kind of lovers had loved here? How many children had rushed through these halls?

Branson followed behind us. Without a doubt, he was unimpressed. I remembered reading about his family’s money, and old homesteads like these were often added to the Braxton real estate collections on a monthly basis.

Branson’s father—from what I understood—had a replica of The Biltmore built on his Montana ranch. Sure, it was a smaller version of the palatial North Carolina home, but it was designed with The Biltmore in mind.

If Branson liked what his money afforded him, he never indicated one way or the other. I, on the other hand, appreciated the nicer things in life. While I had plenty of money to burn—the Giovannis never wanted for much—Branson’s plantation was straight out of the movies.

Everything had an appointed place. From the burgundy Oriental runners covering the hardwood floors to the brass sconces on either side of each bedroom door, many set in between oval, antique black-and-white photographs. The past made its presence known. I felt like the marvelous grandfather clock at the end of the hall designated me

the timekeeper while the pendulum gently swayed back and forth as if giving a lazy effort to turn back time.

The second-floor sunroom offered a bright, refreshing treat. Encased by large bay windows, the view of the lake, ponds, and countryside looked like something an artist designed specifically to enchant those there for a viewing.

Even though it was early fall, some of the leaves had already changed and, oddly enough, on one side of the lake, the trees were painted with a multitude of autumn colors while the other side continued to sport the emerald green tones discovered in new money. Nature seemed to welcome us, showcasing what we had to anticipate by highlighting two of the area's most appealing seasons.

"So this is fall," I said, pointing. "And over there is spring."

"What's that?" Marco asked, taking my hand.

"It's perfect," I said, barely remembering I didn't want the move to Tennessee. "It's so beautiful here."

Branson firmly clapped his hands together. "Now that's what I like to hear. Ain't nothing better than a satisfied woman."

Taking the opportunity to show him the vixen living within, I said, "I imagine that's something you don't experience often."

"You've done it now," Marco mumbled. "Here we go."

Branson inched closer, his eyes sparkling with devilment. "You know what? You're half-right. It's been a good long time since I've had a woman spreading her legs for me, crying out my name, and then screaming for mercy after she's been down that road of bliss one too many times. I kind of miss that. And to make sure you never have to, when Alanzo gets back, I'm going to have a sit-down talk with Marco and Alanzo.

"Yes, ma'am, we're going to have a man-to-man kind of discussion. I plan to persuade your boys and see if they'll let me experience your pleasures, or should I say...let you enjoy mine."

I blinked. This guy was really full of himself. “It won’t do you any good,” I finally managed while hoping my words came back to bite me in the ass.

“We’ll just have to see about that, won’t we? I feel like they kind of owe me.”

And there it was. The promise made to collect a debt.

I forced a smile and turned to Marco. “This is precisely what I expected.”

“Yeah,” Marco muttered. “I’ve been waiting for this, too.”

Branson waved a hand in front of the window. “I invited you here so you could see what heaven on earth really looks like. The least Suzy can do is let me know what it *feels* like. And with any luck, maybe I’ll be able to watch an angel soar.”

Marco grunted, and I couldn’t resist. Since Branson was standing so close and all. I threw my arms over his back and whispered, “Well, that’s where we may have a small problem, cowboy.”

“We do?”

“Yeah,” I purred. “We do.”

He swallowed tightly, and I felt him flinch.

“See, I believe in heaven and hell. But if you’d done your homework, you’d have found out, I’m a gal with a reputation. If you’re looking for an angel and you’re looking my way, you will be disappointed.”

“Never,” he breathed, though it seemed like an effort.

“She could corrupt even you,” Marco grumbled.

“Maybe I need to do a little sinning then,” Branson suggested, shooting me a gaze hot enough to churn melted butter.

“And what then? Hmm? I have an addictive personality, you know. If I get a hold of you once, I may not let go.”

“Okay, Suzy,” Marco interrupted. “Knock it off.”

After an exasperated sigh, I studied the man I loved. The poor guy was sweating. By the wide smile shaping Branson’s mouth, it was a safe bet Branson enjoyed the friendly banter. Me...well, I just loved

verbal foreplay. I was beginning to think there would be plenty more to ignite a few stirring fires.

Branson wanted me. He made no excuses for it as our flirting kicked up a few notches.

Marco allowed us to carry on for a little longer than I'd expected. If Branson's friendship meant as much as Marco and Alanzo claimed, it would only be a matter of time before they caved and let Branson have his way. Then again, they seldom denied me the things I wanted most, and Branson was moving mighty damn close to topping my wish list.

When Branson removed his cowboy hat and held it parallel to his belt buckle, I snickered. "Well, it's time to move on. I've seen about all there is to see. Where are the bedrooms?"

I can't recall a time when two grown men moved any faster.

Chapter Six

Hours later, Marco joined me in our new bedroom. He had one thing on his mind, and I didn't have to ask for specifics. His cock pressed against his pants, and when he started unhooking his belt, his mouth moistened. "Alanzo called. He's on his way. We're picking him up at the local airport around ten tonight."

"This town has an airport?" I asked, dropping to the oversized keepsake treasure chest located at the foot of the bed. Squirming a little when I discovered the blasted thing was only covered with a thin blanket instead of what I thought might have been a cushion, I tucked my legs under my body and found myself eye-level to Marco's waist.

"Tri-Cities Airport," he replied. "It's not exactly small, from what I can tell." The added comment drew my gaze lower when he unzipped his pants. "For all I know, it may be the largest you've ever seen."

"Are we talking airports now, or cocks?"

He chuckled and stroked my cheek.

"Let me guess," I said jokingly. "Someone with a longer driveway than ours accommodates small planes for a landing strip?"

"Cute." He pointed toward the bed and crooked his finger. "Come here, you."

"When will our stuff arrive?" I asked, ignoring the sexual implications just to irritate him.

"Soon."

"I see." A second later, I added, "And you expect me to sleep in someone else's bed?" Thick implications and how they were handled often told of things to come.

“Not yet I don’t,” Marco said, ripping open the front of his shirt. Oh, how I loved that. It made me think of those dirty movies where the man rushes into a hotel room to meet his woman after a long separation. He can’t manage anything more than tugging himself free and plunging inside her. And she never seems to mind. Imperative sex—maybe I should’ve asked for it by name.

Marco gnawed his lower lip and offered up a *come and get me* stare. The one easily interpreted as “give me head and I’ll make it worth your while” and undoubtedly Marco would.

“Nice abs,” I remarked, eyeing his sexy six in the middle.

Marco’s body was duplicated only by one—his twin had the same good fortune. They owned washboard stomachs, great asses, and muscles that rippled in all the right places.

Marco tripped out of his pants, kicked off his loafers, and in a flash jumped on the bed, landing on his back. “Get over here and love me right.”

I eyed his thick penis. “Good Lord. That thing looks mighty dangerous.”

“This here dick,” he drawled, practicing his *Southernism*, “is guaranteed to leave a solid impression.”

I shivered. “Looks like it could bring a woman plenty of trouble.”

“It’s been known to have explosive consequences.”

“I’ll say,” I agreed, stepping out of my designer jeans and wiggling out of a too-pink T-shirt. “We have a couple of little darlings to prove it.”

“I’m more interested in the two little darlings you just uncovered.”

“Really now, Marco. I was talking children.”

“All right. If that’s what you want. What do you say we go for two more?”

“When hell freezes over,” I snapped, rapidly losing the desire to fuck with the sudden memory of childbirth and agonizing pain. Snatching my purse from the floor, I made a dramatic show of taking my birth control pill, swallowing it without water to wash it down.

“Now that’s a sign of a desperate woman.”

“No, just a protected woman.”

After making such a fuss, I took the time to give an equal performance when I removed my bra and panties.

“That’s my good little wife,” Marco said when I dropped to the floor and grabbed hold of his knees.

When he scooted to the edge of the bed, his tight mushroom head pressed against my lips and that bittersweet masculine taste awakened my senses.

“Behave, Suzy,” he whispered. “I want in between those legs for the grand finale.”

Licking the crest, I whispered, “Not a chance.”

After his guttural moan, I quickly added, “And beggars can’t be choosers.”

After sipping, licking, and outright sucking, I was beginning to think Marco had more resistance than all men put together.

I tried every way in the world to bring about his release. From slurping and fondling to taking him all the way down my throat. Nothing worked. His cock pulsed between my cheeks, swelling and swelling, but he didn’t come.

“Done yet?” he taunted.

“No,” I said, cupping his behind and drawing him closer, sucking him to the back of my mouth.

“You let me know when you are,” he said, thrusting across my tongue. “No hurry, honey.”

Like hell.

A few more minutes of this and I’d concede. There was a rippling brook between my legs, and I needed a little turbulence down there sometime in the near future.

Fingering his balls, I took a deeper suction, smacking his ass with my free hand until he grabbed a handful of my hair and pulled me away.

“Let me spank you. I’ll give you what you want if you let me tan your hide.”

His eyes glistened with hope, desire, need, and the kind of raging fire a woman loves to watch burn brightly in the eyes of her lover. I knew why he wanted to spank me. I deserved it.

Nuzzling the tip of his dick, I whimpered and nodded. He rose from the bed and stood directly in front of me, his feet planted on either side of my knees.

“You win,” he sighed, screwing my mouth with a slow, deliberate grind.

I typically did.

With the first thrust, his sweet, salty taste tantalized the tip of my tongue. Before I could savor the silky treat, he shifted forward, stuffing his cock tightly between my cheeks. When his balls smacked against my chin, he gripped my head and fucked my mouth like he’d later take my body. “Here you go, baby. Suck it up.”

* * * *

Alanzo enjoyed spanking me, but Marco loved the hell out of it, especially when he was a little miffed over something. He generally wanted me to feel like he was punishing me for bad behavior, but he was so loving, gentle, and sensual when he delivered the smacks, I hardly defined the spankings as a form of corporal punishment.

After one smack, another two followed, and good grief, how he took his time, making an effort to slap and then smooth away the dull burn. My bottom wasn’t the problem. Even when a heavier smack came down across my ass, the heat I felt was becoming an uncontainable fire.

I moved my fingers to my pussy, and he grabbed my hand to stop me from playing with what he clearly thought of as his. He brought my fingers to his lips and licked them, sucking down the slender bone until he drew out a stifled moan.

When I'd just started to grovel, a creaking sound from the hallway alerted us to the arrival of an onlooker. Marco either pretended not to hear or just couldn't care less. Before I could warn him of the company about to join us, the door swung open, and just as fast, Branson's brilliant blue gaze fell to my bottom.

"Dear God," Branson said softly, either unable or unwilling to move.

My money was on his lack of motivation.

"Shit," Marco said, reaching for a blanket. He tossed a quilt over me and blocked my body with his.

Grinning, I told Branson, "Maybe you *should* talk to my boys privately. See if they won't let you join the party at a *later* date."

"Suzy, really," Marco warned, apparently opposed to the idea.

Branson didn't take the subtle hint. He didn't move, and if facial expressions—one marked with hooded eyes and beads of sweat peppering across his brow—told a tale, he probably wouldn't turn around until Marco asked him to get lost.

"Branson?" Marco began, waving his fingers toward the door. "Can you give us a minute?"

"Uh..."

"Branson!"

"Yeah, man, sure. I don't know what I was thinking."

Yeah, right. I knew exactly what was on the cowboy's mind.

"Let me know if you two need any help in here."

Snickering, I buried my head in Marco's belly after Branson left. "You're so cruel."

"Yeah, well, if he wasn't so anxious to RSVP to that private invitation he's so certain he'll receive, I might have considered his offer."

"No you wouldn't," I told him.

"Sure, I would."

"Uh-huh," I teased, staring up at one beautiful man.

He rolled my nipple back and forth, and I saw the question forming in his mind long before he asked it. “How *would* you feel about Branson joining us?”

That was a loaded question, and I typically avoided those when they were asked by one of the two men I deeply loved. I took a tortured breath and truly thought about the varying possibilities.

Marco and Alanzo were perfect in every way. Physically, they were every woman’s fantasy. Tall, dark, sexy, and oh so handsome, the Giovanni men were made-to-order, godlike creatures. But both possessed a flaw. I wanted something they couldn’t give me.

I wanted to live in public.

I longed to enroll the children in public schools—or at least real private schools, those with a classroom consisting of more than a poolside environment or tabletop lesson plans. I wanted to go shopping with girlfriends without one or both Giovanni men freaking out or fearing I’d been picked off by one of Geoff’s goons.

In that moment, I believed, if Marco and Alanzo agreed, I could have the things I once enjoyed. Maybe I could truly live life to the fullest again, without looking over my shoulder or waiting for the other shoe to drop.

I couldn’t help but wonder, what if. What if Francine hadn’t been killed in that car accident? What if Marco and I hadn’t gotten together? Where would Marco and the rest of us be if Francine’s family had accepted her death rather than tried to avenge a death they continued to blame on Marco?

Then, I had to wonder why I thought I might be able to live a normal life again if Branson were in the picture. Wouldn’t Marco and Alanzo resent it if they knew how I longed for something more than what they could give? And if they thought for one minute Branson could give me something they couldn’t, wouldn’t they move hell and high waters to keep him away from me?

“Suzy?” Marco snapped his fingers in front of my face. “Are you in there?”

I kissed his stomach and let my fingers walk up and down his hip. “I’m here. I’ll always be right here.”

“No,” Marco sighed. “Alanzo and I have noticed a change in you. We think you’re anywhere but where we want you to be. We’ve caused you pain, haven’t we, baby?”

I studied his eyes and saw the hurt burning behind them. “I love you. That’s what matters.”

“I love you, Suzy. But the way I love you may not be enough.”

He brought me into his arms and cradled me against his chest, running his hand up and down my back. “Branson is a good guy.”

“I’m sure he is.”

“Are you attracted to him?” Marco asked.

I tucked my hands under my chin and focused on him. “I’m attracted to you.”

“I know this,” he said. “But do you need something more than Alanzo and I can give you?”

“I miss my old life.”

“You mean your life before me.”

“I miss the country club, dinner and dancing, going to movies, or just walking in the park without this built-in paranoia. I’m tired of moving from place to place, packing up and going on a moment’s notice. Don’t you ever get exhausted, Marco?”

He brushed my hair out of my face and said, “Yes, Suzy. I’m tired of running, too. We’re all tired.”

“Then do something about it,” I whined. “Can’t you do anything to get us out of this mess? Don’t you ever want to return to football?”

He moved away and sat on the edge of the bed with his hands dropped between splayed legs. “I’d love to return to the world of sports in one capacity or another, but I’m afraid we won’t settle things with Francine’s father anytime soon. I don’t think I’ll ever play football again, Suzy.”

“It doesn’t have to be this way,” I told him, leaning over his shoulder. “We can go to the FBI or talk to someone who’ll listen.”

“We’re up against one of the largest organized crime families in the world. You and I both know we can’t risk going public with what has happened to us.”

“Then why try?” I asked, leaping from the bed and strolling across the room to snatch my robe. “Why even bother with living?”

“Suzy, the children...”

“Aren’t here!”

“They’ll be here. They’re safe now. You know this.”

“And they’re unable to enjoy the freedoms found in living life in plain sight. We’ve sheltered them, hidden them in the shadows, and you think this is okay.”

“Come back to bed,” he said, patting the mattress.

“No,” I bit out. “I’m going downstairs to make some coffee. Then, I’ll go with you to meet Alanzo. After we pick him up, we’re going to have a talk. If you won’t try to get us back to the place where we can live again, then I’m done. I’m through. Do you hear me?”

I stormed out and slammed the door. Rushing down the back stairs, I tripped on the last step and crashed into the door, which immediately opened.

Lucky for me, there was a hard body waiting there to catch me. Maybe it was a sign.

I decided to take it as one.

Chapter Seven

“You okay?” Branson asked.

“Yes,” I muttered, pushing him away.

“You sure?” he further inquired, pulling me back.

“Don’t, Branson.”

His lips twitched. “I could, you know. They’re going to let me. You’re eventually going to accept the idea, and one of these days, I’ll strip this robe right off you,” he promised, fingering the silk tie around my waist. The chemistry between us grew stronger and stronger.

I locked gazes with one finely tuned cowboy. His pretty smile was intoxicating, but I reminded myself of vows and commitment. Alanzo and Marco wanted our relationship to remain strictly between the three of us, and I wasn’t one to break promises to them. Regardless of the needs I had developed, I wouldn’t sabotage the relationships formed with Marco and Alanzo.

“I need to change,” I said, looking toward the steps and eyeing Marco, who stood at the top of the stairs.

“I think you’re fine the way you are,” Branson teased, moistening his lips and still refusing to let me go. Our hands touched, and Marco arched a brow.

“Something going on here?”

“Not yet,” Branson drawled. “But you know it’s coming, friend.”

“Maybe,” Marco said. “Who knows what tomorrow holds?”

“I don’t care about tomorrow. I’m more concerned with what I’ll have the opportunity to hold in my arms for more than a day or two.”

Man, he was cocky. Branson must've thought his stamina was comparable to a mountain lion's.

"Looks like you haven't wasted much time taking what you want," Marco snapped, descending toward me and slipping a kiss on my cheek in passing.

I hurried by him, agitated when he kissed me, pissed because Marco knew how to tick me off and often did it with a smile. A kiss wasn't welcomed right then. First, I'd thought I was set to enjoy the early evening by being romped all over my new bedroom. Then, I discovered Marco had given up any hope of us returning to our old lives. And finally, I had to face a truth I couldn't deny—I had a building attraction to Branson Braxton.

What was I going to do about that?

* * * *

Alanzo's plane was late. To make matters worse, when his flight finally arrived, he wasn't on the 737 jet.

I jogged over to Branson's SUV and Marco rolled down the passenger window. "Tell Alanzo to move his ass. I feel like a sitting duck out here now."

He should've stayed at home like Branson suggested, but evidently Marco didn't want his buddy to spend any time alone with me. I couldn't blame him.

I pointed toward the baggage claim area, which was visible because of the large windows. "He must've taken another flight. He wasn't on the one from Charlotte."

Branson jumped out of the large vehicle. "Let me check with airline personnel. Wait here."

Gripping the side of the door, I stared at Marco. "Do what he said," he bit out. "Get in."

He rolled up his window about the time I opened the back door and slid across the backseat.

Marco's rigid shoulders answered plenty of unasked questions. "This isn't good. Alanzo doesn't just disappear. If he were booked on another flight, he would've called."

"Suzy, give me a minute."

I yanked my cell from my purse, hit the speed dial option for Alanzo, and listened to the continual ringing. "He's not picking up."

"Of course he's not answering! Believe me, Alanzo doesn't want to be anywhere else right now except in that backseat groping you and telling you how much he missed you. I realize he's in trouble, Suzy!"

I flinched. Marco refused to tell me everything was all right because everything wasn't okay. Tears filled my eyes and I started fidgeting. After once believing Marco was dead, I was certain of the fact I couldn't survive if I lost Marco or Alanzo now. Death and I didn't get along.

Branson returned. He slid behind the wheel of the Jeep and shot Marco a sideways glance. "Next flight from Charlotte arrives at six o'clock tomorrow morning. All flights into Tri-Cities generally connect from Charlotte or Atlanta."

"Maybe he missed his original flight altogether. Maybe he'll be on a commuter from Atlanta. Did you check the flights from Atlanta?"

Branson ran his fingers through his thick, sandy brown hair. "Suzy, Alanzo doesn't have a booked flight on any plane landing here tomorrow."

"Maybe you're wrong. The airline employees aren't supposed to give out passenger information. They may have told you whatever it took to get rid of you."

I felt like a child. Any minute now, I'd end sentences with a *but...but...but*.

Branson shifted, threw his arm over the back of the seat, and said, "Look, doll. Alanzo isn't on a plane headed our way. I talked to gals at both ticket counters and they pulled up various flights. I generally get what I want from the ladies. A little cash flashed and the sweet little flowers wilt every time."

"I'm sure."

His eyes twinkled with mischief and he showed off a piece of paper. "And one lovely lady was helpful enough to give me her number to boot. She told me to call her if I needed anything else."

I snatched the stick-it note and ripped it to shreds. Marco turned around and raised a brow. Branson chuckled. "That should tell you a lot right there, Marco."

He grumbled something and started going through his cell phone. "Suzy, what's Corby's number?"

"Try Mark." My ex-husband and Marco had formed a friendship when Marco played football for the PFC's Dallas Rascals.

"I did," he said wearily. "No answer."

I hurriedly scanned through my contact list and found Corby Teller's number. "It's 777-555-1111."

Marco dialed and motioned for Branson to start driving. A few seconds later, he shook his head. "No answer. Shit, this is bad."

We had just pulled onto the state highway when Marco said, "Go back."

Branson looked over at him. "What?"

"Go back."

"Why? He wasn't on the damn flight."

"No, but somebody on that plane knows what happened to my brother. We're going to find out who. I'll show my face, and the first passenger to react when they see me will be the first one we question."

Branson grinned. "Why didn't I think of that?"

"It's too risky," I blurted out, fearing for Marco's life. If someone had taken Alanzo, then could Marco be next?

"Maybe so, but it's a chance I have to take. It may be the only one we have. We need to find Alanzo. If we're going to find him alive, every second counts."

* * * *

Marco had been right. He walked into the small baggage claim area and immediately heads turned.

Regardless of Marco's orders for me to remain in the automobile, I followed them inside. Branson grumbled, "Get back in the damn Jeep. Let us handle talking to the passengers."

"Not on your life," I said, approaching an elderly couple overly concerned with Marco's appearance there. "Excuse me, ma'am, sir? Can I ask you a question, please?"

I pointed toward Marco when they stopped. "Ma'am, my husband, who looks like him, was on your flight tonight. Do you have any idea what happened to him?"

The older woman took a deep breath and started to say something. Her husband grabbed her hand and dragged her off before she had the opportunity to tell me much. She did manage to say, "Yes, I saw him."

"Ma'am, please!" I cried out after her. "He's a father and a husband. Can't you tell me what happened to him?"

The alarming look on many faces there sent chills down my spine. Men shook free of Branson's grip, women avoided eye contact altogether, and others outright said to leave them alone. Finally, security removed us from the area.

We drove home in silence. When we approached the house, I began to get nervous. Whoever had Alanzo knew where that flight was headed.

"We're not safe here now. I'm going to Texas tomorrow to get the kids."

"Suzy..."

"I can't deal with this," I gasped before Marco could finish whatever he wanted to say. "Marco, what about the children?"

"The house in Preston Hollow is better secured than Fort Knox right now, Suzy," Branson reassured me. "Several retired military guys and a few ex-cops are there protecting your kids."

“Is that so?”

“Absolutely.”

“Then do you mind telling me why these superior bodyguards didn’t protect Alanzo?”

“Because he wasn’t in Texas. He was on his way back to you!” Branson replied. “He wanted to stay with the kids until we were settled here, but for some reason, he was afraid you couldn’t do without him. I don’t know what kind of magic Alanzo and Marco think you can work with those legs of yours, but it’s going to take more than turning tricks to get Alanzo back. Do you understand me?”

“How dare you imply such a thing!”

“I’m calling it as I see it. You use sex to control these two, and the last thing they need to think about right now is you. If I were you, I’d stay put. Are we clear?”

I shuddered. The tone he used bordered along contempt, and I didn’t like it one bit.

“Suzy, do you understand me?”

I didn’t say anything. I owed him nothing. He was supposed to keep my family safe. He was going to protect us. We believed in him.

And that’s when it hit me. “Geoff took Alanzo himself.”

Marco and Branson exchanged a glance.

“That’s what you think, too, isn’t it?”

“It would stand to reason that those people back there wouldn’t get involved with us because of a viable threat. During Geoff’s very public trial last year, the whole world saw Geoff as the murdering bastard he is. They also saw something else. There isn’t a law he can’t break. There isn’t a judge he can’t buy. People fear him. It’s worse now than when he was Mr. Mobman years ago. He’s old, smart, and apparently dying. He has nothing to lose. Nobody will go up against him.”

“Oh, yeah?” I asked. “Well, that’s where you’re wrong, Mr. Braxton.”

Chapter Eight

Like a teenager sneaking out in the middle of the night, I left around four the next morning. After quietly calling for a limousine service and convincing the owner of the transportation company—who apparently ran his business from home—to send out a driver, I met the sleek town car at the end of our very long driveway.

“Evenin’, ma’am,” the chauffeur said, holding the door open.

“It’s morning,” I snapped, sitting down.

The older gentleman looked like he doubled for a part-time farmer. He had a working man’s hands, callused and very noticeable when he turned on the interior light and stuck out his palm.

“Boss said to collect first. You promised two thousand cash for a lift to Knoxville.”

“Yes, well, I don’t have it on me. Here’s my credit card.”

After the man took the plastic, he sighed, turned toward the windshield, and retrieved his phone. “This will take a few minutes.”

Great. “Do you think you could make the call while we drive?” I eyed the driveway. My luck, Branson or Marco would speed down the winding road any minute.

“Why, sure,” he drawled. “But that’s gonna cost you a right smart tip.”

“I have some cash. I can tip right smart,” I said, using a bit of the area’s twang. Hmm, I mused. I might have been cut out for fitting in with the locals after all.

“Well then, sit back and relax. I suppose we can call once we get on the road.”

“Good,” I replied, settling against the leather seat. “My flight leaves Knoxville at eight. We need to scoot.”

* * * *

After an uneventful flight from Knoxville to Dallas, I started anticipating what awaited me in Preston Hollow. I couldn't let my mind wander, but at the same time, I feared the unthinkable. What if something had happened to the children? Why hadn't I heard from Corby or Cassie?

Where the hell was the ex-husband when I needed him? Humph, I mused. He was where he'd always been, up Corby's ass. Find one, discover the other.

By the time I reached the congested area outside of baggage claim, I knew what I needed to do. I hailed the first limo I saw. A woman had to arrive in style if she hoped to gain Geoff Alberto's undivided attention.

I gave the driver the address and received a nod without a verbal exchange. Tapping the button to my left, I watched the rude one behind the wheel disappear behind the tinted privacy glass.

I longed to call the kids, but by now, Corby, Mark, Steve, and Cassie had probably received word that I left Tennessee. I wanted to check on the children, but my gut told me to see Geoff first. Time wasn't a friend when approaching a monster. In order to get Geoff's attention, proper planning was in order. As I started to gather my thoughts, mother-instincts kicked in again.

Quickly, I sent a text to Cassie, Mark, Corby, and Steve. *Are the kids okay?*

Four replies came back simultaneously. *Yes. Where are you?*

That was enough for me. It was time to arrange a meeting with the devil. It was time to plan the best approach for sneaking up on hell.

Half an hour later, the car stopped in front of the small cottage I once shared with Marco.

“What the heck are we doing?” I snapped, staring outside the window.

Marco stood on the front porch. His thick arms were folded across his broad chest, and to assume he was pissed off was probably accurate.

When my “driver” opened the back door, he looked equally enraged. “Now that we’ve wasted a full day chasing down your skinny ass, do you think you might get with the program?” Branson grabbed my arm and plucked me from the limo.

This was going to get old fast.

“Let me go!” I didn’t bother asking him how he managed to switch seats with my original Asian driver. I really didn’t care. “Did you hear me? Get off me!”

“Hell, no,” he bit out, slapping a cuff around his wrist and one around mine.

I glared at the sudden connection, yanking my arm forward and back. “This will not work!” I seethed. Actually, it was probably the only thing that would ensure I did what Marco and Branson told me.

Marco quietly observed us from the porch. “Are you going to let him do this to me?”

“Yes, Suzy, as a matter of fact, I am. And if you don’t behave from here forward, he’s going to do a lot more.”

Branson smirked. “And I promise, unlike Marco or even Alanzo, when I bend you over my knee, I’ll have one thing on my mind—burning your sweet little ass with one smack after another. With any luck, I’ll spank some sense into you.”

Chapter Nine

Marco paced the small kitchen several hours later. “They’ll kill him. If we haven’t heard anything by now, they’re planning to kill him.”

“We’ll hear something soon,” Branson reassured him, reaching across my body for the salt.

Branson had called in takeout from one of Geoff’s restaurants. With balls of brass, he’d walked through the front door with me cuffed to his wrist a few minutes later. We’d waited in the bar for our carryout order, making sure everyone there saw us. As if we didn’t leave quite an impression, he tipped the bartender a few crisp one hundred dollar bills.

From the door, and loud enough for everyone to hear, Branson had left a final impression. “Tell Geoff Alberto that Marco Giovanni sends his regards.” It was like a cut scene from *The Godfather* or something.

Then, we’d walked out. Why I lived to later think about it, I’ll never know. The entire place was full of Italian men with grim faces.

“What makes you so sure Geoff will come here?” I asked.

“I gave Marco’s name and this address and phone number when we placed our to-go order. He’ll be here. Trust me.”

Without warning, Branson stood. Since I was attached to him, I was yanked to my feet, too. “Marco, please make him release me.”

“Believe me, darlin’,” Branson began. “As much as I’d like to keep draggin’ you closer and closer, you’re starting to add a little more baggage than I want to lug around all day.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Sometimes, Branson didn’t speak plain English. “Are you implying I’m fat?”

He snickered. And I noticed he didn’t respond one way or the other.

Marco gripped the sink and stared out the kitchen window. I wondered if he could be thinking about the same things I was—our former life there, the life we once shared together before things became so crazy. “Marco, my wrist hurts.”

“That’s not all that’s going to throb by the time we’re through with you,” he said in a guttural voice, the agonizing tone I recognized as the rediscovery of days lost.

At least I didn’t have to wonder what was on his mind anymore. He was reliving our history, and by the looks of things, he was ready to make some new memories, too. He was as hard as a rock and growing more and more sexually frustrated by the minute if the lust stamped in his eyes provided suitable confirmation.

“Let her go,” Marco said, hooded eyes holding plenty of pain.

“Are you gonna run again?” Branson asked.

“No,” I half-heartedly promised.

“Can you give me your word?”

“Sure,” I said.

He narrowed his gaze. “No stunts.”

“Agreed,” I said, waiting patiently for freedom.

When he unlocked the cuff, I slapped him. “Don’t you ever, ever try to control me again. Do you understand?”

He only smirked, and he did that after he smacked those kissable lips. Good damn, he was one fine-looking man, but like the Giovanni brothers before him, he quickly developed the practiced ability to infuriate me.

“I should’ve told you she has a temper,” Marco grumbled.

“And a better arm than you once had,” Branson said, rubbing his jaw.

“Don’t talk around me.” I eyed Marco’s crotch. “Instead of standing there with your hard-on thinking about the past, you might start contemplating our future. The man coming for us has a stiff one with our names on it, and it’s not the kind of smoking gun I like to wake up to in the middle of the night, if you know what I mean.”

Branson grinned. “Now I see why they married you.”

“Why’s that?” I asked, taking the bait.

“A woman who can compare weaponry with sex organs has something to offer a man.” He licked his lips and added, “And I’m sure Marco and Alanzo have always found a nice, warm place to holster their pistols.”

* * * *

As predicted, soon after we went to sleep, we awoke to several men carrying lots of guns. The first demand I heard was something along the lines of someone screaming, “On your feet!”

I scrambled to the floor about the time someone grabbed me and yelled, “Get up! What the fuck have we here?”

Fortunately, through my sleepy haze, I quickly discovered the guns drawn were at least carried by the men on the right side of the law. Badges were flashed for verification.

After a man by the name of Agent Delrino introduced his team, Marco told his story, recounting our years on the run. I’d never had a prouder moment. From his fake death to the moment we reunited to the birth of our children, Marco explained why he “died” in the public eye and how Geoff had pushed him into the shadows because of his need to control him and his family.

When Marco finished speaking, Agent Delrino looked like he could cry a few tears to match the ones I’d shed while Marco spoke of faking his own death, giving up his professional football career, and so much more—family, friends, and his very personal crusade to help those less fortunate.

Agent Delrino addressed me when he was finished, “So, when Mr. Giovanni married you, he forgot to mention he was engaged to the mob? Is that right?”

“That’s an odd way of stating things,” I said, suspicious.

“Well, either you knew about his illegal activity or you didn’t.”

“She didn’t,” Marco said, skeptical, too, apparently.

Agent Delrino lit a cigarette. Marco cringed. No one smoked in his house. “So, you think Geoff has your brother,” Agent Delrino finally said, taking a few puffs and rudely blowing the smoke in my face.

While I waved my hand through the thick, gray cloud, Marco responded, “I’m certain of it.”

He turned to Branson. “And you’ve been aiding and abetting these two?”

I gulped. *Whose side was he on, anyway?*

“If that’s what you want to call it,” Branson replied cautiously while squaring his shoulders.

The agent pulled a notepad from his coat pocket. Then, he turned to one of the officers from the local beat and said, “All right, boys. Read them their rights.”

“What are you talking about?” I squealed. “We have a missing family member and you’re arresting us?”

Branson winked at Marco. He must’ve found something quite amusing about handcuffs and burly guys blowing smoke up our asses.

Marco stepped in front of me. “Let me handle this, Suzy.” He turned to the detective. “Didn’t you hear what I just said?”

“Sounds to me like you faked your own death because you wanted to collect a lot of life insurance money. I’ll bet the commissioner of the Professional Football Confederacy will love hearing from you.”

“Where did you get that idea from what he shared with you?” I asked.

“Isn’t that what you basically said, Mr. Giovanni?”

“No, sir,” Marco replied. Why he granted the detective anything close to respect beat the hell out of me.

The detective kept scribbling something on his notepad. When he looked up, he said, “You died, disappeared or whatever, and then your wife and brother collected on that sham of a death you staged. Now, your whole clan is living happily ever after.”

Branson smirked.

“Something funny, son?”

“I ain’t your son,” Branson drawled, scratching his chin and narrowing his gaze.

“We still have all the insurance money and then some,” I quickly volunteered. “It can be returned once we resume living like normal people again.”

“Say you have every dime?” Agent Delrino asked.

“Yes! I’m telling you, we were on the run for our safety. Marco didn’t want to leave. Think about the career he gave up. Think of the friends he left behind.”

“And you expect me to believe you didn’t spend the money?”

“Shut up, Suzy!” Marco blurted out.

“No!” I cried out. “We have plenty of money. I had millions from a divorce settlement and investments. Alanzo and Marco each earned their independent incomes and didn’t spend near what they made. We can return the insurance money. We just want the opportunity to go back to our old lives and raise our children in peace. The money means nothing to us.”

“Good, good. See, where y’all are going, you won’t need any cash, and I happen to know a man who can’t wait to collect on an old debt you folks owe him.”

“Bingo,” Branson said. “You were right all along, Marco.”

The detective arched a brow. “I beg your pardon?”

“No, I don’t think you will,” Branson said, taking a seat in the kitchen. “This keeps getting better and better.”

About the same time, my gaze followed the detective's hand when he waved for someone to enter the home. I saw the front door open. Then, it closed.

Geoff Alberto walked toward me in all of his arrogant, self-serving, criminal glory.

Chapter Ten

“Don’t panic, Suzy. We’ve got this.” Branson hissed in my ear while the detective and Geoff greeted one another like old friends.

“So much for being on the right side of the law,” I muttered, watching Agent Delrino and Geoff as they talked about whatever it was that crooked cops and common thugs discussed.

Geoff eyed me like he wanted to strip me. “Did you say something, Miss Illiani?”

“It’s Mrs. and it’s Giovanni,” I snapped, glaring at the decrepit old man in his expensive suit. He must’ve thought he was something else. “And if I address you, I’ll make sure you hear what I have to say.”

He chuckled. “Ah, yes, that’s right. You are married to a Giovanni now, aren’t you? A bigamist is what I’m told. You finally fucked your way all the way to the top. From what I hear, you married two Giovanni men, and that, my dear, is certainly against the law.” He took a few steps in my direction. “Those tabloid reporters used to call you a gold digger, a groupie, and what else?” He gnawed on his lower lip. “Oh, that’s right—any man’s whore!”

“Why, you sorry son-of-a-bitch!” Marco yelled, rushing him.

Branson stopped him with one thick arm landing squarely against his middle. “Marco! He’s not worth it!” Branson exclaimed. “Let him run that mouth. The more he says the better off we are.”

Trying to mastermind a few distractions, I walked toward Geoff, working a powerful strut I wanted him to interpret as confidence and contempt.

I’d had it with being afraid of this man. I was tired of hiding from a worthless piece of garbage. “Coming from you, I should be

honored. At least my men aren't on your payroll like apparently everyone else in Texas." I shot the detective a scowl. "I'd rather be a real man's whore than a pudgy prick's guinea pig."

Geoff squared his shoulders. "You have a mouth on you," he snarled. "I bet I could find a lot of things to do with those vindictive lips." He eyed Branson and then Marco. "Bet they find plenty."

Accepting that sometimes a woman couldn't escape or outrun her more personal past, I decided to hush. The reputation I once earned was mine to own. We needed to break up the small talk and find out what Geoff had done with Alanzo. Had he harmed him in some way?

Taking a seat at the small kitchen table, Geoff glared at me, and I leered back. I was staring at the man who had destroyed my life, the bastard who had kept my children from planting hometown roots and developing friendships. Geoff was a corrupt criminal who'd bought his way to the top. He enjoyed trampling all over innocent people because of who he was and what his money gave him the power to destroy.

"I can assume you know who I am?"

"Satan?"

"Ha!" Even his laugh was evil.

"Am I close?"

"You are a spunky little thing, aren't you? I see where that boy of yours gets it."

Immediately, I was in his face. "Why, you low-down bastard. You better not touch my children. Do you hear me?"

His gaze shifted toward Marco. "An eye for an eye. A son for a daughter."

Marco's jaw twitched. His face turned blood red. Once again, Branson stood in between Marco and Geoff, remaining practical and apparently wise to the fact that we needed to remain somewhat sensible. Alanzo was counting on us.

"My children haven't done anything to you!" I yelled.

“No, they haven’t, but their fathers have. I’m surprised you aren’t more familiar with the Italian way. The sins of a father mark a child forever.”

I reminded myself to show no fear and changed the subject. “What have you done with Alanzo?” I demanded. “Where is he?”

“He’s floating around these parts somewhere,” Geoff said, laughing.

The detective joined him. “So we should expect his body to wash up sometime soon?”

Geoff’s gaze held mine. “Depends.”

I felt like I’d been hit by a Mack truck. “You killed Alanzo?”

“Not yet,” the old man said. “But he should be dead within the hour.”

“Why are you doing this?” I wailed. “Why can’t you just leave us alone?”

He chuckled. “What I do from here forward depends on your husband. That is what you are, right, Marco?”

I locked gazes with Marco. He didn’t answer Geoff.

“Well, well, well, what do you know? You really are a bigamist, Mrs. Giovanni.”

“I thought my husband was dead.”

“You were mistaken, weren’t you?”

“What do you want, Geoff?” Marco asked all at once. “What’s it going to cost us this time?”

“I want what is mine, yours, hers, and...” He eyed Branson. “Oh, yes, this is better than expected.” A beat later, he said, “Wait a minute. I know you.” His expression went from one of recognition to an outright sneer. “I’ll take what’s his, too.”

Branson’s eyes went cold water blue. “Didn’t you already do that?”

“Oh, my God!” I gasped, searching Branson’s face for any indication. Had Geoff Alberto been behind his family’s demise?

“Answer me, you coward!” Branson demanded, thick veins bulging like cords embedded in his neck.

Geoff stood. He walked toward the porch, but when he evidently detected Branson behind him, he stopped abruptly.

“I did,” he calmly stated. “And I’ve never regretted the decision.”

“You fucking bastard.” Branson clenched his fists, and two lawmen stopped him from attacking Geoff.

After a few seconds, Geoff turned around, and with as much wickedness as he could manage, he said, “My men told me your mother squealed like a pig when she watched my fellows kill your brothers.”

Branson’s face turned to stone. His eyes became wild, like an animal’s might when he’s caught in a hunter’s wild game trap. “Why, you sick fucking prick!” Branson made a sudden leap, and the butt of a gun was slammed against the back of his head.

“Branson!” Marco and I screamed in unison.

I couldn’t breathe. Everything seemed so surreal. There was a scuffle, one where fists connected with jaws and guns were rapidly drawn.

The good-guys-turned-dirty aimed pistols at our heads, and the dirty detective yelled, “Don’t move!”

I jerked. A body landed against mine.

“Suzy, no,” Marco said, gripping my hand like he thought I might do something foolish.

“Detective,” Geoff said, smiling, “let’s take a walk.”

After Marco helped me to a seated position again, I checked for and located Branson’s pulse, glaring at the other officers. Branson moaned and started to move. I could see Geoff and the detective exchange handshakes and money.

“We’ll triple what they’re paying you,” I said to one of the officers while kneeling next to Branson. They seemed unwilling to negotiate. “Name your price!”

The officers stared back at me like I hadn’t spoken at all.

“Suzy,” Marco whispered, placing a hand on my nape. “It’s going to be okay.”

Branson finally sat upright, groaning from the effort. He massaged his neck and then called out over his shoulder, “You can come out now. I hope you got all that!”

Had Branson gone mad? Did he have a concussion? Who was he yelling for?

Three cameramen and several reporters stepped out of the closet. Quickly, I averted my focus toward the door. Geoff Alberto’s skin looked ashen. He must’ve come to terms with his fate almost immediately. He didn’t run. He spent his final moments as a free man glaring at Marco, the hatred evident in his cold, horrifying eyes.

“FBI is picking up the garbage off the sidewalk now,” one of the reporters announced.

Two agents rushed through the front door, flashing their badges. Geoff’s puppet-cops tried to hurry toward the back of the house.

“Freeze!” agents shouted. “Nobody move.”

Marco pulled me into his arms. He quickly covered my head.

“Marco! Listen to me!” I sobbed into his shirt. “His men will kill Alanzo now. If they get word of this, Alanzo is dead! We have to talk to someone. Hurry!”

In the middle of the commotion, I heard heavy footsteps behind me. Gripping Marco’s shirt, I turned to see who was there.

“They tried,” Alanzo said, picking the perfect time to enter the cottage. “I ran faster than they did, and, thank God, most of them were lousy shots!”

My gaze dropped to his leg and I noticed the blood pooling around his ankle. “Oh, my God, you’re hurt!”

With a lopsided smile and a seductive wink, he wrapped his arms around me. “I’m willing to bet you can make it better.”

“I told you these two think you have some powerful stuff between those legs,” Branson muttered, still looking a little disoriented.

Sniffing, I ignored Branson and framed Alanzo's face. "I was so scared."

"I know, baby. You had every right to be."

A few minutes later, Geoff and his bought badges were in custody. The feds returned to the kitchen and began taking statements from Marco and Alanzo. I walked outside, aware of the fact that Branson was right behind me. Cuffs were slapped around Geoff's wrists.

"Officer, may I have a word with Mr. Alberto?" Amazing how much confidence someone can gain when the enemy is secured.

The young fellow looked a bit apprehensive. He loaded Geoff into the back of an unmarked car, slammed the door, and reached inside the driver's window to release the back glass so I could have my say. Without a word, he walked away.

Geoff stared straight ahead, unwilling to look at me, which was just as well. As long as he could hear me, I didn't care. It was time to face my fears. In order to find peace, I had to confront the man who made our lives a living hell.

Branson tried to pull me away. "Come on, Suzy."

Shrugging off Branson's hand, I stooped next to the car, and with the most diabolical tone I could muster, I said, "I won't waste time telling you how much I hate you. A man without the capacity to love doesn't quite grasp the full concept of hate.

"Geoff, you systematically destroyed a man and his family because of greed. You're so pathetic that you used your own daughter's death for financial gain. You weren't trying to avenge her death because you realized that wasn't practical, it made no sense, not even to you. Marco never questioned your motives. He thought you were a distraught old man with plenty of burdens to distort your ability to rationalize."

I shot him an evil smile and smacked his jaw. "But we both know better, don't we?"

"Suzy," Branson said, "come on."

Once again, I defied Branson and eyed my target. “I’m having my say!”

“This is bloody ridiculous!”

Geoff sneered. “You should listen to your new boyfriend.”

After a burdensome pause, I said, “You might be interested to know that Marco loved your daughter very much. Francine was his first love. He would’ve married her if she hadn’t died. He was devastated when he lost her, and because of his love for your daughter, he felt like he owed you something.

“As his wife, I’ll never understand why. He wasn’t responsible for her death, but you didn’t care. You used your own daughter and tried to make the man she once loved feel guilty for something that wasn’t his fault. While Marco has mourned her a thousand times, you’ve never grieved Francine the first hour.

“But I’ll pray for you,” I said sarcastically. “I will, Geoff. I pray you’ll be locked up for a very, very long time. I hope every day and every night when those bars slam behind you, you’ll think of that drunk driver slamming his car into your daughter’s side. Think of her screaming her last words, perhaps, ‘Help me, Daddy’ or ‘Why me, Daddy?’ and then—”

He flinched.

“You think about what you’ve done to strip two good men of the life they wanted to live with their family. And you know this...” My voice trailed off. “I may be a Giovanni, but Giovanni blood isn’t in my veins.

“The Giovanni family is a peace-loving family. They’re respectable. Based on what you know about me, you should understand that these words I leave with you are true.

“I’ve never killed before, but I will pump a round of bullets into your skull without a second thought. If you show your face around my family *ever again*, I’ll hunt you down like the animal you are and murder you in cold blood.

“You’ve lived your life chasing revenge, an eye for an eye. I can do that, too, and base it on the fact that you took Branson’s family like I firmly believe you would’ve eventually taken mine. Let this go, Geoff. Let Marco live his life. If you don’t, you’ll pay. The remaining members of your family will pay. Capiche?”

“Suzy, damn it! Come on!” Branson exclaimed, successfully tugging me away from the car.

Branson pulled me halfway down the sidewalk. “Are you out of your fucking mind?”

Alanzo and Marco joined us before I answered. “What’s the matter?” Marco asked.

“Your little assassin just threatened the world’s most notorious mob boss.”

“You did?” Alanzo asked, not at all surprised.

“What did you say?” Marco asked, brows gathering.

I shrugged. “I wanted him to know if he ever comes near us again, I’ll kill him.”

“Suzy, shh!” Marco exclaimed, alarmed. “Cops and detectives are everywhere.”

“I don’t care,” I said. “The only way to beat someone who makes you their enemy is to follow the same tactics they use when they attack you. That’s what I let Geoff know he could expect.”

“Oh, shit, Suzy,” Alanzo said, running his hand down his face.

“Don’t use that tone with me, Alanzo. The Giovanni family has lived in fear. Marco, you’ve been running scared for so long that you don’t even know why you’re running anymore. Alanzo, you’re no different. I’m sorry, if you two want to live this way, you go right on, but I’m done.

“I’m fighting for my family. I’m returning to Preston Hollow where I belong. And if Geoff buys off the right judge this time, then so be it. He can come looking for me. I’ll be ready. I’ll be waiting.”

“I like it when she talks dirty,” Branson said, waggling his brows.

Alanzo rubbed his neck. "From what I hear, you just like her. Period."

"I don't know about all that now, boys, after what I heard back there," Branson thumbed the air behind him and shivered, "she scares me."

I rolled my eyes. "You should be petrified." I checked out his ass and then sashayed down the sidewalk. "Oh, yes, cowboy. You should be shaking in your denim and boots."

Chapter Eleven

“Mommy!” Cameron and Maggie ran into my arms when Alanzo, Marco, and Branson returned from the Teller home later that evening.

“Look at you!” I exclaimed, eyeing Heather asleep in Branson’s arms.

I hugged Cameron and Maggie tighter and waited for them to pull away first. Once they were satisfied their hugs lasted long enough, they took off upstairs, ready to move on to something more exciting.

Straightening from a stooped position, I reached for little Heather. “I missed you,” I whispered to my sleeping angel.

“Corby and Mark said she missed you, too,” Alanzo said, patting her soft head. “They said she didn’t sleep a wink.”

“Way to go, kiddo,” I muttered. “You give Mommy’s ex a little hell whenever you can.”

“Cassie said she’s glad you’re back,” Marco remarked. “She also told me to tell you that they give Rambo classes in a dilapidated building downtown.”

“Very funny,” I sang. “I’ll tuck the children in and be right back.”

“No,” Marco said, plucking Heather from my arms. “You rest. Alanzo and I have the kids.” Marco, Alanzo, and Branson exchanged a knowing look.

I studied Marco and then Alanzo. Slowly, I swung my gaze toward Branson. Alanzo chuckled. “What can I say? With three kids, we can’t handle you by ourselves anymore.”

I tried to conceal a smile and failed miserably. Branson stuffed his hands in his pockets. “I told you I expected something in return.”

“You did, didn’t you?”

"I meant it," he said, shooting my men a quick wink. "Ask them. I don't do anything for free." His royal blue eyes sparkled with alluring possibilities. "How about you, Suzy? You gonna charge me for services rendered?"

"Depends," I said, strolling toward him. "What are we talking about exactly?" I quietly hoped he mentioned swapping sexual favors.

Branson chuckled, took my hand, and walked toward the living room. Once there, he sat on an ottoman and pulled me to his lap. "Depends on what you want. Everything is negotiable." His hand dipped under my shoulder-length hair, and he massaged my nape, taking a slow approach.

His touch was hypnotic. I longed to tell him to keep his fingers moving. I wanted to coach and encourage him. But I had a feeling if he knew how desperately I needed him to make his first play, he'd postpone the good stuff until he couldn't control *his* urges.

"Thank you," he finally said, sincerity oozing from his voice.

"For what?"

"For what you said back there. You mentioned my family when you told Geoff you'd take an eye for an eye. I've never had anyone stand up for me like that. It meant a lot, Suzy."

"I meant every word. I'm not giving one person the power to destroy me or my family and...you're included in our family. It's obvious how much Marco and Alanzo care about you," a beat later, I said, "*I* care about you."

I wasn't quite sure why, but in a short period of time, Branson had become very important to me. I felt strangely connected to him from the start. Perhaps it was because I knew so much about his history. Through the years, everyone had shared their Branson Braxton stories. In many ways, I felt as if I'd known him for as long as I'd known the Giovanni family.

Branson peered around my head and continued to pamper me with a steady neck massage. He grinned when he moistened his lips. "The waiting is over," he whispered.

As soon as Branson's lips met mine, a wave of new lust ignited the passion. I framed his face with my palms and returned his kiss, losing a part of myself to him the second our mouths pressed together.

In our first intense moment, no one else existed in that kiss. Marco and Alanzo had obviously given Branson permission to lead me somewhere. *And where was that exactly?* I backed away from his mouth and gauged the lust in his eyes.

He flashed a dazzling smile. With a soft cluck and a wink to boot, he said, "Whatever we do, it's up to you, Suzy. Marco and Alanzo said it's entirely up to you."

My heart took off at a running go. Could my life get any better than this? Geoff was out of our lives. We were able to return to Preston Hollow. I had two handsome men who loved me and doted all of their attention on our family. And now one sexy-hot cowboy acted like he couldn't wait to have me in his bed.

Rubbing my lips together, I said, "I'm not into casual sex anymore."

"Me either."

My pulse raced faster. "I'm not the easiest woman to please."

"Why don't you let me worry about that?" Branson whispered against my ear.

"Marco and Alanzo are my life."

"I understand that. But you're very attracted to me, too, Suzy." Again his lips stole mine, and this time, the way he kissed me sealed the deal.

Branson was taking me to his bed. I had a feeling he'd probably spend the rest of his life waking up in mine.

Chapter Twelve

Branson carried me upstairs. I leaned my head on his shoulder, enjoying the way he cradled me against his body. Alanzo pinched my hip, and Marco leaned over long enough to kiss me when we passed them along the way.

"We'll be up in a minute," Marco said. "I'm expecting company."

By the look on Marco's face, he was excited about the guests he anticipated. Branson brushed the hair out of my face and kissed me again while he walked. His tongue swirled inside my mouth while his fingers twirled around the buttons of my blouse.

We entered the master bedroom, and I gasped in surprise. Aglow with soft candlelight, the dim lighting assured one thing. Alanzo and Marco accepted the fact that another man had a place in our relationship, in our bedroom. They'd set up a remarkable and memorable stage for romance.

"I didn't do this," Branson said, blushing.

"I know," I said when he let me slide away from his arms.

Taking the pressure off, I backed away from him and began undressing. Branson sat on the bed and watched, offering nothing in the form of removing his own clothes.

At first, I thought he might be all talk, the kind of man who manages to hold his own with a little foreplay and banter but falls apart behind closed doors. Branson fit the bill. Based on his past, I might have expected him to have a problem with intimacy, especially given the fact Alanzo once told me Branson believed sex was a group sport.

Maybe that's why he found me so appealing.

Stripped down to a lace thong and lavender bra to match, I approached him, bracketing my arms around his neck. "Want me to help you?"

He caressed my forearms for an indulgent and beautiful moment. "No, Suzy. I want you to dance for me."

"I beg your pardon?" I asked, stunned.

"I love dancers. Strippers used to be my thing," he said, cupping my breasts and licking my nipples through the lace. "I want to watch you move."

Biting down on my finger, I did as he asked. I wasn't a shy one, especially in the bedroom. With my arms overhead, I let my body undulate to the music that wasn't there, finding a tempo to match the lust, and a dramatic sway to set the mood.

His hooded eyes followed my body. His hot gaze seared my skin. I wanted to show him more, tempt him to lose whatever control he apparently tried to keep.

Reaching for the clasp, I unhooked my bra, allowing the material to fall off my shoulders, slip down my arms.

"Beautiful," he rasped, motioning for me, patting his erection and insinuating plenty.

He definitely wanted that lap dance. And I couldn't wait to drive him insane.

Straddling his hips, I took my seat, balancing my body by using his sturdy shoulders, grinding against him until I was wet, needy, and longing to feel the strength of his erection pounding inside me.

"That's it, gorgeous. Work it," he muttered, holding on to my sides and eyeing my breasts. I wanted his lips on my nipples, his fingers locked inside me.

A doorbell rang in the distance, but I didn't stop the erotic dancing. I wasn't sure I could. Standing again, I dropped my hands to his knees and continued to work everything for show.

When I turned around, I knew what to expect. I had a great ass. I'd worked mighty hard for an irresistible bottom.

“Lean forward,” he said, guttural and possessive.

“Sure thing,” I purred, placing my hands on my inner thighs and working out a grind guaranteed to roll out a response.

Branson’s flat palm came down across my bottom, and I sighed. Oh how I loved a good erotic spanking.

He smacked again. A small moan slipped from my lips. I arched my back, presenting my ass higher than before.

“You naughty girl,” he mumbled, smoothing out the burn. Again, he gave me another smack. “You need a good scolding, don’t you, darlin’?”

“Yes,” I hummed. “God, yes.”

Another pat, and then another.

“More,” I breathed.

“I’ve got you some more,” he said, letting his zipper fall.

Chill bumps scattered across my spine, and my pussy felt like hot lava. I burned for Branson’s touch. I wanted him to spank me over and over again. I was dying to be his bad girl, the naughty woman he’d love to pieces.

When his hands clasped mine, he pulled me onto his lap. “I’m going to drive you crazy,” he warned.

“I’m counting on it.”

His cock ground against my bottom, and he groaned. “You know what you’re doing, don’t you, baby?”

“No,” I teased. “I don’t have a clue.”

“Yeah,” Alanzo said from the door. “She’s bad in bed.”

Wrapped only in a towel, Alanzo strutted over to the bed and stood in front of me. “Look at that wicked little smile, why don’t ’cha?”

I winked. “You got something for me, handsome?”

“You know I do,” he said, dropping the towel to the floor and yanking me from Branson’s lap. Alanzo’s lips caught mine, and he took the lead, guiding me into a silky smooth smooch.

Branson stood. He kicked off his boots, discarded his worn jeans and cowboy-style button-down shirt. In my peripheral vision, I saw a heap of clothes. I caught my breath when I saw his boxers thrown on top of the pile, too.

This was it—time to find out if a cowboy knew how to rope in a woman and love her right.

Chapter Thirteen

“Some friend you are,” Marco said from across the room. “And, Alanzo, you ought to be ashamed of yourself.”

“Snooze, you lose,” Alanzo said, stepping in front of me.

“What did I miss?” he asked, undressing in the far corner.

“Nothing yet,” I assured him, grinning.

Branson took a seat on the bed. His hands propelled down my sides and hips. “Have you ever seen such a pretty ass?”

“It’s why I married her,” Alanzo said, tilting my chin and leaving me with a peck upon my lips.

“Me, too,” Marco added, walking over to the bed. He opened the bedside table and pulled a few lubes from the drawer, tossing them our way.

Instead of joining us at the edge, he spread out across the mattress. His hungry eyes had always been such a turn-on. As Marco had matured, his sex drive had been insatiable. Often, he watched Alanzo and I have sex before he joined us. Apparently, he had the same goal with Branson in the picture.

A squirting sound made note of the obvious. Alanzo licked his lower lip, cupped his sack, and aimed his penis my way.

Licking the head, I sucked the tip, devouring the shaft completely. Alanzo’s weight shifted, and he moved closer, letting me take him, giving me what I wanted.

Branson moved his hands around my body, tweaking my nipples with fingers and thumbs. “Sweet,” he said, watching me as I gave Alanzo an aggressive blowjob.

“Hmm...” Alanzo muttered, grinding against my throat. “So good, baby.”

Branson’s hard cock pressed against my hip. He continued to manipulate my nipples. His mouth was as sweet as hot syrup, traveling over my neck and shoulders.

Alanzo’s pace quickened. His eyes became droopy, hooded. Branson grabbed my hips, pressed the balls of his hands against my lower back, and prepared me for the taking.

Inching inside my ass, Branson growled. “Damn,” he muttered.

Mumbling my appreciation, which was all that could be done with a dick in my cheek, I let him set the pace. Working my head up and down, I swallowed over and over again, taking Alanzo’s cock from base to tip.

“I can’t hold back,” Branson said, apparently still trying.

Alanzo moved closer. His fingers twirled around my nipples. His cock thrummed at the back of my throat. The silky texture of his release shot through his slit and coated my lips. He fucked harder and harder. “That’s it! Right there! Use that sweet tongue, baby.”

I licked my way around his size and gradually let him withdraw. He looked over my shoulder and nodded to Branson, grabbing my forearms and holding me against him, bracing me for things to come.

Branson stood. My body was at a perfect angle. He held my hips in a firm grasp, screwing himself higher and higher. “That’s right. Buck against me, baby. Ah, yes. There you go.”

When he started to come, he slapped my hip and rode me like he’d ride one of his wildest mares, hooping and hollering like nothing I’d ever quite imagined. Alanzo looked at me like he was equally as shocked, watching until I finally found the right passage to pleasure. My fingers dipped inside my pussy, and I fingered myself, letting myself get lost in the way Branson’s balls tapped against the back of my hand.

“Damn, baby, that’s kinky!” Branson screamed, his release oozing inside me.

He smacked my ass one or two more times. And we met the point of true bliss together. Alanzo held, loved, and supported me all the way to the finish.

Marco, on the other hand, was patiently waiting in line.

* * * *

There wasn't time for cuddling and pillow talk. As soon as Branson and Alanzo finished with me, Marco whisked me away to a hot shower.

"You're jealous," I told him when he lathered my body with soap and caressed strategic points with a soft washcloth.

"Terribly," he admitted, kissing me.

His hands kept moving, one with soap and the other with the rag.

"Am I dirty now or something?"

"Filthy," he said, grinning into the kiss.

The lust was thick in his eyes. He spent a great deal of time around my breasts, using the soap bar directly against my skin until I ached for him. Standing under the showerhead, Marco licked at my erect nipple, tweaking the other one until I was aroused, hot, and desire-filled.

He draped both my arms over his shoulders and immediately lifted me to him, bracketing my legs around his waist. "God help me, Suzy, I'm still as crazy about you as the day we married."

"I know," I whispered, awaiting penetration.

"I love you. I'll go out of my way to please you."

"I know, Marco. I know," I said, kissing him crazily.

Positioning his cock at my pussy, he said, "I can share you with Alanzo. But I'm not sure about Branson."

Before I answered, he slid between my folds and thrust inside me with long strokes. "Do you feel me, baby?"

Understanding completely, I said, "Yes, Marco, I feel you." But just because I understood didn't mean I fully agreed.

Chapter Fourteen

The next morning, I had a surprise visitor. Sitting by the pool enjoying a little peace and quiet, I was elated when Cassie showed up for an unannounced visit.

“Hey there, sex kitten,” Cassie said, grinning from ear to ear.

“What are you doing up so early?” I asked, leaning over to hug her when she sat on the lounge beside mine.

“Figured you could use some company.”

“You did, did you?”

“Yes. Your guys came by to get my guys this morning. Alanzo and that good-looking stud in the cowboy hat took the kids shopping with Steve and our athletes. You can guess where they are.”

“Marco went to talk to Coach Dalton, didn’t he?”

“Yes, and I have good news for you, but you have to act surprised when Marco tells you himself.”

“They’re going to let him play for the Rascals again?”

“Corby’s retired,” Cassie explained. “They’ve had a few rough years. Rookie quarterbacks haven’t panned out, and the new owner, Don Faulkner, is willing to pay the price for talent.”

I sighed.

“Don’t act like you couldn’t care less about the money.”

“Truth is, I couldn’t. I have all the money I need and then some. At this stage in life, all I want is a little peace and a little love.”

Cassie smirked. “From what I heard, you had plenty of lovin’ last night.”

“What did you hear exactly?”

She discarded her bathing suit cover-up and showed off her tan, skinny body. Cassie was always too thin, but with huge boobs, she was often dubbed the sexiest football wife by the press. She flaunted what she had, and, well, I couldn't blame her. Even a boob job didn't put my chest in the same league with hers.

"Oh, come on, Suzy. You know how our fellows are. They have to tell all."

"No, Mark digs for information so he can spend the rest of my life teasing me."

"He cares about you," Cassie said, which coming from her was odd. I was Mark's ex-wife, and she seemed to think it was the coolest thing that we somehow overcame adversity and remained best friends. Ah, but it wasn't always so simple.

I closed my eyes, ready to get my tan on. "I've missed you."

"I've missed you, too. Now, spill. What is it about the cowboy?"

"He's hot. Guess you saw that for yourself, huh?"

"Yes, but Marco's threatened, isn't he?"

I grinned. "I'd like to think that's it, but it isn't. Truth is, Marco is more or less worried that I won't have the ability to keep up if we let another man in the house."

"Keep up?" Cassie asked, bathing in suntan lotion.

"Sexually."

Cassie snickered. "Are you trying to tell me Marco is still a stud in the bedroom?"

"Three times a day, without fail."

"No fucking way." Cassie gasped.

"I'm serious."

"What is wrong with him?" Cassie asked in a slightly raised voice. "Is he a sex addict?"

"No," I said. "He's a Suzy-addict."

She broke into an outright laugh. "God, you're so vain."

“No, I’m serious. After he faked his death and went on the run, things changed. When we were reunited, it was like an electric current where sex was concerned. He’s super-charged seven days a week.”

Cassie sighed. “I have one like that.”

“It ain’t Mark,” I drawled.

“No,” she said, laughing.

“Steve?”

She nodded.

“I’m sorry, I just don’t see that.”

“Why, because he doesn’t play football and have steel arms?”

“That’s not it.”

“I know what it is,” she teased. “It’s because you once made a pass at him and he didn’t take you up on the kind offer, right?”

I laughed, recalling the time when I did, in fact, come on to Steve. “Remember, he was with Mandy back then.”

“Who was your friend, too!”

I sighed, reaching for my sunglasses. “And if she’d been any kind of friend at all, she would’ve shared.”

“Like you expect Marco and Alanzo to share by being generous with you?”

After some thought, I said, “No, not really.”

“So, you don’t want to keep the cowboy?”

“I don’t think so.” A strike later, I said, “Maybe. That is, if I could get by with it. You know I couldn’t do anything to hurt Alanzo or Marco. And what would the children think?”

“Children adapt. They accept what they’re taught. It’s not like you discuss your sexuality with them anyway. Kids don’t need to know what goes on behind closed doors.”

“Maybe you’re right.”

“Where the cowboy is concerned, I am. If you give that up, you’ll regret it. I’m telling you. Besides, you’ll never know what you’ve missed until you give it a try.”

I thought about that. She was right. I sure didn't want to miss out in life. Quickly, I sat up and faced her. "I have a big favor to ask."

She laughed. "I'll keep the kids on one condition."

"Name it."

"You have to convince Marco and Alanzo. I want you to keep Branson around."

"Why?"

"Because he's the sexiest man I've ever seen."

"You slut, you!"

"I know. I can't help it. I may have three men in my bed, but I'm not dead yet. I can look and you can tell me all about him later."

"Cassie, usually when you look, you touch. Then, you claim."

Chapter Fifteen

“Babysitter, huh?” Alanzo said, slipping under the satin sheets later that evening.

“It took you long enough,” I complained, eyeing Branson and thinking how handsome he was. Cassie was right. He was probably the sexiest man I’d ever seen. He had a five o’clock shadow, a firm jawline, and everything about the way he approached me screamed sex on contact.

He was something else.

“Where’s Marco?”

“He’s coming,” Branson said, glancing over his shoulder.

“What’s he doing that for?” I teased. “That’s why he has me.”

“He’s out in the hot tub,” Branson said, stripping off his swim shorts and stretching out at the end of the bed.

I gave Alanzo a leisurely kiss and then motioned for Branson to move closer. He copped a smile and an attitude. He fisted his cock and worked his hand up and down his size. He opened his mouth and his tongue darted in and out. “I have other things in mind, Suzy.”

With a quick whip of Alanzo’s hand, the coverlet I was under disappeared, drifting to the floor. Branson eyed my naked body and rolled over fast, swiftly finding his position between my legs.

Marco strolled in the room with a bottle of non-alcoholic wine swinging from his hip. “What’s this?” I asked.

“A celebration,” Marco replied.

“What are we celebrating?” I asked, pleased to see him so happy again.

“You’re looking at the starting quarterback for the Dallas Rascals.”

“Are you serious?” I asked excitedly, reaching for him.

A quick swat landed against my pussy, and I looked at Branson. “Let me up!” I said playfully.

“Lie down,” he ordered. “Marco can come kiss you.”

Marco grinned. “You don’t have to ask me again.”

Marco’s lips met my mouth. Branson’s met my pussy, and his long, meaty tongue uncurled in the most elaborate fashion, immediately going to work for my pleasure.

I groaned into Marco’s kiss, and Alanzo rubbed a flattened hand over my belly, inching closer and closer to my breasts.

Cupping my behind, Branson raised my hips, and his tongue darted in and out of my cunt. Branson was magnificent between a woman’s legs, and with his oral skills, well, there was just no way I’d ever consider letting him go after such an encounter.

Marco didn’t stop kissing me. “Yes,” he muttered. “We have some celebrating to do.”

I sighed as Branson’s tongue traveled, pushing higher and higher. I was lost somewhere between my bedroom and heaven. Alanzo’s fingers dipped between my legs and he manipulated my clit.

Alanzo’s touch was like a hot bolt of electricity as he rolled the hard point over and over again, carefully maneuvering my intimate little button. Branson’s quick tongue worked for pleasure, striking in and out of my pussy until I was practically begging for one of them to fuck me. Marco kissed me, guiding my hand between his legs.

“I’m coming,” I whispered, ready to fly, anxious to feel that exquisite burning pleasure.

“Not yet,” Branson said, kissing a path from my pussy to my knee, licking my trembling thighs, with a hungry sigh falling from his lips every few seconds.

Alanzo pulled me over him. My back pressed against his chest. Marco knelt beside my head, and Branson held my legs open, watching Alanzo enter me from behind.

I gulped when Alanzo sank inside my ass, turning my head and indulging in the pleasure. Marco's dick was there, straining against my mouth.

"Let me feel those sweet lips surround me," Marco encouraged, stroking my cheek.

Fingers danced around my opening. Branson kept watching the joining of bodies, tugging at his erection with one hand, fingering me with the other.

Marco shifted, gaining a better position, easing his cock between my lips at an angle guaranteed to induce satisfaction. Easily, I took him to my throat, and he jerked. Then, he started to pump and grind.

Alanzo fucked my ass, pushing me forward as he screwed me. Branson held himself at my opening as if he awaited the perfect time to slip inside.

Drenched in heat, I moaned against Marco's cock, blinking as he thrust between my lips. Alanzo pounded my ass, working for his satisfying moment, clutching my body while he reached for release, sought it, and ultimately found everything he desired.

Alanzo yelped. Marco fucked my mouth, and Branson finally joined us, stuffing his cock inside my pussy and immediately going for the prize, searching for the climax everyone wanted to ride.

Marco's cum jetted to the back of my throat. "That's my girl," he said, collapsing as he withdrew and eyeing Branson with obvious concern, or perhaps, out of curiosity.

Alanzo finished, and slowly slipped away. Branson grabbed me from the bed, turning into this wild lover with an unleashed passion so intense, I readily responded, anxious to see where all of this would lead.

Gripping my ass, Branson walked toward the recliner, kissing me as he carried me, holding me so close I became the heat blistering his

skin. When he sat on the recliner, his mouth fell to my breasts and he gently toyed with the nipples, circling each over and over again.

My legs fell across the armrests on either side, and he plunged inside me again, rocking me as we fucked, holding me to him as he reached for another moment, one we could claim as our own.

“That’s it,” he whispered, watching me with his bright, lust-filled eyes. “Get all you need,” he said in a raspy voice. “Ride me, baby. Ride me hard.”

And who was I if I couldn’t oblige?

Chapter Sixteen

“Good morning,” I chirped, greeting my men in the kitchen. I gave Marco a kiss in passing. Alanzo caught a peck at the coffee pot, and I slid a kiss on Branson’s lips when I sat down to my hot cereal.

It was then I realized all eyes were on me.

“What?” I asked, swallowing the first bite.

“You,” Alanzo said. “You’re...”

“I’m what?”

“Too comfortable,” Marco said finally.

I took another bite of cereal. Branson looked quite smug. Alanzo acted like he was shocked that we had this amazing chemistry, and Marco was plain hard to read. But he’d told me how he felt about anything long term. Or at least, he tried to, in so many words.

Alanzo and Marco sat at the table. “What are you going to do today?” Marco asked.

“Not much,” I said, stuffing the spoon between my lips and reaching for the classifieds. “I need to find another housekeeper since it looks like we’re staying in Preston Hollow.”

“How about you, Branson?” Marco swung his gaze toward Branson. “Any plans today?”

He shrugged. “I guess I’ll head back to Tennessee and send all your boxes back here.”

“Don’t do that,” I blurted out abruptly.

“Why not?” Marco and Alanzo joined in together.

Branson grinned. “What’s wrong, boys? Are you afraid the little woman wants to go home with me?”

“Is there something one of you would like to tell me?”

Branson looked at Marco and Alanzo. “Okay, if you won’t tell her, I will. Marco doesn’t like the idea of sharing you with me. Alanzo doesn’t care because, of course, he’s pussy-whipped and does pretty much anything you want.” He eyed Marco and then looked at me again. “Fact is, Suzy, Alanzo accepts the fact that you want me.”

Marco took a deep breath. He stood and immediately paced. He stopped behind my chair. “Suzy, I want you to shoot straight with me.”

“Okay,” I said, draping my arm over the back of the chair.

“Are you in love with Branson?”

“I...”

“You said you’d shoot straight,” Branson reminded me.

I looked at Alanzo, who looked like a dark, handsome devil about right then. He was no help. He grinned and winked, and then he stuck his nose in the newspaper and pretended to read something far more newsworthy than my declaration of love for their best friend.

Branson shifted in his seat. “You want me to tell him?”

“How could you know what I feel?”

“It was in your eyes. When we made love, it was in the way you looked at me and the way you responded to me. I felt it. You can bet your sweet ass they saw it.”

He was right. I was in love with him. I was so alarmed when I thought he might return to Tennessee without me, I’d already shown my heart. “Marco, I didn’t mean for this to happen.”

Marco grinned. Alanzo dropped the newspaper. Branson nodded. “I told you, boys.”

“Cassie once warned me that two became a party. Three became a nightmare. I have one rule—you three can’t talk around me like I’m not here. The good old boys club can’t convene behind my back and then meet in my bed. That’s not going to happen.”

Again, they exchanged looks I couldn’t quite translate.

“I mean it,” I said firmly.

“Truth is, Suzy,” Marco began, “anyone could see the two of you had chemistry from the start. When I told you it wasn’t going to happen, I wanted to see how far you were willing to go to get what you wanted.”

“She showed you that last night when she took Branson to the recliner and fucked the hell out of him,” Alanzo pointed out.

Marco chuckled. “Yeah, and I liked it.”

“You always like to watch,” I said.

“Uh-huh,” he said, grabbing my hand. “And better than watching, I also like to do.”

“You’re so bad,” I said, giggling.

“I’m really good at naughty,” Marco promised, lifting me into his arms. “How about I remind you?”

“Looks like you might have to wait,” I said, nodding toward the patio where the kids were playing.

Marco laughed. “Nope. That’s what I like best about this arrangement. We always have plenty of hands.”

“You know what?” I said, sliding his arm under my shirt. “I couldn’t agree more!”

Epilogue

One Year Later

Dallas Rascals Stadium

“Oh, fuck my life.” Ariel Martin rolled her eyes when I walked in the team owner’s suite. “Who let *her* back in here?”

I pretended not to notice the way the other wives and girlfriends scowled when they saw me. Instead, I stood in front of the floor-to-ceiling window and searched the field.

I spotted Marco in a matter of minutes. He was on the sidelines pumping up the other players, doing what every good quarterback does best—leading his team.

“Who is she?” One of the new player wives asked.

“You don’t know? Ha! You’re the only one. That’s Suzy Giovanni. Everyone knows her. I heard she fucked her way straight through this team a few years ago,” Ariel said.

“You must be kidding! Her?” someone else cackled. “She must be at least, what, forty-five, fifty?”

Humph! They’d be surprised what this over-forty-year-old woman had accomplished. Rather than let them get the best of me, I turned to watch the door, expecting Alanzo and Branson any minute.

A round of laughter rang out in the room. I faced my accusers, those who judged me based on rumors rather than giving me the chance I deserved. A deep breath and a second later I decided, *why not?* I grew up in this world. I was schooled in it in a way these newcomers couldn’t possibly understand. And one thing I learned early on. People don’t stab you from the front.

I walked over to Ariel and acknowledged her friends with a slight nod. “Ariel, I hear you’re back in the saddle, too, these days.”

“I beg your pardon?”

I smiled sweetly and thought of the tabloid gossip, the way the Internet and newspapers easily spread their news and lies. Reporters and sports world bloggers often convinced others to join them in attacking the accused before they even released what the one in the hot seat was guilty of, and they never revealed their sources.

With daggers leaving my eyes, I started to blast Ariel in front of everyone, reminding her of how her husband had been caught with several prostitutes, a few strippers, and a couple of waitresses. Apparently, every day the man awoke, he had one main objective. He was going to get fucked, and fucked hard. First by a stranger, and then by a tabloid’s photographer, who was always around the corner.

I stood in front of Ariel Martin, ready to be as evil as she’d been, prepared to spit out venomous words I’d never be able to take back. Suddenly, I couldn’t do it. She wasn’t worth the effort. And I wasn’t going to ruin Marco’s day. This was, after all, his day. He was the starting quarterback and the man of the hour, the man who came back and secured his position with the Dallas Rascals after Ariel’s husband failed to deliver.

Alanzo and Branson joined me right after kickoff. When the first ball was snapped, I couldn’t conceal a smile when Ariel began wagging her tongue all over again. She’d returned to huddle with her friends, and several of the single gals couldn’t keep their eyes off my men.

Yes, the day was a good one. If nothing else, I remembered what I’d always loved about the Professional Football Confederacy. Even though the PFC players and their wives often had a lot to talk about where I was concerned, one thing was certain. I was a survivor, and in so many instances, I came out on top in spite of adversity. In fact, I earned a third promise—another man’s hand to have and to hold. How lucky could a woman be?

My name is Suzy Illiani Giovanni. The press once made sure my name was attached to anything guaranteed to raise a few brows or generate a couple of chuckles.

After I fell in love with Marco Giovanni, Geoff Alberto took him away. When I thought I'd lost Marco, I found his brother, Alanzo. Later, Marco returned to me, and we lived on the run, always looking over our shoulders until Branson came along and made sure we didn't have to hide anymore.

My grandmother used to say, "Find the good in everything, Suzy Q. Find something nice to say about everyone."

Grandma was right. As much as I'd like to, I can't hate Geoff Alberto, even after all the pain he inflicted on our family. Why? Because through his hatred, I found enormous love.

Funny, but Grandma also once said success—regardless of where it's found—has a sweet, sweet flavor, especially when it's sprinkled with revenge.

I couldn't agree more.

THE END

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Destiny Blaine is an international award-winning, bestselling e-book and paperback author. She writes under several pseudonyms in various genres. Destiny lives with her family in East Tennessee and spends most of her free time attending sporting events, relaxing on the beaches of South Carolina, or playing craps in the Mississippi casinos.

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