

# SUMMER RAIN

Arlene Knowell

*Champagne Books Presents*

Summer Rain

By

Arlene Knowell



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## ***Dedication***

To my husband, the avid fisherman. This story came to life with notebook and pencil, as I sat in his boat on hot summer days. There is no better place to think than with the gentle hum of the trolling motor and spin of the reels. So thank you Tim, for always inviting me on your fishing trips. Thank you for believing in me and most of all for loving me. You are the best blessing God ever sent my way.

# ***One***

Huge clouds of gray smoke loomed in the distant sky, from the processing plant, a few miles away. The air held a damp chill as the late September wind carried the smell of the salty Pacific waters. The shadows of the towering Sequoia trees faded into the darkness as it consumed the brilliant red rays of the setting California sun. Marisa hadn't intended on her run taking quite this long, but the beautiful seaside trail offered far too many opportunities to stop and gaze as the sun set over the horizon.

The beautiful view had taken her mind off the nerve rattling news coverage of the escalating friction between the United States and Iran. She was bewildered that Iranian officials had admitted publicly that the terrorist disaster in Chicago, Illinois had been the work of an anti-American extremist group. The problem escalated as the Iranian government refused to turn the terrorists over to the United Nations for trial in the murder of thousands of innocent Americans. Marisa saw the war as inevitable and the fear of many soldiers losing their lives, one in particular, haunted her night and day.

She heard a car door close ahead, which meant the trail's end was just around the curve. It had been an exhilarating run on a circular trail that would challenge even the most seasoned runner. Tired from her two and a half mile jog, she slowed her pace and strolled quietly as her body recaptured the oxygen it had lost. Maybe next time she wouldn't burn up so much time sightseeing and might actually finish the trail with a decent run time. Her eyes focused on the darkening trail ahead and some twenty yards in the distance a man held a woman. Anyone, especially an amateur, could get hurt on this unforgiving trail with its

twists and turns.

She walked closer, hoping she could help, but gasped as the man tossed the woman carelessly over the cliff into the crashing waves below. She backed slowly away, holding her breath, desperate to disappear into the dark shadows of the Sequoias. It was too late, he had seen her. The sting of predatory eyes pierced her and if she didn't act quickly, there would be more than one body at the bottom of the cliff. Turning abruptly, she bolted back into the trail. Heavy footsteps pursued her. She ran, depending more on her memory of the trail than the distant fading sunlight. Her stride was long; her heart pumped with the same force it had when she'd finally achieved her life's dream and ran the Boston Marathon. This excitement was different, however, because this time her life depended on her ability to outrun the man chasing her.

He was a strong runner. Marisa dipped around the zigzagging trail with amazing speed. There was a reason she'd always loved to run competitively, and it wasn't because she was slow. But it seemed that her long legs weren't moving fast enough and she prayed hard as she ran that she'd get out of the trail alive. She threw a quick glance over her shoulder to find the trail empty. Her heart pounded harder; the only thing worse than being chased by a murderer was not knowing where he was. It was probable he was cutting through the bush to intersect her on the trail. He could also be lying in wait, hoping that she'd think he'd given up the chase. She had a fifty-fifty chance of making the right decision and she didn't like those odds when her life was on the line.

"Oh God, please," she begged the higher power that'd never forsaken her, "Get me out of here."

She spun around and bolted in the opposite direction. She didn't think she was capable of outrunning him for two miles, and she had to make the decision that gave her the best chance of getting out alive. There were only a few hints of soft grey light, and even those faded quickly into darkness. The huge Sequoias were now barely visible. She could see the fence line in the distance ahead— if she could only get there. Her feet pounded the ground with a great, hurried, determined force. Her heart pounded even harder.

The damp salty air assaulted her lungs as her body demanded deep quick breaths. She did not cry because there was no time or energy for emotions. She knew her fear all too well, and her desire to live pushed her forward. Squinting against the darkness that had swallowed her and the unfamiliar world around her, she caught the glitter of moonlight off the color of Cobalt blue.

The moments seemed like an eternity before she reached her car. She keyed in the code, but the security system rejected it. She puffed, glanced toward the dark trail, and attempted to steady her hands. She keyed in the code once again. Victory. She hopped inside. The sound of the locks activating was magical as she started her engine and jerked the car into reverse. A large hand crashed through the window, and onto her cheek with deadly impact. She screamed in pain. The hand raked along her head, to get a grip on her hair. She jerked her head away, swatting at the hand that continued to reach for her. Fear consumed her; he would be able to grab her if she stopped to put the car into drive. She floored the accelerator and shot backward across the large parking lot.

A loud bear like growl roared through the silence, when the car jerked the murderer off his feet. His arms were draped over the window ledge, his chest flat against the car door as the car dragged him. She looked toward him elbowing him blow after blow. The scar beneath his left ear trailed to his throat. A tattoo on his left forearm was the face of a snarling dog. Planting both feet firmly onto the brake pedal she brought the car to an abrupt stop, leaving it impossible for the murderer to hang on. Snatching the car into drive she spun away, leaving the man in a cloud of rocks and dust.

A few moments later, headlights of a vehicle illuminated her rearview mirror as they suddenly appeared on the dark roadway behind her. She accelerated the sports car and pierced it through the dark, curving roads near the cliffs. She would rather be killed trying to escape than to be killed at his hand. Reaching a shaking hand toward the navigation panel on the dash, she touched the icon for emergency services and sat back into the seat, focusing her mind on driving as the GPS unit routed her to the nearest

police station.

~ \* ~

Less than ten minutes later, she squealed into a parking spot at the police station, and stumbled, with exhaustion, from the car. Two police officers on the sidewalk reached for her, concern and confusion evident in their eyes.

"Whoa there, are you okay?" A policeman asked.

Tears streamed down her face as she fought to gain enough composure to speak.

"She's in shock," the other policeman stated.

She blinked with confusion because the multi-story building looked as much like a hospital to her as a police station. Turning her attention back to the policemen, she told them that she had just witnessed a murder, and barely escaped with her own life.

"Murder?" One asked his voice stressed by her revelation.

She nodded and attempted to walk on jello-like legs that were usually strong as steel. The policemen hurried her into the police station and interviewed her. Taking quick notes, one of the policemen left her side, had a brief conversation with someone she couldn't see in another room, then returned.

"Follow me, ma'am," The officer advised motioning his hand toward her, "You can wait in Detective McCord's office. He'll be right with you. He's finishing up a phone call."

"Thank you." Marisa's eyes darted toward him; her face was becoming more painful by the minute.

As she sat alone in the small rectangular shaped office, she watched the standard round, black rimmed clock on the left wall and wondered if murder wasn't a big deal in San Diego. A woman was lying at the bottom of a cliff, for goodness sakes and they treated it as if Marisa was waiting to have her nails done. Several minutes later, the door swung open with a bang. An imposing man wearing Khaki pants and a blue oxford shirt darted his eyes toward her. Marisa snatched her fingers from the antique globe that sat on a small round, wooden end table to her left. Her mind had wandered to a distant land where fate should have taken her. Tonight, she should have been in South Korea snuggled in the arms of the man she loved; safe, happy and content.



The detective squinted at her as if he were mentally calculating her actions, then made his way around the black metal desk. He clicked a blinking red button on the hi-tech phone to his right then turned his attention to Marisa. "I'm Detective Jonathan McCord and I hear that you've had a very interesting evening."

Marisa studied him as he slid his fingers down the barrel of an ink pen, flipped the pen and repeated the motion. His hair was short and jet black. His eyes were hazel, and smiling a bit too much for her at the moment. Interesting? What kind of inconsiderate asshole would consider witnessing a murder interesting?

"Yes sir, I suppose one could call my evening interesting, I'm just not the one," she stated as she settled into the black leather padded office chair.

"That's a nasty lump, you have there," he said. "Would you like to tell me about it?"

She didn't like him or the arrogant grin that teased his lips. She'd witnessed a body dump and the last thing, she wanted was to deal with a character that could compete with the cool confidence of Steven Segal in an action movie. "I witnessed a murder, or at least the disposal of a body."

He dropped the ink pen onto the desk with an audible click then leaned forward, placing his elbows onto the desk, intertwining his fingers. "Are you sure about what you think you saw Miss Potts?"

Marisa furrowed her brow into a hard glare. He was an arrogant bastard. She turned her attention and her eyes to the framed awards and certificates hanging on the camel colored wall behind him. If he thought he was going to treat her like a child then he could think again. "I'm absolutely positive about what I saw. How the hell do you think I got this?" She asked, pointing toward her cheek. "I certainly wasn't in a bar brawl."

"You'll have to forgive me, Miss Potts, as you can imagine we see all kinds of people in here," Detective McCord supplied.

"I'm sure you do. However to be quite honest with you, Detective, I thought in the United States you were innocent until proven guilty. It seems that I have to prove myself innocent of whatever you think I've done before you'll

take the time to hear my story." She'd learned young to be strong, life had made her that way. Her strength was one of the few things from her past she was proud to have. It had never failed her; in fact, it had pulled her through some tough experiences when most women would have given up.

He leaned back with a smile, propping his hands on the back of his head. "Okay, I think we understand each other. Tell me where you were."

"Sunset Cliffs Park." She stared at her hands in her lap and willed them not to tremble.

His expression changed to something unreadable while he studied the possibilities and sat forward again, returning his elbows to his desk. "You said someone disposed of a body?"

"Yes, he tossed her over the cliff like she was a wad of paper into a trash can." Her eyes moved over the multiple buttons on his high back leather desk chair.

His muscles tightened against her words. He seemed to be fighting some invisible force. "Tell me about the man."

Clouds of questions rolled in his eyes, and she sensed that there was more behind his questions than she knew, or wanted to know, for that matter. Marisa took a deep breath and closed her eyes briefly in thought before looking at the detective. "It was dark, so I don't know much. He was about my height, 5'9" or 5'10" and about 180 pounds. He had a tattoo of a dog on his left forearm and a big scar beneath his left ear." She hesitated, then continued. "He runs a lot because he's strong and he's fast."

"So you think he's a regular there?" He questioned, suddenly so involved in her every word that it left her feeling self-conscious.

"I'm not sure, but I do know that given a few hundred feet more he would have caught me."

~ \* ~

Detective McCord wrestled with emotions of a case that had stumped him for the past several months, a case that had peaked with the news media weeks ago and fizzled out after the terrorist attack in Chicago. A serial killer was stalking San Diego women and the detective was positive Marisa had witnessed him tossing his first body in more than two months. The killer raped his victims, broke their necks,

then injected liquid drain cleaner into the vaginal canal to destroy all DNA. As an added insult to the police, the killer tossed the victims into the crashing surf, and by the time the bodies were found the water had long since washed away any trace evidence.

He nodded as he scribed her account onto paper, and then looked toward her. "The tattoo. What type of dog was it?"

She crossed her legs and sighed. She squinted as if mentally returning to the moment of seeing the tattoo then folded her hands nervously into her lap and shook her head. "I'm not sure, maybe a bulldog. It was snarling. I can also tell you that there was a yellow sunset behind the dog."

He stared at her, his eyes searching her face and wishing he could get into her mind and see her thoughts. "Can you show me where he threw the body?"

Marisa shook her head. It was obvious there was no way that she was going back to that place. He stood and walked around the desk, then leaned against it, only a foot or two away from her. His badge was clipped on the waistband of his pants and a body holster held his gun in place over his crisp blue oxford shirt. He needed her to trust him; this was the first time anyone had seen the serial killer and lived to tell it. "If I take you there myself and I get my partner to meet us there, will you go?"

"But what if he's there? What if he follows us back and comes for me when I go home?" She asked, fear evident in her voice.

He squatted in front of her. He needed to tell her many things, but he wasn't quite sure how. "May I?" He asked, looking toward her hands folded in her lap. She nodded. He rested his right hand atop hers. "I'll make sure you're safe. Help me find the woman, because without a body there is no murder."

He sighed when she nodded. "Okay, but you can't leave me. You can't put me in a patrol car and tell someone else to get me home safely. That guy was going to kill me, and I trust you to keep your end of the bargain."

"I promise that when I can't be beside you, one of my men will."

~ \* ~

They pulled into the gravel lot at the park as Marisa directed. She could tell Detective McCord didn't know the lot existed. He'd probably thought she'd entered the park at the main gate. He learned, however, there was another world out there, especially for people like her. San Diego loved its runners and took special care that they had nice places to run.

McCord introduced a second man who'd followed them into the lot in an unmarked car. "This is Detective Richard Dell. No relation to the computer people."

Marisa attempted a smile, but was far too nervous to enjoy any notion of humor. McCord stepped from the car and looked toward Marisa, who stayed in the car. A glance at the dark trail reminded her of running for her life there a short time ago. The chilled, salty air blew in the open driver's door and she associated the smell with death. She had always loved the fresh smell of an ocean breeze, but that was now changed forever.

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McCord walked around the car, and Dell followed. "She saw The Breaker, I'm sure of it."

"Holy hell, we'll have to put twenty-four hour guards on her," Dell advised.

"Yep." McCord nodded and stuffed his right hand into his pocket. "I know that, but she doesn't, at least not yet."

McCord pulled the door open and squatted beside her. Dark clouds of fear rolled in her green eyes. A cold chill of uncertainty hovered around her. He wanted to calm her fears, to make her feel safe, but he wasn't sure anyone could keep her safe. "I know you're scared. I don't blame you— I would be, too. But I'm not going to leave you and I will protect you with everything I have, even with my life."

She offered a reluctant smile and stepped from the car. "I trust you."

His heart raced as a cold chill engulfed him; he wasn't sure if he was worthy of trust. He would certainly keep his promise and would absolutely protect her with his life, but it seemed that the killer known only as The Breaker trumped him at every opportunity. In fact, Marisa wasn't the only witness who had seen the killer, she was just the first to live to tell about it. An elderly man had called and stated he'd

seen a man coming from a victim's home the night she disappeared. McCord had gone to the witness' home to give him a ride to the police station to work with the sketch artist on a picture of the killer. When McCord arrived, he found his witness sitting in his recliner, dead, his eyes removed.

~ \* ~

Walking with the detectives, she was cautious, and terrified of what might lurk in the dark. It reminded her of the nights that she'd walk down the road to hide in the neighbor's barn to escape abusive parents. She jumped when something scampered out of the bush. The detectives pulled their guns, and darted their flashlights in that general area. A cat sprinted across the trail. The detectives both sighed and she smiled, feeling safer knowing that the two were on their toes.

"Down there," she said as she stopped on the trail and pointed toward the edge of the cliff.

McCord and Dell shinned their lights down onto the rocky shoreline and within a few seconds Dell's light found something. The woman was lying like a snow angel on a huge rock as the Pacific waves crashed and splattered onto her body, "Déjà vu," Dell said, regret lacing his voice.

"Déjà vu?" Marisa shot back. Her heart was suddenly pounding. There was only one reason to say that, and something told her that a much bigger story was just waiting to be told.

McCord glanced Marisa's way, then turned his attention back to Dell. "Where?" He asked as he trained his eye to the beam of Dell's light. "Damn it!"

"I'll make the call," Dell informed, referring to their need for a rescue team to retrieve the woman from the very inaccessible spot below.

The distant sound of sirens drew closer as lonely strobes of red and blue lights shone among the sequoia trees, reminding Marisa of a horror movie. But this wasn't a movie; someone had actually died. There wouldn't be any retakes and something told her that unlike a movie, this would be something she'd never forget.

She waited patiently under the watchful eye of a veteran police officer while the rescue workers pulled the

body from the bottom of the cliffs. She moved toward the action, but wasn't surprised to be stopped by the steady hand of the cop. It was probably for the best; she wasn't sure she really wanted to see any more than she'd already seen. She took a seat on a large, flat rock and watched as McCord and Dell gathered evidence that they hoped would help them identify the killer.

~ \* ~

Jonathan McCord knew the first step in the investigation was to identify the young woman, and from there he could piece together the last hours of her life. Her hair was as black as any midnight sky he'd ever seen, and her body was fit and tall. Something told him this was a twenty seven year old named Ginger Hollister. The woman's co-workers had reported her missing four days ago. He nodded in disbelief, this was the fifth time he'd looked down at a beautiful woman and found himself apologizing for failing to catch the killer in time.

"It's definitely him," Dell said as he held up the girl's left hand. "Her pinky is gone."

"Damn it," McCord growled. "How many more before we finally catch this bastard?"

Dell looked toward Marisa, and McCord followed his stare. McCord swallowed hard. He had to find a way to tell her about the serial killer. He had to find a way to tell her that even though The Breaker hadn't killed her, he had successfully stolen her life away. From this point forward, things would never be the same for her. Not only would she have to battle the nightmares, the media who would swoop in like vultures and even with a twenty-four hour guard detail, at some point the killer would come for her. He knew that she was scared, she had every right to be and the truth would scare her even more.

~ \* ~

Walking with the detectives back toward the cars, it was obvious something was troubling them both. McCord pressed his hand onto her upper back when she asked how the woman had died. He told her that he wasn't sure, but something told her they were hiding the truth from her.

"You know but you aren't telling. Why?" She had a right to know, didn't she?

"I suspect that her neck is broken," Dell finally said, his tone dry with a hint of uncertainty.

"Oh, God." Marisa shivered remembering the strong hand that crashed through the window and reached for her.

"Do you remember any vehicles other than yours?" Dell asked.

Marisa looked up at the older and seemingly wiser detective. His hair was a distinguished salt and pepper with a matching neatly trimmed mustache. His eyes reflected the dozens of red, yellow and blue lights in the parking lot. The strobes of the lights were almost as unsettling as the thought of the near death experience she'd had there. "There was something there but I can't remember. I never thought of looking around, I was just trying to get out of there. I'm sorry, but I guess I'm not much help."

Jonathan stopped her by stepping into her path, then took her arms into his hands, "Don't say that. Without you, that girl would still be down there. If we'd had you five months ago, that girl might not be dead today."

"Five months ago?" She quizzed, looking first into McCord's eyes then to Dell.

"It's a long story," McCord offered.

"Hopefully, I have plenty of time," she bit back. It rubbed her the wrong way that they refused to tell her the full story like she was some sort of spying reporter. She wasn't a reporter, she was a witness. Given the choice, she would have preferred not to be, but just like everything else in her life, it hadn't been her choice.

"Let's get you back to the station so that you can get some rest," Richard Dell advised. "We have some things to explain to you."

"I can't go home?" Fear shot through her; there was definitely something they weren't telling her. Were they considering her as a suspect until they could prove otherwise? If that were the case then she had, for the lack of a better phrase, framed herself.

"No, I'm sorry you can't," Dell admitted his eyes apologizing as he scribbled onto this pocket notebook.

"But I've been keeping my neighbor's dog while he's away on business," she protested, "If I don't go back he'll poop on my floor."

McCord met eyes with Dell and squinted slightly as he held the door for her to sit into the car. His hazel eyes pierced hers even in the darkness. "We'll go by there to check the dog and let you get some things. You can't stay there, however, until we have a chance to check the security. So, tonight you're crashing at the police station."

"When do you plan to tell me what in the crap is going on?" She asked as he got into the car. It seemed she wasn't a suspect, but it still didn't answer the questions in her mind. She was confused and although she was glad they were offering security, it still didn't explain why they were so adamant about it. If her thoughts were correct, she was in far more trouble than she'd ever dreamed. Two San Diego detectives were as interested in her as an astrologer in the black hole.

McCord sat down into the car and drove away as Dell followed closely behind. "I'm going to tell you but I don't want you to panic," he glanced toward her and shifted his grip on the steering wheel.

Her heart tapped a frantic tempo; she was about to learn something that would change her life forever. "I'll try. But I get the feeling that you just got confirmation about something you feared while you were questioning me. Didn't you?"

He nodded slowly, looking briefly toward her as the glow of the freeway streetlights shone upon her swollen face.

"Do you remember about five months ago when the news was full of stories of a serial killer called The Breaker?" He asked.

A sudden rush of blood shot to her face as a bolt of unexplained energy ran through her legs and out her toes. She nodded. "I thought they caught him."

McCord shook his head.

"But it hasn't been on the news."

"It was going on when the terrorist attack happened in Chicago," he explained, "The case took a backseat to the coverage of the attack. Since then, he hasn't killed, until tonight."

She bit her bottom lip with nervous energy. "You think he'll come for me, don't you?" She'd grown up on serial killer stories, and had even written two high school term papers



and her college thesis about what makes them tick. A need to feed lured a killer out of his home, like a hungry lion. Desire would continue to grow within in him until there was no choice but feed it. She'd watched hundreds of interviews with serial killers and the moments just prior to snatching the victim were more like a courtship game than she'd wanted to believe. The actual act of the killing took the place of the sex, and in both rituals; courtship and murder, the euphoria would last long after the act was done.

He took a deep breath and nodded. "I'm afraid he will, yes."

"How many were there?"

"The girl tonight was the fifth. But I have reason to believe he killed one man, too. The man was a witness who had seen him leaving his neighbor's house."

Marisa gasped and clapped her hand over her mouth. For the most of a minute she sat silent as the evil feeling of fear consumed her mind and soul.

"I will protect you," Jonathan promised. "Don't doubt that."

## ***Two***

She unlocked and pushed her apartment door open with nervous hands, as McCord gently nudged her aside and entered first. Detective Richard Dell guided Marisa through the door. It was suddenly obvious that the detectives were as sure that the killer would come for her as they were that they'd blink again.

She squatted to greet the bouncing Jack Russell Terrier, Flip, who met her at the door. She pulled the dog into her arms and reached toward the coat rack for his leash. Locking the leash securely onto the dog's collar, she sat him onto the floor. "I need to take him for a walk. I'm sure you'll go with me?"

Dell shook his head and reached for the leash, his brown eyes were telling, not asking. "I'll take the dog for a walk. You stay here with McCord and get your things."

Marisa nodded, but wasn't wild about the idea of releasing Flip into someone else's care. Kevin, the gorgeous son of a Texas oil tycoon, and who lived next door had entrusted her with the job. It wasn't that she was attracted to his wealth, she had more money than she'd ever be able to spend, but what girl wouldn't like a cowboy of her own? Not a want-to-be cowboy but the kind who could really rope and ride. She'd met him when he moved in six months ago and they'd visited each other many times over the past couple of months. She still remembered the look on Kevin's face when she'd told him about her money, and the look was relief. Even if the money had been an inheritance gift from Ida Lowry, the owner of the flower shop where Marisa worked, Kevin seemed pleased to find out. He'd dated more

than one gold digger.

"All clear," McCord called from across the beautiful oak parquet floor of the living room. "You need to pack enough for a couple of days, that'll give us time to figure out what type of security to put into place."

Marisa nodded, and wondered how in the heck something like this could have happened when she'd only gone out for a leisurely jog. "I'm not going to be staying at the police station two days, I hope?"

He met her eyes and shook his head. "No, I just want to keep an eye on this place for a day or so before we try to set you up with guards."

She walked into her bedroom when he finished speaking, grabbed a suitcase from the bottom of the closet and spun toward the canopy bed behind her. McCord's hands wrapped firmly around the suitcase inches before it would have slammed into his stomach. Their eyes met, locked, then danced some unnamed courtship ritual. She swallowed hard, not knowing if she should run or hope her knees didn't buckle. He drew in a slow deep breath as he rubbed his index finger beneath his nose and slowly turned away.

Marisa swallowed; she'd been as broadsided by that moment as she would have been if meteor crashed through the room and landed on her bed. Her mind had been too full of fear to notice how handsome he was. She was too worried about staying alive to realize that he was just a few years her senior, years that had served him well. She studied him as he stepped away, suddenly noticing things about the good detective that had escaped her earlier. His shoulders were wide, narrowing into a trim waist line. The low top hiking style shoes he wore with khaki pants were a teasing promise of a rugged outdoorsy kind of guy.

"Would it be okay if I showered?" She asked, breaking the awkward silence.

"Sure, that would be fine." He nodded, pointing toward the living room. "I'll just wait in there."

She clicked the bathroom door closed behind her and took a deep breath. Damn if she wouldn't like for him to join her. She shook off the thought and turned her attention to the mirror. Her cheek was a purple swollen mess. Her hair was worse. She puffed a defeated sound and removed her

clothes, dropping the uncomfortable sports bra to the floor. She tugged the rubber band from her hair, gritting as it tore through the tangles. Turning on the shower, she waited patiently for the water to heat. The one downfall of living in an apartment complex, even an upscale one, was the time it took for the hot water to kick in. She glanced back into the mirror. She looked like she'd been in a fist fight with Rocky Balboa. She gasped when she noticed a large smudge of blood near her collarbone. The bastard had either hurt her or himself in the process of trying to capture her. Checking herself, she found no wounds. The blood had to belong to the man who'd crashed his hand through her window.

She pulled her shorts back on and wrapped a perfectly white towel around her upper body. She took a deep breath, ran quick fingers through her long blonde hair then opened the bathroom door and pointed to her shoulder as she entered the living room. "This isn't my blood."

~ \* ~

Detective McCord looked toward her from his place on the large, dark brown leather sofa. He was admiring the Thomas Kinkade art, originals he believed, on the walls. Holy damn she was hot. He stood and walked toward her, fighting a gallant battle against his testosterone levels. Stuffing his hands deep into his pockets, he cleared his throat with a soft sound. "I'll radio Dell to bring up the evidence case. Whatever you do, don't touch it."

She walked closer to him, dangerously close. His body reacted to her. The detective in him knew this was a huge break in the case, but the man in him couldn't seem to get beyond the perfect female that stood before him wearing little more than a towel. He figured she probably still had on her shorts, but in his mind she was as naked as the day she was born beneath that towel.

He took his phone from the waistband clip and activated the push to talk feature. "Bring up the case when you come back Dell, we've got blood."

~ \* ~

Marisa perched on the edge of her coffee table. The thought of sitting on the sofa seemed far too...intimate. She was having trouble understanding the feelings that consumed her. She hadn't felt anything like it since Ben

Weaver had left her behind in Tennessee for his one true love, the U.S. Army. She still had the ring he'd given her when he asked her to be his wife. She'd worn it proudly months after he left for his South Korean deployment. She had taken it off when the letters and phone calls stopped. The dread had consumed her when she heard rumors that he'd married a Korean woman and their baby was due only a few months later.

Detective McCord, the man she'd initially found arrogant and imposing, stirred a fire in her that hadn't burned in over four years. She wasn't sure she liked the feeling. She didn't want this man to have power over her, but there was no doubt about it; she wanted the man. Something told her that she couldn't have one without the imposition of the other. But that was a debate for another time. Right now, she had to stay focused or she'd have him thrown down on the sofa unleashing four years of sexual deprivation on him. He looked like he could have handled it, easily in fact, and it seemed that such a thought had only hindered the process of getting him off her mind.

She enjoyed sex, when she got it, anyway, and she wondered if it was another sickness that bled over from the past she would have rather forgotten. From the early age of three or four, she'd watched orgies unfold in her living room. She remembered the first time she actually understood what was happening. It had been strange for an eight year old to watch the male and female bodies slide effortlessly together and enjoy what seemed like an abundance of overwhelming pleasure. She was too young to see it, far too young to comprehend the repercussions of such an act. Aunt Clara had come for her shortly after, however, and soon the only things that remained of the orgies were the distant fading memories.

At the time in her life when Clara came along she desperately needed a strong female spirit in her life. One that taught her the difference between right and wrong and actually cared that she made the correct choice. Clara had gotten her into church, and gave her the incentive and praise to make better grades in school. She'd met Ben Weaver in church at the tender age of fifteen. Clara had been pleased with the budding young relationship, as Ben was the

grandson of Clara's best friend. Thanks to that wonderful woman, she'd been seventeen before she lost her virginity, and when considering the early influences in her life she figured, she'd beat her expected date by at least five years.

~ \* ~

The door opened. Marisa gasped as if she'd done something wrong, and McCord spun toward it. Dell paused, looking first to the half-naked woman on the table then to McCord. Dell moved closer and set the evidence case onto the coffee table near Marisa. Jonathan McCord noted that the lucky little rat of a dog had run straight to Marisa and stuck his nose between her knees. McCord cleared his throat and wanted to kick Dell's ass for furrowing his brow with a confused look. Of course he knew what Dell was thinking, at least part of it. Marisa looked as guilty as sin when the door had opened. He also figured that Dell probably wondered why he wasn't excited— If the blood spot on Marisa really belonged to The Breaker, then they were closer than they had ever been to identifying him.

"Are you going to lift the evidence or do I need to go back to my car and get my glasses?" Dell asked.

McCord shot Dell a warning glare and moved toward Marisa. He stood there looking down at her, afraid to touch her. Dell drew in a long steady breath, and McCord knew the sound all too well. Dell was tired and their shift should have already ended. When Dell got impatient he got crabby.

"You can't get what you need with your hands in your pockets," Dell growled.

That was the point. McCord bit the inside of his bottom lip then got onto his knees in front of Marisa. He reached into the case and removed several items and carefully swabbed away the blood from the delicate skin of her collarbone. He could see her pulse pounding in her neck and he wondered if she was feeling as out of sorts as he. He could see the desire in her eyes and he could taste it in the air around them. He respected her will to fight it, however, because with her help he might solve the case *before* the key witness ended up in his bed.

He noted that Marisa held her breath. What was going through her mind? The heat from her eyes as they scanned him felt like a hot summer rain. It was the oddest feeling

he'd ever known. Probably the most sensual one, too, but he wasn't complaining.

"Is there enough of it to get DNA?" She asked.

"There's enough of it to nail the sorry bastard to the wall." Dell smiled as he slapped McCord on the shoulder, "It's about time we finally catch a break on this case."

"So I can shower now?" She asked slowly, looking into the hazel eyes of Detective McCord.

"Yes, you can." McCord nodded, as his eyes trailed down to her long curvy legs.

~ \* ~

Dell rolled his eyes. It was as obvious what was going on as it would have been to see a hooker on a street corner. He waited for the bathroom door to close behind her then, "What in the hell are you thinking? You know the rules, McCord."

"What rules?"

"Don't get mixed up with other cops, lawyers or witnesses," Dell barked. "You didn't make detective by thinking with your crotch."

"Nobody is getting mixed up," McCord informed as he turned his attention to the evidence bag. "She was half naked, I'm a man. My mind went haywire when she walked out of that bathroom. No harm, no foul dude. Don't sweat it."

"In case you forgot, I'm a man too." Dell pointed out as he picked up a box of fingerprint tape and handed to McCord. "You can pawn the no harm no foul shit off on somebody else I'm not buying it."

McCord worked to place the items into the bag then close the lid. "Kiss my ass."

"Just remember that I warned you," Dell said as he slapped McCord on the shoulder.

~ \* ~

When Marisa immersed from the bathroom she liked the smiles on the detectives' faces. They finally had a piece of hard evidence against the serial killer. "What should I do with Flip? Kevin won't be home for two more days."

"He should be okay until morning," McCord supplied.

"Well, if it isn't safe for me to stay here I'm certainly not leaving Flip."

"We can't take a dog back to the PD." McCord informed with wide eyes.

Marisa opted to lock Flip in Kevin's apartment rather than leave him in hers. He'd feel more at home there and he wouldn't have to deal with the serial killer if he came calling. "Let me find the key."

"We'll be right back, Dell," McCord said. "We're going next door."

Dell nodded with a smirk and mumbled something about checking the windows in Marisa's apartment.

McCord watched her when she opened the door and flipped the light on. It was obvious she was attracted to the man who lived in the apartment by the way she took a deep breath, enjoying the masculine scent that engulfed them as they walked through the door.

"What's the neighbor do?" He asked.

"Anything he wants," Marisa said softly. "He's a billionaire."

McCord wandered around the apartment. Although very upscale, it didn't look like anywhere a billionaire would live. "I see."

"He's a liaison for his family business and travels a lot," she finally explained. "He's a super nice guy."

It probably didn't hurt any that he was a billionaire. "It helps to have good neighbors."

He watched as she walked around the apartment with ease and it became quickly obvious to him that she'd spent many hours there. Her hands hadn't searched through the cabinets for dog food, she'd just opened the door, grabbed it, and closed it again. He certainly was glad that he'd kept it together and not made an idiot of himself. It was the story of his life, every beautiful woman seemed to be taken.

~ \* ~

Detective Dell fumbled his way into McCord's office carrying two cups of coffee. They'd both known this would be a long night, and Dell hoped to go home at a decent hour and enjoy a movie with his wife. Marisa Potts had discovered The Breaker's blood on her, however, and plans changed. There were reports to write, evidence to submit and the process wasn't quite as simple as it appeared on television. Dell's eyes landed on Marisa sleeping on the sofa in the



corner. "Oh McCord, that can't be good."

"What do you suggest I do? I suppose I could lock her up in a cell, but it doesn't seem right," McCord retorted, looking up from a mountain of paperwork.

"Doesn't hurt that she fits the McCord perfect woman mold, huh?"

That never hurts. "What in the hell are you talking about?"

"I saw the looks you two were exchanging in her apartment. Hell, you might as well have reached and grabbed that towel because it was obvious that she was already naked in your mind." Dell teased as he took a seat in one of the black leather chairs.

"You're crazy man." McCord shook his head. "Let's get this shit done so we can get out of here."

"And what are you going to do with her?" Dell asked with a coy grin gesturing his head toward Marisa.

He had several things in mind, giving her the old one-two sounded fun. McCord turned his attention first toward Marisa lying on the old black leather sofa in the far corner of his office, then to meet the smirk on Dell's face. "Kiss my ass, Dell."

"Well, are you putting her in a hotel?"

"Hell no, she'd be a sitting duck," McCord explained.

"You're right. I guess you're thinking that she'd be safer at your place." Dell teased as he took a slow sip of his coffee, squinting against the warm steam.

"Damn it, Dell." McCord fought a grin and reached for his cup. "I could use a little help here."

Dell smoothed his tongue over his lips and motioned his cup toward Marisa. "Why don't you just let her crash here tonight, lock the door and put a uniform outside the door?"

~ \* ~

"Good morning." McCord said as he walked into his office the following morning. He hoped Marisa had gotten more sleep than he had. He'd told himself that he was too wired about the killer striking again, but something else told him that it had everything to do with the hot little number looking out the window behind his desk.

"Hello," she said sheepishly. "The guard outside said it was okay for me to shower in the ladies locker room."

"Great." He allowed his eyes to move the length of her body in one slow motion. "Tonight we'll make arrangements so you will be more comfortable. I just couldn't take a chance by putting you in a hotel last night."

"That's okay, I understand." She gave him a slow nod.

He moved around the desk, closer to her, and he fought the urge to wrap his arms around her and promise to make her forget all about the serial killer. "So, how did you sleep?"

She turned from the window and toward him. "Under the circumstances, I slept okay. Your sofa is a bit lumpy and I didn't have the best of dreams, but I held my own."

He placed his hand on the back of his chair. He boldly scanned her body, after all, they were both adults and if this woman didn't know she was smoking hot then it was high time someone told her. "I know all about the sofa, I've slept many nights there myself."

She lifted her brows. "Really?"

Something about her voice told him that this conversation could get out of hand in nothing flat. "I'm sure it was a rough ride for you because you certainly have more curves than me."

Her cheeks flushed red, but she held his stare. "Thank you."

He winked. "You're welcome."

"So who's the lucky person who gets to go with me to walk the dog?" She fluttered her eyes and reached to touch the back of the chair near his hands.

He cleared his throat; he'd damn well kill Dell if he volunteered. "I think I can handle that."

"Soon, I hope." She stepped closer, meeting his eyes. "Billionaire dog poop stinks just like poor dog poop."

He puckered his lips slightly, and admitted to himself that he liked a woman, especially a sexy one, who had a sense of humor. Of course, it was painfully obvious that he'd like this woman regardless.

"So, are you and the billionaire an item?"

She smiled, but he could tell she was a bit too nervous to hide the truth. "No. We've visited with each other a lot, but, when you're a billionaire, you date whomever you want and it's not usually the girl next door."

"So you're hot for him but he's not for you?" McCord asked.

She pulled her hand from the chair and trailed her eyes down his body then back up. "I wouldn't say I'm hot for him. Let's just say that he'd be a catch if a girl were into the cowboy type."

He swallowed hard. If there was one thing that he wasn't it was a cowboy. He'd spent a lot of time around horses but he just didn't understand the whole roping and riding thing. To him, it made more sense to ride things with engines. He was more into guns and fighting, and couldn't change that even for a woman like her. "So, you must be into the cowboy type."

Her face was solid, her eyes never leaving his. "Telling you the kind that I'm into would only serve to embarrass me at the moment."

Her words shot sparks of fire into his crotch. "How's that?"

"Well," she said, "I'm more into heroes than cowboys."

"I can't imagine a woman who can out-think a serial killer needing a hero." He shifted his weight in an effort to adjust his expanding package. "But I'll certainly keep that in mind."

"I didn't out-think him. I got lucky." Her eyes drifted away to a memory.

"Call it whatever you want." He rushed to recapture her attention. "I call it a hell of a woman."

McCord turned his attention to Dell as he walked through the office door without as much as a knock. Sometimes he wanted to rip that guy's head off. "Come on in, Dell, make yourself at home." Sarcasm dripping from his words.

"Sorry, man," Dell said with wide, curious eyes. "I was just going to let you know that I'm on my way down to the lab to drop off the DNA."

"Okay." McCord turned his attention back to Marisa's golden tan. "Take your time."

Marisa smirked when Dell left the office and closed the door behind him. "Are the two of you always like that?"

"Most of the time," McCord answered honestly. "This is the first time we've ever worked together on a case. Captain

wanted the two lead detectives on this case and here we are."

"So, how has all this altered my life? I'm assuming you don't plan to use me as a paperweight." She turned her eyes up toward him.

"Something tells me that if you were sitting on my desk I wouldn't get much work done." The door popped open a second time. "Damn it, Dell." McCord spat.

Dell laughed. "The ME's report is ready."

"Don't leave." McCord pinched the bridge of his nose as he tried to wipe away the thought of Marisa on his desk. "We need to tell Marisa about what we plan to do to keep her safe. Then I have to take her to walk the dog."

"I'm already driving down to—"

"That's okay," McCord interjected. "I'll take her."

Marisa gave little resistance as Jonathan explained just how important it was that she have twenty-four hour guards. Considering the circumstances, he figured that she would prefer it.

"I think Connie Brick would be perfect to assign to night shift," Dell explained. "She teaches self-defense classes in her spare time, shoots in tournaments and has a black belt in karate."

McCord agreed and stacked a group of papers on his desk. "Did you get a chance to check Whitlock's record?"

Dell dropped his head to disguise a grin, then met McCord's eyes. "I did. He's good, but not as good as Hammond. When it comes to guarding a witness it doesn't get any better than having a former Secret Service Agent on your team."

McCord swallowed hard. Tony Hammond was hot even from a male standpoint and he didn't like the idea that a cop might put the moves on his witness, especially if it wasn't him. "Hammond, huh?"

Marisa perked up. "What's wrong with Hammond? I can hear the doubt in your voice."

A cold chill engulfed him in a quick smooth moment. She didn't care who her guards were as long as they kept her safe. McCord looked toward her then pushed a file folder aside taking a seat on the corner of his desk. "Nothing, we'll get him assigned as your day shift guard without a problem."

Dell held out a hand, palm up. "I need the keys to your car. I'll put it in storage."

"Storage?" She darted her attention from Dell over to McCord then back to Dell. "I can't drive my car anymore?"

"That'll be the first thing he looks for and we can't take the chance," Dell explained as he gave the globe on the table a gentle spin then met her eyes. "You'll have transportation anytime you need to go anywhere. We just can't take any chances."

## ***Three***

McCord watched the gentle sway of Marisa's hips and if he weren't on duty, he would have reached out and grabbed himself a handful of ass. He *was* on duty, however, and he had to keep reminding himself that as much as he wanted to ravish her body, she was a witness and getting mixed up could be deadly.

Marisa opened the apartment door and Flip bounced into her arms. He wanted to bounce into her arms, and lick her all over like that incredibly lucky dog was doing. He wanted to do much more than that, however. He shook his head and forced his eyes away. Damn, if this wasn't the hardest task he'd ever faced.

"We can go out back." Marisa crossed across the room into the kitchen, where he assumed the back door was located. "It's fenced in."

McCord made his way across the kitchen, past the large beveled mirror and Bombay chest that decorated the right wall. "Lead the way."

His eyes locked as automatically on her unintentional sensual walk as a missile to its target. He puckered his lips and blew out softly as he enjoyed the view of her stylish dark blue denim hip hugger jeans. He couldn't remember feeling like this since he'd been a teenager following his little sister's babysitter through the house.

~ \* ~

Marisa looked over her shoulder as she made her way out the door. "If you have a few minutes I'll take his leash off and let him get a little exercise."

"Go ahead." McCord approved then walked a few steps

toward a standard black park bench near the side fence. "We'll hold the bench down while the little rat burns some energy."

She loosened the dog and turned her attention toward McCord. "So tell me about Detective Jonathan McCord. It seems like we're always talking about me." She liked the way his eyes scanned slowly over her as she took a seat beside him. He just felt safe, and at this point in her life she liked the feeling of safety. Of course, she was sure there was more to the way he felt than just safe, she hadn't been fortunate enough to find out, however.

"What do you want to know?" He asked.

"The ins and outs, ups and downs." She glanced toward the dog then turned her attention back to the tall well-proportioned man at her side.

He coughed then adjust his position on the bench. "Well, I'm single."

She licked her lips as a rush of fire shot through her body. "Really, now? So, who is the lucky woman who fills your time?"

"There is no lucky woman." He shook his head.

"Oh, come on." She coaxed as she scanned her eyes down the creases of his permanent press khakis, then back up the buttons of his red oxford shirt. "You can't tell me that somebody isn't...well...keeping the shelves dusted."

He tilted back his head; the chuckle that escaped him was a magnificent, masculine sound. "Since I've started working on this case there hasn't been any time for dusting."

Her mind ran wild with possibilities, none of them clean. She could only imagine a man like him being lonely for female attention. She moved her eyes over him once again, and if it were true, then it was a damn shame.

"You have the most powerful eyes I've ever seen," He supplied.

She looked up at him with intrigue. "Powerful eyes?"

"Every time you do that it feels like hot rain."

"Do what?" She lifted her brows to try to cloak the grin that tugged at the corners of her mouth.

He scanned his eyes down to her cleavage then back to her face. "Check me out."

"Well, let me just be frank with you, Detective,

humans have needs and with a body like that I can't expect that you'd be any different," she said, realizing all too late that her face was burning.

"Thank you very much, but please, call me Jonathan. And since we're on the subject, who's dusting your shelves? The billionaire?"

She glanced across the large fenced in yard, to where Flip was digging near the base of a large Maple tree. She gave his question some thought then smoothed her hands over her thighs. "I figured out after moving to California that I'm not exactly as high on the food chain as I was back home. When the competition is as thick as it is here, a girl has to find other ways of keeping the dust down."

He released a growling noise that sent pulses of lust through her body. "Wow, I suddenly have a vivid picture in my head."

She swallowed hard fighting the desire to reach for him, then said, "Maybe—" The sound of his ringing cellular phone cut the sentence short.

He rolled his eyes, pressed the phone to his ear and talked in random sentences to an obviously male voice. She figured it was one of his friends, a guy who knew all about the women who helped Jonathan McCord dust his shelves.

~ \* ~

He wrapped his hand around her hip and pressed her gently to the side. He'd understood why she wanted to go by her apartment before leaving and he'd actually hoped she would. It just felt odd talking to a woman in another man's home or at the least while walking his dog. A million questions whirled in his mind, but the less he knew the better. He was becoming far too comfortable around her. He wasn't usually one to get close to a witness, he usually knew little more than their name. Of course, being totally honest, he hadn't had a witness that looked quite like this one. She had curves so feminine that the flow of her would have made a wonderful roller coaster ride. Her skin was smooth as silk and her hair was naturally blonde. He wasn't sure how many years it had been since he'd seen a natural blonde, but in California they were few and far between. "So what brought you to California?"

She clapped her hands together to divert the dog's



attention from the relentless digging. Her eyes returned to his and battled the tears that welled in her eyes. "Ida Lowry. She once owned my flower shop. I worked for her while still in college and I just stayed with her."

"From looking at your apartment I wouldn't be afraid to guess that your degree is in Interior Design."

She nodded, "Yes, thank you."

"I need to turn you loose in my house." He glanced toward the gentle beep of his cellular phone, pulled the device into his hand, pressed a single key then tucked it back into the carry case. "I bet you could turn it into a really cool bachelor pad."

She stopped and looked back toward him as she walked across the kitchen, "Something tells me that it probably already *is* a cool bachelor pad."

"Nope." He admitted then laid his hands onto her kitchen bar. "There isn't anything cool about bare walls."

"A bachelor pad is kind of like a fountain garden," She began. "No matter if there are flowers or weeds around it, the fountain is still the main attraction."

He shook his head with a grin. "I suppose I'm the fountain."

"Oh, you are definitely the fountain," she said as she nodded. "Trust me, when a woman makes it into your pad the last thing she's thinking about are the pillows and curtains."

She was as different from most women as a black goat in herd with a hundred perfectly white sheep. He had a few women who hung around from time to time. The ones he'd call over in the middle of the night to satisfy an urge. There was one in particular that would spend entire weekends with him, but that had to stop. Things were different now; he'd met a real woman and if it weren't for this damn case she'd, already be his.

He took a deep breath and walked toward her, perhaps he'd regret it, but he'd gone just about as long as he could without getting a few answers. He needed to know what her skin felt like, how soft her hair was and if those curves were as deep as they looked. He reached for her ponytail and pulled his hand down it, the silkiness of it smooth against his rough skin sent sensations pulsing

through his body that felt like hot shrapnel.

She tilted her head toward him but didn't say a word. He liked that. He moved closer until his lips touched her gently. He didn't wait for approval; he needed the answers to his questions before he snapped back to his senses. He pressed his palm against the back of her head, and advanced his kiss into an open mouth attack. His tongue explored her as if he were feeding a desperate need. He glided his hands down her sides and growled—she was the most feminine thing he'd touched in years, possibly ever. He couldn't kiss her any deeper, it wasn't physically possible. The way she kissed him back made him want to try, however. Every nerve in his body was on edge, he felt like he'd grabbed a live wire, and probably had. She could turn him inside out in the bedroom, and he needed that, however, he didn't need to complicate things anymore than he already had. Her hand rested on his chest, delicately stoking with a rhythm that made his manhood alert with hope. He had to back away or he would screw up and she'd be much more than his witness.

He pulled away, then turned his back. The last thing he needed was for her to see the affect she'd had on him. His rock hard erection was as visible as a straw in a cup and there was little he could do about it at this point. "Damn it."

"What?" She asked, her lips pouting and begging for more.

"That shouldn't have happened," he barked, rubbing his hand over his crotch hoping to rearrange the painful shaft in his trousers.

"I'm sorry." Her voice was tinged with hurt, and her soft tone cut his heart into shreds.

"Oh no." He laughed, trying to brighten her mood. "Don't apologize, I wanted to. I just shouldn't have."

"Why?"

"Because if I get involved with you it'll take away my edge. We can't do this." He turned toward her and wrapped his hands around her arms.

"Okay," she said and he could hear the defeat in her long sigh.

He hated himself for being just as much a part of the flirting game as she. He'd been the one to take it up a notch and he was punishing her. She'd been honest in telling him

her perceptions of him and he loved it. Nothing suited him better than to think that she thought he looked delicious, but this just wasn't the time.

"It's not your fault," he said honestly. "It got the best of me. Damn it, you look good and smell good. To be honest, I just couldn't stand it anymore and I had to know if you felt and tasted as good as you look."

Her eyes locked on his lips then traced slowly to his eyes. "Well?"

"My God." He grunted as he nodded his head in disbelief. "The thought of you dusting your own shelves will make me crazy."

Her face blushed red. "Stop it."

He moved closer again and looked down into her eyes, "He'll make a mistake and I'll nail him to the wall."

"Then you'll nail me?" She pulled her index finger down the center of his chest.

He grunted. "That's a promise."

## ***Four***

McCord swallowed the lump in his throat as he knocked on Marisa's door. He had a picture in his hand of the girl she'd seen tossed from the cliffs. He had promised that he'd keep her updated on the case. It had been four days since the murder and he certainly planned to keep his word. He'd been right in thinking the woman was Ginger Hollister and she'd suffered through four days of hell at The Breaker's hands.

"Come in, Detective," Connie Brick said as she stepped back and to the side.

McCord nodded politely, but Connie was just one of those women that made a guy wonder if she'd ever had sex. She was as masculine as most men, more so than others. Her short hair was only part of it. "I'll be here for about an hour if you need to run an errand."

"That's okay," Connie said with a wink. "For once, I'm enjoying my job."

McCord furrowed his brow, looked her in the eye then moved past Connie. "Sounds like you need to check your hormones at the door." It had never crossed his mind that Connie might be a lesbian, but looking back it couldn't have been any more obvious. He puffed a laugh and nodded; it seemed that Marisa's list of admirers from the San Diego Police Department was growing. It wasn't hard to see why, either. She looked adorable even when she lounged around the house. Her hair was pushed back in a simple white headband, her shorts were once a pair of ragged jogging pants.

Connie nudged Jonathan with her elbow to gather his

attention, then she looked toward Marisa. "Trust me if I ever get my lips on her she won't remember your name and she'll forget all about Ben Weaver, whoever the hell he is."

"Ben Weaver?" McCord quizzed with a confused shake of the head then met Connie's gaze again. "Keep your lips off my witness."

He wanted to know who Ben Weaver was. He wanted to tell the she-wolf beside him that he'd already had his lips on her and she was sweet as honey. He couldn't do that, however; he had to remember Marisa was off limits until The Breaker was behind bars.

"Just hide and watch me, McCord." Then, "She'll be screaming my name before you know it."

He looked at Brick like she'd lost her mind. He wasn't sure if he wanted to be responsible for leaving Marisa with a woman like her. Most men couldn't ward off Connie Brick and he had no reason to think that delicate little Marisa could. "Maybe you aren't the woman for this job, after all."

"Take me off this case because I'm a lesbian and I'll have that shiny little detective badge of yours," Connie threatened.

"Detective McCord," Marisa wiped her hands on a towel as she walked around the bar. "You're just in time for dinner. Are you hungry?"

He could see the delicate skin that wasn't leg, but wasn't quite ass. The muscles in her legs looked like she could easily run a marathon, and the way she walked around in her bare feet made it far too easy to picture coming home to her in the evenings. He puffed a laugh as he nodded his head. If only she knew how hungry he could be for her—but actually, she already did. "I didn't come to eat, but you talked me into it. It smells great. What is it?" He asked, walking toward the island stove.

"It's an old family recipe. I call it BLT." She teased then began lifting the bacon from the old cast iron skillet.

His eyes locked with hers as she stood holding the spatula. Heck, he'd been in her apartment for more than five minutes and he was yet to explain why he was there and she hadn't bothered to ask. She was painfully beautiful, and he wondered if she'd go to the bedroom with him if he asked. That would be against the rules, however, and he'd have to

refrain from asking. He'd have to stick to their little flirting game until they finally had the serial killer behind bars. He took a seat near her at one of three places she'd set at the round, high top bar table.

"That's my spot," Connie protested as she looked directly into his eyes. "I'm a creature of habit."

Heat shot through his body. He was being one upped by a uniform, a female uniform at that. No doubt she was a creature, but what kind? He hesitated, giving careful consideration to whether or not his hand to hand combat training in boot camp fifteen years ago could equal her black belt. "And the entire time I thought you were working for me. What was I thinking?"

"I could take a guess," Connie bit back sarcastically.

He took a seat on the stool directly across from Marisa and laid the photo on the table. "Ginger Hollister."

The smile faded from Marisa's face as she looked at him, slid from her stool and made her way around the table. He handed the picture to her and pressed his hand on the small of her back as she studied the face of the woman who had haunted her for days. Her eyes met his briefly, she moved even closer, and the manly part of him twitched with desire.

"She was a dispatcher for a taxi service. She was quiet, an only child, and from all accounts, a shy loner." Then, "She was twenty eight and from Salt Lake City. She was here escaping an abusive husband."

"What's the connection?" Marisa asked, hanging on his every word.

"If only I knew," he admitted. "There is no pattern, the victims lived all over the city. It looks like they're just random selections."

Marisa laid the photo back onto the table and looked into McCord's eyes. "You'll get him. I know you will." She traced her finger down his chest then turned and made her way back to her seat.

McCord lifted his hand toward Connie and wiggled the fingers that had occupied the small of Marisa's back. He wasn't sure if Marisa had touched him because she was attracted to him or if she was proving a point to Connie Brick. Either was fine with him. If this was a competition, he

had one thing in his favor—he'd already tested the waters, and Marisa certainly wasn't a lesbian.

~ \* ~

Marisa opened the car door and sat down inside. "Good morning, Tony."

"Back at you, beautiful." Tony Hammond lifted a bottle of water from the passenger seat seconds before Marisa sat down. "How was your night?"

"It was okay," she said as she watched Connie Brick walking toward her car, "How about you?"

My kid brother stayed at my place last night so things were boring as heck."

Marisa looked at the blond-haired, blue-eyed hunk and tried to control her salivary glands. He wasn't her type, but he was certainly easy to look at. Tony had more women to his credit than Marisa had flowers in her shop. The undeniably female urges within her, however, made it impossible not to at least enjoy the view.

"So is Brick still trying to put the moves on you?" He asked with a grin.

Of course, Marisa knew that Tony had picked up on the way Connie told her goodbye every morning. It sounded more like lovers parting for the day than a witness and a guard. Marisa smoothed her tongue over her pearly white teeth. As far as lifestyles went, she didn't have a problem with anyone's, unless it began to intertwine with her own. It was okay that Connie was gay, that didn't bother her, but the comments did.

"She's not quite as obvious as she was; I think Detective McCord picked up on it last night when he came over." Marisa explained. "But I still get the impression that she's waiting for me to drop the soap."

Tony tilted back his head and gave an open mouth chuckle. "Well, relax, because all you've got to do is confirm it to McCord or Dell and she'll be gone as yesterday's sunshine." Then, "Now let's get to the shop and check out the flowers. I certainly get laid more now that I have access to your cooler."

"You couldn't get laid more if you lived in a whorehouse. Who are you kidding?"

"Well I still enjoy taking goodies from your cooler." He

winked.

"Take all the flowers you want, just shoot to kill when the time comes."

"You can bet on it, baby."

~ \* ~

Although Marisa had always loved flowers, she had never dreamed that many strange twists of fate would land her in San Diego with her own business. When she studied Interior Design at Memphis State University, her instructor recommended her for a part time job at a local florist. After several months of working in the store, Marisa knew that she had found her dream job. There was no pressure, no stress, just happy bright flowers. She continued to work with Ida Lowry long after she'd received her degree in Design. The doubts came when Ida discussed selling the shop in Memphis and moving to her home town in California. Having hardly any family to mention, Marisa took the plunge, packed her belongings and followed Ida to San Diego. In fact, it seemed like the only thing to do as rumors of Ben Weaver's marriage to another woman spread.

Ida had named the new shop *Potts of Flowers* in Marisa's honor. Ida hadn't taken it lightly when a young Marisa Potts had thrown caution to the wind and followed her to California. As Ida's health began to fail it was obvious to Marisa that Ida had learned of her inoperable breast cancer and returned to San Diego to die. Marisa's faith in Ida had inexplicably landed her in the sole inheriting position of Ida's estate. Suddenly Marisa was transformed from a store employee to store owner, but most remarkably, she made the transition from rags to riches. The young girl who had always been kicked around was now wealthy beyond her wildest dreams.



## ***Five***

Marisa's life had turned into an insane routine that made her wonder if she'd be just as well off to take her chances with the serial killer. It had been almost two weeks since the night of Ginger Hollister's death and the detectives were no closer to solving the case. Life as she'd known it had turned into a three ring circus with more freaks than she wanted to admit. Each day Connie Brick's attempts to work her way into Marisa's bed, grew more obvious. Tony Hammond, she quickly learned, was the equivalent of a high maintenance call girl with the exception that he was definitely male. The handsome neighbor, Kevin, had returned home to find another woman living with Marisa. Marisa wasn't allowed to tell him that Connie was only a guard, therefore his opinion of her had changed on visual impact.

She had considered talking to Dell and McCord about Connie. She was sick and tired of being called *Doll*. The only woman who'd ever called her by a pet name was her Aunt Clara and she'd earned the right. Aunt Clara was responsible for her meeting Ben. She had taken Marisa in after her parents both ran away chasing distant rainbows. And it was Clara that Marisa confided in during long phone conversations in San Diego. Aunt Clara was the glue that was holding her together and Clara had advised her to tell before it became a real problem.

~ \* ~

Marisa sat on a high top stool working on a floral arrangement when the door chime caught her attention. Dell and McCord made their way inside and toward the design room behind the counter.

"Hi guys." Marisa waved toward them, a blue iris in her hand. "What brings you calling today?"

Dell spun his attention toward Tony Hammond, who told them he was studying a car that he'd seen more than once in front of the store. He and Dell were soon out the door to investigate.

"Well, we have some tattoo sketches for you to look over," McCord said as he turned his attention toward the glass front of the store and toward what had drawn Dell and Hammond's attention.

"It's the blue Honda," she said matter-of-factly. "It started showing up a few days ago. Tony hasn't mentioned it, but I knew he saw it."

"Have you seen the driver?"

"Not yet. It just magically appears during rush hour when things get wild."

Jonathan nodded, "Maybe we need to put another guard on you just in case."

"No," Marisa almost shouted. Then, "Please don't do that."

Jonathan shot his glare toward her. "What happened?"

She could see something primal inside him and she liked it. "Nothing happened. I'm just going crazy."

"Has Hammond made advances toward you?" He asked point blank. "I won't hesitate to kick his ass."

She fluttered her eyes then fought the embarrassment that engulfed her as she wondered how she could tell him it wasn't the hot sexy man who made advances but the brawny woman. "No, he has far too many women to worry about me."

"Brick?"

She nodded and turned toward the flower arrangement when she felt her face burn. "She hasn't actually done anything, but she's getting braver by the day. I don't think she's at the top of her game while guarding a woman. Maybe you could pair me up with a gay male cop? I certainly do need a break."

"I'm not sure we have any of those." Jonathan leaned against the counter and into her view. "Something tells me that I could put a gay cop with you and he'd turn straight."

"Oh, my gosh, you're so wrong for that." She swatted

him on the shoulder with a pretty pink iris.

"Maybe so, but if I was gay you could sure as hell straighten me out." He leaned closer to gather her attention again.

"Well thank you...I think." She locked her eyes with his and held her breath.

"It seems that you don't realize just how sexy you are." Jonathan reached toward her and brushed her long blonde hair behind her ear. "Hell, I don't blame Brick. To be honest, I'm anxious to get between those legs, too."

Heat surged through her, and the room went suddenly hot. "Brick is out of luck. You, on the other hand, already know that I'm on the menu, all you have to do is order it."

He grunted and moved closer. "Sometimes the look on your face says some of the damndest things."

She looped her finger into the waistband of his jeans backed away into the store room, him willingly following like a hooked fish. "What is it that my face is telling you?" Her other fingers made their way into his waistband, too.

He looked back toward the door.

"Don't worry about the door, the chime will go off when they come back in. Tell me, Jonathan McCord what's the look on my face telling you?"

"That when I finally get my hands on you, it will be like roping a wild mustang." He smoothed his palms down his hips.

Her hands reached for the snap on his jeans and the look on his face told her that as badly as she wanted it, she might not succeed. She moved closer, trailing a finger down the visible bulge in his jeans. Returning to the snap closure she smoothed her tongue over her teeth, tiptoed and leaned in to meet his lips. He was tense and he couldn't deny it because every muscle in his body was taught. As the snap gave way, the sound of the zipper releasing was the only thing she heard. If she were lucky enough, Dell and Tony would stay gone a little while longer and she could answer her own questions about Detective Jonathan McCord.

"Oh my," she breathed as she reached into his jeans and wrapped her hand around his penis. "Just touching it makes me throb all over."

He gritted his teeth and looked down as her hands

worked him free. "If you think you're throbbing, you should be me."

She glanced down at his shaft and licked her lips, then met his intense gaze. "How long has it been, Jonathan, since...?"

"Oh, hell." He grunted. "Too long."

She tiptoed one last time, met his lips with an open mouth kiss and swept her tongue into his mouth. She liked the growl that rolled in his chest—a very good sign. Her hand stroked him softly as her lips pulled away and she fell with a thud onto her knees. His legs trembled and he clinched his fists a few seconds before he finally reached toward her. He slid his fingers through her hair, clinched his fists at the back of her head and stroked inside her.

"Damn it, that feels so good, Marisa," he said through gritted teeth. "You have to stop. I can't take it anymore."

She giggled, reached up and pressed her hand beneath his shirt, silently reassuring him that she knew exactly what she was doing. She needed him like her mother had always needed the men in their living room. She needed him the way she'd seen her father needing the two women on the sofa. She'd always wondered why he had one bent over the end of the sofa and the other sitting atop it with her legs spread wide open. This was the first time that she'd ever understood a need that strong.

"Marisa, if you don't stop I'm going to have an accident." He attempted to pull away.

Her fingernails dug into his belly and dragged their way down. She wanted him to know that she was there for his pleasure and she wasn't stopping.

"Shit," he said in an amazed, pleased moan. "I cannot believe this."

When she looked up toward him she could see the need and desire in his eyes. She liked it that he wanted her. He grunted loudly and reached for her head again. He locked his hips and she moaned as his desire spilled into her.

She milked her fingers up his shaft to ensure she'd cleaned all the evidence, then released him. It was easy to tell that there wasn't a coherent thought anywhere in his mind. She liked that.

"You may want to put that away." She rose to her feet

with a coy grin and playfully tapped the head of his shaft with her index finger. "Dell might ask questions."

He snapped to his senses and took a deep breath. "You have no idea how wonderful that was."

"Maybe you could tell me sometime." She raised her brows. "Or better yet, you could show me."

The doorbell chimed as Jonathan made the final adjustments to arrange his manhood in his jeans.

"So what about Connie Brick? I really don't want her in my bed." She fought the desire to laugh as he struggled with his jeans.

He nodded, leaned closer and stole a quick kiss. "That won't happen," he whispered. "But I'll talk to Dell and we'll see if we can come up with another guard."

"Thanks." Marisa picked up the tattoo sketches from the floor and thumbed through them.

Dell and Hammond made their way back into the shop, and through the maze of strategically placed floral exhibits. They had found the owner of the car and it was a seventy year old man visiting his wife in the nursing home down the street.

"Marisa needs a break from Brick," McCord finally informed. "Let's just say that she's a bit too friendly."

"Good, you finally told them." Tony wrapped his arm around Marisa's shoulders and gave her hug. "I thought that I was going to have to tell them myself."

Marisa's face blushed. She hadn't avoided the moment because of hurt feelings, or Connie losing her job, but rather the embarrassment she felt now. Honestly, Connie Brick hadn't pushed the envelope too far, yet. But Marisa wasn't quite sure that Connie was as capable of the job as her counterparts had thought. No doubt Brick could beat the hell out of a man and leave him wishing he'd never messed with her. However, the woman was too busy planning and executing a strategy to get between her legs to be worried about who was outside the door.

"Well, that's a damn insult," Dell said solidly. "I'm sure if a good looking woman like you wants a cop to ask her out, even a lesbian one, you'd want that cop to at least be nice looking. Connie Brick looks like scabies eating a cracker."

Marisa couldn't help the laugh that escaped her. "Well

thank you, Detective Dell."

"I'll start doing a bit more research and see what I can come up with for a suitable replacement. Until then, I think McCord here could burn up the hours." Dell slapped Jonathan on the shoulder. Then, "I'd offer but my wife would kill me."

Marisa raised her brows, she certainly hadn't expected that. Actually, she figured it would land her in the police station again until they could find another guard. She traced her eyes toward McCord who was already looking at her as though waiting for her reaction. She offered the pages of sketches toward him, and shook her head.

"Hell, I have to admit that he's better looking than Brick," Tony Hammond said with a jolting laugh.

"That means a lot coming from you Hammond." Jonathan shot Hammond the bird then turned his attention back toward Marisa. "It's your call."

"I'm not trying to rock the boat, but it's getting to the point that I hate to go home. If you could sacrifice a few hours of your time, I would appreciate it."

"That settles it." McCord gave a single confirming nod then popped his palm against the counter at his side. "Since it's Friday, I'll be over at 6:00."

"Thank you." She sighed, excitement bubbling through her body. "But what about Connie?"

"I'll take care of Connie," McCord answered. "Don't worry."

~ \* ~

Marisa made her way from the bathroom into her bedroom without a word. She'd hoped that Connie Brick couldn't hear the soft moans that escaped her, but she couldn't go another minute without some relief. Thoughts of Jonathan sent darts of fire shooting through her body like exploding fireworks. It had been a long time since a man had gotten her that hot. In fact, the last time had been Ben Weaver's first phone call from South Korea.

Marisa jumped with nervous energy when someone knocked at the door. She glanced at the clock, which told her it was just minutes before six. Perhaps she would regret not giving Connie any warning, but she certainly didn't think so. She hoped it would be easier for Jonathan if he were able to deal with her before Brick got angry. She moved toward her

bedroom door and waited for the voice that would soon call out to her. "I've got it, Doll." Connie's voice carried through the apartment.

Marisa rolled her eyes. She damn well wasn't Connie Brick's doll.

The squeak of the door reached her ears as Connie opened the front door. "Detective McCord, come in,"

"Hello, Officer Brick," McCord said. "Where's Marisa?"

Marisa peeked out the bedroom door. Connie pressed her tongue seductively against her top teeth. "Well, she just made her nightly towel walk from the bathroom into the bedroom. I'm sorry you had to miss it."

"I'm sure you are," McCord bit back, then met eyes with Marisa as she peeked out the door.

"She certainly does have long, pretty legs." Connie winked. "It's just a matter of time before I'm between them licking her like a lollipop."

"Well, actually, Officer Brick, it's you I've come to see. I'm relieving you of your duty."

Connie Brick had turned to walk away, but snapped instantly back toward him. "Not necessary, but I appreciate the offer."

McCord moved a step closer and looked directly into Connie's face. "It wasn't an offer."

Connie Brick looked him up and down and Marisa knew what she was thinking. She was under the impression she could win. Even if she beat the hell out of McCord, she was still off the case. But something told Marisa he had no plans of getting his ass kicked tonight, at least not by Brick.

"What's going on?" Connie shifted her weight and clinched her fist.

"I'm relieving you of duty," McCord said again, calmly. Then, "You need to return to the station to pick up your new orders."

Connie squinted. "Are you pulling me from this case because you're afraid I'm going to get in her pants before you?"

"You're off this case because of your actions," McCord straightened his back and locked eyes with her. "You're lucky that it isn't a sexual harassment file."

"Are you telling me that she asked you to take me off

this case?" Connie asked, narrowing her eyes to small slits.

"I'm telling you that you're off the case. You'll get further instructions at the station. The captain is waiting for you there."

Another knock at the door caught Connie's attention and Marisa found it hard not to hold her breath as she watched the situation unfold. Connie looked at the door then to McCord. "Another of your surprises?"

McCord made a few steps and reached for the door. "Just a couple of people to help you gather your things."

"This isn't over, McCord." Connie said as she looked at the uniforms that made their way inside. "I'll have your ass on discrimination charges."

"Good." McCord said, his tone short. "See if you can get them to backdate it prior to the date on the letter of complaint I submitted because the person at your guard felt sexually threatened."

"You think you're something, don't you?" Connie bit as she walked toward the extra bedroom to gather her things. "You better be because all hell will break loose when the press finds out about your witness."

"If the press finds out I'll see to it that you're booked for endangering a witness." McCord growled, his face darkening until Connie had to look away.

~ \* ~

Marisa waited for the door to close behind Brick before bolting from her room, eyes full of tears, and desperation in her voice. "Will she tell the press who I am?"

He looked toward her and she could tell that part of him wanted to assure her that Brick wasn't that crazy but the other part of him wasn't so sure. "I've never understood women." He explained as he stared blankly ahead. "But if she does she'll regret it."

"I'm not worried about what'll happen to her," Marisa explained with a strained voice. "If the press finds out, that means The Breaker will know who I am."

His eyes scanned her slowly, leaving her feeling like he'd just left her smoldering in his bed. A slow look of greed grew across his face. "He'll have to go through me."

The tingling sensation that shot downward from her navel was like the cold spray off the northeastern Atlantic



during the deep hold of winter. She shivered and flexed her internal muscles against the feeling. She wasn't ready to trust another man, but for some reason he gave her the impression that he was worthy. "So, you're my new guard?"

He stepped closer. "I'm afraid not. I'm a lot like Brick—my mind would be in all the wrong places. In fact, my mind is in the wrong place right now."

She arched her head toward him as his lips met hers. The soft kiss seemed to slowly manifest into demand and sexual hunger. He moaned and she knew he was thinking about taking her and had been ever since she'd given him such pleasure earlier in the day. "Take me in the bedroom," she almost begged.

He grunted, "Do you have any idea how difficult it's going to be to work this case now?"

"No, tell me." She rubbed her hand down his chest and teased the zipper of his jeans with her finger.

"Well, I can't let the Captain find out, which means that Dell can't find out. I can't show favoritism toward you, which is very hard considering that a few hours ago you gave me the best blowjob I've ever had."

She reached forward and wrapped her hand around his index finger. "I'm glad you liked it."

"I didn't *like* it, I *loved* it," he admitted clearing his throat.

Her eyes followed the contour of his body toward the sound of his vibrating cellular phone. He watched her eyes and she knew he certainly liked her eyes on him. "McCord. Oh yeah, she's right here with me. Yes, sir," he said, his voice deepening with respect.

"Well, we were going out to grab a bite to eat." McCord said, looking to Marisa then pointing toward her shoes.

"Yes sir, I understand." He gritted his teeth.

She widened her eyes and promptly began the task of lacing her shoes.

He spoke into the phone. "I'll let her know that she has house guests until Monday."

Her heart leapt, wondering if he was that guest. If he was staying, she needed to change the sheets on the extra bed, or did she? A naughty expression crept across her face;

if it were up to her he could just snuggle into her bed.

She rose as he walked toward the door looking back at her. How long was he going to keep this secret, whatever it was? "Who was that?"

"My Captain," He pulled the door open and looked down the hall before he motioned her out. "He called in a favor and has a new guard for you who comes on duty Monday."

"Who?"

"Joyce Shelton. She works with S.W.A.T right now. She's married to another member of the team. She's a hell of a cop." McCord explained, obviously satisfied with the Captain's choice of replacement of Connie Brick.

"So, what happens until Monday? Am I stuck at the police station again?" She asked wrapping her arms around his arm. "Or are you my weekend house guest?"

"I could never get that lucky. You're stuck with me and a female uniform." He stopped briefly and looked at her.

"Another female from your station?" She asked with a certain amount of justified doubt in her voice. "You aren't trustworthy alone? Detective McCord, surely you wouldn't think of compromising a witness."

He pulled open the front door of the complex and stepped out first, taking special care to evaluate the surroundings and every individual he saw there. "Let's just say that the Captain feels like I might need a chaperone."

She climbed into his unmarked car and waited for him to get inside. "I can't imagine that someone would think that about you."

"I'm sure you can't." His gaze swept over her body in one smooth quick motion. "If he'd waited five more minutes to call he would've been too late."

"Oh, promises, promises."

He rubbed his hand over the five o'clock shadow on his chin. "I'll get my chance. And when I do, you'll know what kind of demon you've released."

"I only have one extra bed," she flirted. "But of course we'd have plenty of room if two people slept in my bed."

"We'll make do." He spoke up, touching the end of her nose with his index finger.

## ***Six***

Marisa had thought her situation couldn't have gotten any worse when she had witnessed a serial killer and was then forced to share her personal space with Connie Brick. She learned the hard way that she was wrong. In fact, things had suddenly gotten so much more worse that she wasn't sure that the Knights of the Round Table could have kept her safe.

Things had gone smoothly after meeting her new female guard, Joyce Shelton. It had only taken a short time for Marisa and Joyce to become quick friends. In fact, Joyce's husband, Rick, soon became a familiar face around the apartment. Marisa was okay with that for more than one reason. First and foremost, it was easy to see that Marisa was safer with two S.W.A.T. team members in her home. Second, Rick wasn't hard on the eyes and she'd told Joyce so.

Tony Hammond, also easy to look at, made a hooker look innocent. Tony talked about a new woman, every day. Liquorish was what he called them, and Marisa often wondered if it was the taste of the candy or the pronunciation that led Tony to categorize all women as such.

"She's coming back over tonight." Tony rubbed his hands together as the flower shop door opened. "The only flat surface left is the washing machine."

Marisa blushed and turned her attention to the gentleman who'd entered the store. "Good morning, how can I help you today?"

The tall, lanky, gray haired man glanced toward Tony then turned back to Marisa. "I'm looking for Katherine M.

Potts." His voice hinted at curiosity.

Marisa looked at Tony then back to the customer. "Katherine Potts?" Her heart raced. There was no reason anyone in the greater San Diego area would know the name Katherine M. Potts. She'd resigned to use her middle name while in grammar school, and other than a few close friends and the DMV, no one else knew her real name.

Tony rose to his feet and Marisa was sure he'd seen the concern on her face. He moved closer. "And you are?"

The man looked at Tony again. "I'm Kimble Justice with The Globe. I'm hoping to secure an interview with Ms. Potts."

"Interview?" Tony tilted his head slightly in question.

"Yes sir, according to my sources, the owner of this shop, Katherine M. Potts, is the undisclosed witness in the serial killer case."

Tony looked surprised. Marisa, however, stood silent and hoped like hell that she had a good poker face. "Sounds like someone is playing games with you, Mr. Justice."

"It came from a reliable source," Justice adjusted his silver rimmed glasses on his face.

"Well I'm a reliable source, too, and I'm telling you that the only thing you're going to get here is a hard way to go." Tony finally snapped and tapped both palms on the counter. "Now get the hell out of here and if I see a word of this in the papers, I'll be looking for you personally."

"Are you threatening me?" Justice asked as he closed his notebook and stuffed it back into the pocket of his shirt.

Tony stepped around the counter and into Kimble Justice's personal space, "No, I'm absolutely promising you that if I see this in the paper, I'll be on you like green on grass. Is that clear?"

Justice locked his eyes on Tony and after a few seconds, he backed slowly away.

Marisa wasn't sure if she should sigh with relief or run out the door with her arms flailing. Tony walked one step behind the reporter until he was out the door. Abruptly, he turned from the door and snatched his cellular phone from the case like he'd just witnessed a bank robbery.

"McCord, we've got trouble," Tony said, his voice on edge.

Marisa waited a few seconds and Tony spoke again.

"A reporter named Justice was just here. He's from The Globe, and says his sources tell him that the owner of this shop is an undisclosed witness in the serial killer case."

Marisa took a deep breath. Even with Tony ten feet away she'd heard McCord's reply loud and clear. "Damn it!"

Tony looked at her, and he was probably reading the fear on her face like an open book. She wanted some good news, but she assumed the way Tony walked out onto the sidewalk that her life was about to change abruptly again. Tony made his way back inside, his expression sour. "Grab your purse."

Marisa turned toward the stock room. "Why?"

"McCord says we can't take any chances," Tony supplied as he looked cautiously out the front of the store. "Dell is in the area and McCord is calling him to come by to get you out of here."

"What about you?" She asked as her eyes flowed over the clash of his totally masculine figure among the feminine designs of her shop.

He turned his attention toward her. "Don't worry about me, I'll be fine. I'm going to hang around here for the rest of the day and see if any other reporters come by. I'll hook back up with you tomorrow."

"If they print that in the papers I'm a goner." Marisa wrung her hands.

Tony closed the gap between them and laid a comforting hand on her shoulder. "Over my dead body."

~ \* ~

A sudden pounding on the back door made Marisa cringe against Tony's chest. He wrapped his arms around her, gave a gentle squeeze then released her. "It's probably Dell, but stick close to me."

She didn't like the way he kept his hand on his gun when he approached the back door. If Tony thought there was a reason to be nervous then there probably was. Relief washed over her when Dell's voice replied to Tony's demand for the stranger to identify himself.

The look on Dell's face sent a new wave of fear through Marisa's body—like he was trying to smuggle a rock star out of a building without a thousand hyper teenagers

knowing. "Let's roll."

She didn't ask the first question, but rather jumped into the car and watched Dell as he sat back into the driver's seat. The car sped down the alleyway, and made its way into traffic. "I feel like I'm in the middle of a bad dream."

"Well, we're hoping that we've caught it in time. McCord has gone to The Globe now to have a talk with the reporter."

"So, what happens if he isn't the only one who knows?"

"We swap to plan B." He glanced toward her then back to the road. "Don't worry."

"What is plan B?"

He tightened his grip on the steering wheel and nodded his head. "Well, right now there isn't one."

~ \* ~

When Dell's office door swung open, Jonathan McCord entered the room like a warm summer breeze. His chin was solid and his walk was more mechanical than usual. He looked at Marisa and nodded in defeat. "We just keep turning your life upside down, don't we?"

Sorrow swept through her from the look on his face. "As long as I'm alive, I'm good with it."

He shook his head and turned toward her. "At least you have a good attitude about the entire thing."

"I suppose Connie is the source?" She quizzed.

McCord nodded, "He wouldn't confirm that but I'm positive that it was her. The bad news is that it wasn't just one person she told."

Marisa swallowed hard as bolts of dread shot through her body. "What do you mean?"

"Captain called me about ten minutes ago; it was on the noon television news."

"It might have been better to deal with her than to risk getting killed." Marisa fought the feeling of horror that had invaded her senses like the creeping shadows of dusk.

Jonathan rubbed his palm along his chin and shook his head. "If somebody in this police department is going to sexually harass you, it's damn well going to be me."

She felt like someone had lit a torch inches from her. Heat engulfed her body in demanding pulses. "Well, I'm still

waiting."

He grunted. "If you only knew."

"Tell me." She chided, her eyes following the line of buttons of his drab green oxford shirt.

"This case is too important to get my head all screwed up." He admitted honestly. "Where is Dell?"

"He's gone to get a fresh cup of coffee."

Just as quickly as the conversation had started, it ended and something told Marisa that Jonathan McCord was different somehow. Was there something he hadn't told her, and if so, had it anything to do with the call he'd gotten yesterday? She hadn't actually heard a female voice but the look on his face and the words he spoke told her loud and clear that it was a booty call.

"I called Shelton and she's going to your place early." Jonathan explained, "I'll take you home tonight and I'll be staying until we can find a second guard to put on you."

Marisa sighed; even the excitement of having McCord in her home all night, couldn't take her mind off needing a second guard. The man who would be looking for her wasn't a bank robber or even a member of the mafia, but a serial killer with at least five deaths to his credit. Not only had he killed them, he'd tortured them, raped them and defiled their bodies after they were dead. It looked as if Marisa had turned into a real life Clarice.

~ \* ~

"Are you okay?" McCord asked as he drove toward Marisa's apartment.

She looked at him; setting aside that she'd seen a serial killer toss a body, that her life had been stripped away by the police, her store was closed until further notice, and a disgruntled cop had leaked her identity to the press. Sure, everything was fine. Why would he ask such a stupid question? No, she wasn't okay. She hadn't been okay since the night that Ginger Hollister had been killed. "I'm surviving."

"We're doing all we know to do," he stated. "I'm sorry things are so screwed up."

"Don't apologize." She shook her head looking into his hazel eyes, "It's just amazing how one moment in time can change your life forever. I'd just gone somewhere new to run

so it wouldn't be so mundane. I haven't gotten to run since."

He nodded. "I promise your life will soon be back to normal."

She stared blankly out the window watching the utility polls click by like spokes in a bicycle wheel. "Don't let anyone fool you; my life hasn't been normal in years."

Her eyes scanned over him as he drove. There was something about him that made her feel like Rapunzel in the tower. She wanted to touch him again, just to know if he'd touch her, too. Had he gotten laid after the booty call yesterday, and if so, who was the lucky lady?

"Did I pass?" He asked, his voice low as his eyes met hers.

"Pass what?"

"Inspection." He glanced toward her then turned his attention back to the roadway. "You hit me with that summer rain."

She swallowed hard because she didn't have a clue what to say. He hadn't seen her looking, she was certain of that. In the future she would have to remember that he could feel her stare. "You already know the answer to that question."

"Well, that's the odd thing about inspection—it makes you feel weird but in the end you pass or fail. Either way, life goes on."

She blinked in confusion, she wasn't really sure how to take that comment, but it sounded as if her opinion didn't matter. It made her believe he had gotten laid after that call. If that were the truth, then the episode she'd shared with him on her knees had meant little more to him than a good blow. She needed to change the subject, and quickly. "Sometimes I feel sorrier for you than I do myself. It has to be awful to give up your personal life to stand guard over someone."

"Don't feel sorry for me." His voice was confident. "It's my job."

"Will it not cause problems for you and the girl on the phone?"

"What are you talking about?" He snapped his head toward her, with a hard glare.

"The girl on the phone yesterday," she said softly.



"You got the call and disappeared."

"You're talking about things that you know nothing about." His tone was short and to the point.

"Oh, I just thought—" She said only to be cut off as he spoke again.

"There's a lot about me that you don't know." His tone corrected with an audible warning not to make assumptions again.

"I'm sure." She said as embarrassment shot through her body like a cannon. "I'm sorry; it isn't any of my business."

She'd never met a man that gave as many mixed signals as Detective Jonathan McCord. At one point, he was kissing her, like the world was ending. At another he was enjoying her oral talents and had even talked about what it would be like when he finally got his hands on her. Now, suddenly, he'd chastised her in a conversation that had gone dreadfully wrong.

He took a deep breath when he pushed the car into park. He looked toward her, "I'm sorry for being short with you, but this isn't going to work. I'm attracted to you and you know that. Hell, things have happened between us that I can't ever forget, but it has to stop here."

She looked into the dark floorboard rather than to meet his eyes. "Okay."

It was all she could do not to cry like a heartbroken child. She'd had high hopes of the relationship that was to come with Jonathan. Those hopes were dashed. He could have told her that he was in a relationship. He didn't, however.

"Something has happened that makes things different for me." He continued to explain, wrapping his hands back onto the steering wheel and pressing himself back into the seat.

"I understand." She said softly as she pulled the handle on the door and stepped out. Damn him for reeling her in, and making her think that she stood a chance with him. If there was another woman he should have told her from the beginning and it might have saved her heart all this pain. The humiliation surging through her body made her feel like a helpless child, and she'd be damned to ever be

helpless again.

## ***Seven***

"McCord should be back tonight." Joyce said looking across the room toward Marisa.

"That's right I forgot." Marisa said softly. She was happy that she hadn't been faced with a demand to deal with him one on one.

"Yeah right, you might forget the sun is going to rise tomorrow, but you haven't forgotten that he's coming back."

Marisa met Joyce's face with weak eyes. "Is it that obvious?"

"Only a blind man couldn't see it," Joyce shook her head from her position on Marisa's sofa.

"He's like a never ending story." Marisa, sitting in an oversized corner chair, shook her head and pulled a throw pillow into her lap. "Just when I think I have him figured out, something else happens."

Marisa's mind faded away to the last moment she'd seen Jonathan...

~ \* ~

Three weeks had passed since McCord visited with news that made Marisa proud he'd cut his sexual ties with her.

He was wearing a perfectly fit gray T-shirt tucked into a pair of faded jeans when he made his way into her store. His badge was clipped on his belt. His hair was shorter, neatly trimmed into an almost military cut. She tried to resist the desire to stare at him but his hazel eyes lined with sexy black lashes made him irresistible. She suddenly found herself wishing that she could be the body holster that held his gun snugly to his torso.

"How are you today?" He asked, his question simple and to the point as he approached the counter and leaned into it.

"Good. How are you?" Marisa looked at him, but forced her eyes away to an arrangement on the left wall.

"I'm trying to wrap up a few things before I leave. I've given Dell all my case notes, and he's going to be checking in on you, from time to time. He's knee deep in those database searches, comparing DNA profiles, so he won't be around as much as I might be."

Her heart almost stopped; surely he wasn't resigning his position as detective. He'd taken a sudden aggressive, almost resentful, turn against her but she'd never thought he'd back down from the promises he'd made. She snapped her face toward him. "Where are you going?"

"I'm sorry, I thought you knew." He began, then picked up an ink pen from the order book on the counter. "I have drill for the next three weeks."

"Drill?" Confusion flooded her face.

"As much as we've talked, have I failed to tell you that I'm in the Marine Reserves? I go to Twenty Nine Palms for training tomorrow." He scribbled on the order pad and turned his attention briefly up to her as he spoke.

Marisa couldn't believe her ears. This perfect man was in the military. The same, military that shipped Ben to South Korea. It could just as easily ship Jonathan to other exotic locations where the women were as intriguing as they were beautiful. Not that any of that matter, now. She stood silent. She had to look away. She couldn't hold it together long enough to have this conversation.

"What's wrong?" He asked as she made her way to the back of the store and to the flora cooler.

"Oh, nothing." She fought the confusion and reached for a large group of long stem roses. He'd told her there were many things she didn't know about him, and as luck would have it, he was right.

"Are you sure?" He asked changing his position to force her to look into his eyes.

Of course, she couldn't tell him the truth for several reasons, the most important of which was that it was none of her business. Oddly enough, she was consumed by the same

feeling she'd had when she found out that another woman was sharing Ben Weaver's bed. She had craved the moment she would see Ben again when he'd gotten on that C-17 bound for South Korea. He had promised that he'd be back during the week of her birthday. He would take leave, marry her and take her back to Korea with him. That was almost four years ago, and she'd never seen Ben again.

"I'm sure." She confirmed in attempt to shake off the vivid memories that invaded her mind. "I just didn't know you were in the military. It's a shock."

"Does this have anything to do with the way you look at Korea on the globe?"

She instantly turned her face away as the blood rushed to it in a hot surge. Why the hell was he asking, anyway? She was entitled to her privacy the same as he.

"I can't say that I've seen you pass the globe in my office once without touching Korea."

She fought the tears that burned the back of her eyes, but she didn't win. She took a vase of the shelf beside the cooler then turned back toward him. She had to face the truth. She swallowed hard and looked up at the only man who'd ever made her forget Ben Weaver. She nodded—because the words just wouldn't come.

"Tell me, Marisa." He urged, as his eyes met Tony Hammond and he nodded him to leave the room.

"I was engaged to be married in June, four years ago." Marisa turned her attention to Tony as he made his way into the show room, then the front door bell rang. "He deployed to South Korea and I never saw him again."

"He was killed?" He took the vase and roses from her hands and turned toward the table behind him.

She considered telling him a lie. Sometimes she thought it would have hurt less if Ben had died. But he hadn't died, he'd just forgotten her. He'd moved on so quickly that within two months he'd stopped all communication with her. At six months, she'd learned that he was married and expecting a child. "No, he met someone there and got married."

He stood totally shocked. "Oh I see."

"I suppose he did what was best for him." She turned her attention to the roses then glanced up at him. "They say

time heals all wounds. Unfortunately, no one ever told me how long it would take."

~ \* ~

Marisa shook herself for the memories and turned her attention toward Joyce. It was the look, the smile, on Joyce's face that made Marisa question her. "What?"

"When he's back he'll be tired," Joyce supplied. "My husband was in the Army before he joined S.W.A.T. His favorite place was in his recliner with a cold beer."

Marisa furrowed her brow and fidgeted her left hand into a fist on the throw pillow. "And you're telling me this, why?"

"It's useful information," Joyce shrugged with an enthusiasm that confused Marisa. "I thought you should be there to give him the beer."

Marisa shook her head and her finger at Joyce. It seemed that Joyce knew even less about McCord than Marisa did. She began to explain the day that McCord had told her that it couldn't happen. He was adamant that things between them stop.

Marisa studied Joyce as she fought a laugh. How odd. Marisa had taken the time to explain a very depressing situation, and Joyce was laughing.

"What's so funny?" Marisa asked deepening the furrow in her brow.

"Nobody has told you, have they?" Joyce bit her bottom lip and sat forward on the sofa reaching for a glass on the coffee table.

"I guess not. But, I think you better." Marisa had been laughed at enough when Ben Weaver broke her heart; she wasn't willing to be laughed at again.

"The captain overheard a conversation between you and McCord while you were in his office one day." Joyce supplied with excitement. "He threatened to put McCord on patrol if he didn't get his testosterone back in check."

Marisa sat for a moment allowing Joyce's words to soak into her mind, like warm water into a dry sponge. "What are you saying?"

"That McCord is still as hot for you as you are for him."

"But the woman..." Marisa stated. Conversations were distinguishable as between male and female and that one

was.

"That's Sandy." Joyce waved off the thought and returned the glass to the table. "It's precinct knowledge she's been McCord's stress reliever for years."

"Well, that makes me feel stupid."

"Why?" Joyce asked.

"Because something happened with me and McCord," she admitted, tears of humiliation in her eyes.

"What?"

"It's awful." Marisa pressed the pillow against her face to cover the shame. "How could I have been that stupid?"

"What happened?" Joyce quizzed again from the edge of the sofa.

"Let's just say that I was on my knees."

"Oh, my God." Joyce squealed clapping her hands like a giddy teen. "Are you serious?"

Marisa couldn't have kept from smiling if her life had depended on it. "Don't make me smile. Right now, I feel like killing myself."

"When?" Joyce shot to her feet.

"Before, we closed my shop down." Marisa looked reluctantly into Joyce's face.

"Well, McCord's been keeping a secret." Joyce smiled.

"Don't tell him that you know." Marisa begged. "I'd just as soon keep it a secret myself."

"I've known McCord for almost six years—this is the first time I've ever seen him speechless." Joyce clapped slowly with her words.

"Well, I'm personally glad."

"Do you trust me?" Joyce asked, her face far too smug to sooth Marisa.

"With my life." Marisa nodded. "I hope I don't regret that."

"Grab your purse." Joyce motioned. "What the captain doesn't know won't hurt him."

~ \* ~

Where were they headed? The second guard was due at her house at 8:00 and that was only three hours away. Joyce had gone into the hall and had a short conversation with someone but that wasn't uncommon, especially when they discussed the cop stuff they didn't want Marisa to

overhear. "Where are we going?"

Joyce glanced and turned into a short concrete driveway. "This is McCord's house."

Marisa's eyes were the size of silver dollars. What was Joyce up to? She wasn't sure she wanted to be part of it. "Why are we here?"

"He's babysitting." Joyce cut her eyes toward Marisa. "I called him earlier and told him I had a situation with my parents that I had to deal with immediately. He agreed to be your guard until Bob comes on duty at 8:00."

"Oh God, Joyce, you didn't." Marisa said as fear grabbed her by the throat and threatened to snuff her out right there on the spot.

"The rest is up to you." Joyce stated point blank. "Of course my parents are fine. I'm going home to get laid. I think you should do the same."

She was out of her mind. Marisa couldn't just walk in and tell him to drop his pants and give her the old one-two. She wasn't sure she was ready to face him, especially alone; because he always had a short fuse when they were alone.

"Please don't do this, Joyce."

"Come on." Joyce motioned as she opened the door and stepped out of the car without another word.

~ \* ~

Marisa batted her eyes against the totally masculine figure that opened the door. It just wasn't right for a man to be that sexy. It certainly wasn't right to have to stay alone with him for three hours. His blue drawstring sleep pants had footballs on them, and his naked chest was baby smooth. His dog tags dangled between his pectoral muscles. She swallowed hard. If she could just keep her eyes off him for the next three hours everything would be okay. Who was she kidding? She couldn't keep her eyes off him if her life depended on it.

"Come on in." He pulled open the door and walked back toward his recliner. "Make yourself at home, Marisa."

"Thank you." She said softly, wishing she could take her eyes off him. She had to remember that he could feel her stare.

Marisa looked at Joyce with a weary expression. She needed Joyce to understand she didn't think this was a good



idea. Marisa wasn't sure that she could resist the sexy man in the recliner, but, something told her that with the Captain's threat he could easily resist her.

"Have you had dinner?" Jonathan asked.

"See you later guys," Joyce said quickly. "I've got to roll."

"Be careful Joyce," Jonathan waved.

Marisa looked at Joyce with wide, threatening eyes, but she was out the door like a flash.

"Now," Jonathan walked back toward his recliner. "Have you had dinner?"

"Not yet, but Bob will drive through, and let me pick something up on the way home." She glanced toward his long frame stretched the length of the recliner. Her heart pounded like a jackhammer and her core flooded with wetness.

"I ordered Chinese. I hope that works for you." He stared straight at the television.

"Sounds good," she admitted with a soft, steady voice.

She took a seat on the army green sofa and tried desperately to keep her eyes on the television. There were still two hours and fifty five minutes left in her stay and unless she got her hormones in check, she'd be straddling him trying to overpower his strong sexy body.

"How was drill?" She asked fidgeting her left fingernails with her right hand.

He nodded, extended his recliner, crossed his feet and put his hands behind his head. "Just another day in paradise."

He looked so delicious she wasn't sure she could resist him. "So you're probably beat."

He turned his head briefly and glanced toward her then back to the television. "I'm a little tired but it's nothing compared to a few days in the big sandbox."

"Big sandbox?" She looked his way and swallowed hard.

He shifted slightly. "Iraq."

"You've been there?"

"Four times since 2003," he explained with a tone less than hospitable.

He was stressed and it was obvious that she shouldn't

continue to push. His answers were short, and to the point. When Jonathan McCord wanted to talk he wasn't shy. She respected his determination to stay in his captain's good graces. He had his priorities straight and she shouldn't rock the boat.

He looked toward her, but kept silent. She wasn't sure what that meant. Sometimes she thought he was pulling her closer and other times it was like he was shoving her away.

She looked around the room that somehow had no visible personality, but still managed to capture the person that Jonathan McCord actually was. There were no pictures or awards on the wall, like in his office; he obviously didn't have much company that he wanted to impress with his accomplishments. There were no curtains on the windows; he wasn't a shy guy. The carpet was worn between the front door and the recliner; a creature of habit. The main thing that caught her attention however, was the fact that his recliner and the bed she could see at the end of the hall were both fairly new. Obviously, both pieces of furniture were important to him.

~ \* ~

She held her breath as he paid the delivery man and closed the door behind him. If she could have five minutes with him, she'd be willing to pass on the food. That wasn't possible, however, and she had to keep reminding herself.

"You're doing it again." He closed the door and turned toward her.

"Doing what again?" Her heart leapt as a cold sensation exploded in her chest.

"Those eyes of yours." He pointed his finger at her. "I've told you that they feel like summer rain."

She laughed, probably a bit too loudly, but she needed to find a way to cover the embarrassment that was suddenly devouring her. She wanted to make some cute comment about how it might have felt like rain to him but she was the one that was wet. But, the last time it had only taken a few seconds for him to inform her that her opinion really didn't matter. "Sorry about that. As you can tell by my line of work I'm a visual person. I'm inclined to stare; I don't mean a thing by it."

Of course, it wasn't true, at least the part about not

meaning a thing by it, but she had to find some way to cloak the lust as a natural impulse. She'd be damned to let him slam her again over the same thing.

"That's too bad," he grunted as he motioned her toward the kitchen. "I love to play in the rain."

She stopped in her tracks, giving his words deep thought, and her heart pounded like a bass drum. He placed the bag onto the table and moved to the cabinet to retrieve plates. She wasn't sure what he wanted; one minute he was hot and the next he was cold. There was one thing she did know, however, and that was exactly what she wanted, and it was him.

He looked back toward her as she stood there in silence. "What?"

She swallowed hard as he sat two plates onto the table and looked at her again. She walked quickly toward him, closing the distance with a pace that would have told any man why she was headed his way. Her right hand reached firmly up and grabbed the dog tags that hung onto his perfect chest. He submitted to the tug and she crashed her lips onto his in a demand that he kiss her back.

As quickly as she'd touched him, his arms wrapped around her and drew her into him. She rubbed her hands up the back of his neck onto his head and whined as her body throbbed in demand.

"The captain will pull me off the case if he finds out," he murmured as she trailed wet, teasing kisses down his neck.

"He won't find out," she insisted.

"I want you so bad," he said, as he pulled away. "I'm just scared as hell that if I get involved with you I'll screw this case up and get you hurt or worse."

She narrowed her eyes in thought, wondering how in the hell a man could be that strong. She could taste it in his kiss, and see it in his eyes. Most off all, it was visible right there between his legs, in a bulging package that offered the pleasure her body demanded. "I'm not letting you walk away."

"It isn't like I want to." He grabbed the bag and began setting the small boxes onto the table.

There were no words for how mad it made her. It was

worse than losing Ben Weaver to someone she never had the opportunity to fight. It was worse than waking up one day knowing that her parents simply didn't love her. Her hand snatched her shirt over her head in a smooth swift motion. If he wanted to play hardball then he better grab the bat. When it came to tough games she'd played her fair share. She snatched the ponytail holder from her hair with no thought of the hair that came with it. She ran her fingers through her hair and allowed it to flow over her shoulders and down her back. "Then look at me, damn it." She bit as she stomped her way out of her jeans. "Come play in the rain."

She studied the look on his face and she wasn't sure if he was pleased or angry that he'd turned his back for a moment and she'd stripped down to her skivvies right there in his kitchen. The seconds mounted and she stood her ground. "You said, that you couldn't because you didn't want me to get hurt or worse. I'd rather be dead, than know I couldn't have you."

Silence continued to build in the room, and the bulge that had disappeared between his legs suddenly reappeared. His eyes scanned her. She gritted her teeth but never moved her eyes from him. If he was going to turn her down then he was damn well going to have to do it face to face. He couldn't take the chicken's way out like Ben Weaver had.

"The offer isn't good forever." Her words were strong but her voice quivered. "If you let me stand here and make a fool out of myself and you don't take it, then the game's over." She didn't know what she'd do, or how far she'd have to run to escape Jonathan McCord. If he turned her down, however, he would never get the chance again.

Without a word, he walked to her and scooped her up into his arms. He kissed her, deeply this time, heat surged through her body as his tongue explored her. "This is going to be complicated."

"I certainly hope so." She kissed his neck.

In swift strides, he moved to his bedroom and laid her on his bed, then peeled off his sleep pants. She sighed to see him naked and aroused. She slipped out of her panties as his hands worked to free her of her bra. She needed him like a fish needs water, and she didn't care if he knew it.

She enjoyed the feeling of his pounding heart. It was hard to imagine that a woman like her could make a man like Jonathan McCord's heart pound. He lowered his head and smoothed the tip of his tongue up the taut tip of her breast. It puckered painfully in protest as it demanded more attention. He turned his ministrations to the other, repeating the process and bit his lip when the reaction mirrored the last. He kissed her in the valley between her breasts then trailed his wet tongue up to her throat. He blew softly on the wet line and she thought she would jump out of her skin. He was the biggest tease she'd ever met, but she liked it.

"I want you so bad it hurts." She arched into him.

"And you'll have me." He kissed just below her breasts. "Don't rush it; it's been a long time in coming."

She couldn't believe that he was actually using logical reason at a time like this. She was on fire, like her insides were molten lava just waiting to erupt. "Jonathan."

He briefly met her eyes then lowered his mouth back to her nipple. "Hmm?"

"I'm on fire." She moaned as she smoothed her hand down her abdomen and toward her wet core.

He grunted, "Yes, you are."

"It's been far too long since I had a man," she admitted. "I'm tired of dusting my own shelves."

"You don't have to do that anymore," he said with a coarse voice.

She arched into him and liked the way he used his hand to rub the head of his shaft up and down her wetness, taking special care to tease her. He pressed slowly inside, then pulled away. Her eyes fluttered. He pushed slightly deeper and her eyes fluttered again. Finally, he pressed himself deeper, filling her to capacity.

She rolled her eyes and moaned as her body devoured him. Inch by inch the need was fed. His eyes searched hers asking for instructions, not realizing that there was nothing she needed more than him inside her. It didn't matter if her body reeled in orgasm, just that for a few moments in infinite time she was one with him. Her fingers caressed his back and at least once neither she nor Jonathan had a beginning or an end. The heat radiating through them melted their bodies and souls into one existence of pure, hot, liquid

desire.

"You feel so good," he said as he continued to press inside her and kissed her lips.

"If I asked you to go faster, would you?" She asked.

"Until I died of heart failure." He kissed her on the chin. "You tell me what you want and I'll make it happen."

"Faster." She moaned.

Marisa liked his smile and she especially enjoyed the way he took in a sudden breath when she lifted her head and playfully bit his lips. The grunt that rumbled from deep within his throat told her that she was awakening a sleeping monster. That was okay, too.

"Is that it?" he asked. "Is that what you want?"

"Oh, yes." She answered with a desperate voice. "This is exactly what I want."

The incredible sting of friction as he moved quicker excited her core, made it throb for attention. She wasn't sure how he was doing whatever it was that he was doing, but with each stroke he propelled her toward climax. She didn't want it to be over so soon, but the woman in her needed the release as badly as he needed to give it to her.

The glistening wetness on his forehead told her he was working with determination and his goal was set. The way his eyes scanned her face left her battling the smoldering cloud of lust that hovered over them. He was by far the hottest man she'd ever encountered. He wasn't learning, he already knew. He was unleashing sexual powers on her that she never knew existed.

"That's it." He coaxed as her breathing became labored. "Enjoy it."

"Oh, God." She reached for him, for the bed, for the covers, for anything that could help her in her desperate hunt for satisfaction.

When he lifted himself slightly and met her eyes she wondered what he was doing, surely he wasn't about to stop. He never lost his rhythm but leaned and kissed her deeply. "You want it bad, huh?"

"Yes," she begged. "Please Jonathan."

"Look," he said as he gazed between their bodies, into the small space that separated them. "It feels so good to slide into you."

"Oh, God." She sighed, but never moved her eyes from the long shaft that stroked easily in and out of her wetness.

"You're so wet," he said in a husky, passion gripped voice. "So warm."

"Oh, Jonathan." She continued to beg. "Don't stop."

He puckered his lips and released a slow breath. "It would take an act of God to stop me, don't worry. I'm right here, giving you exactly what you want. In and out. In and out."

There was no denying the distant storm brewing within her. With each of his movements the threat grew closer as the sensual feelings rolled through her body like a great thunder approaching from a distance. Second by second it escalated until there was nothing but violent rumbles, strong pulses of lightning and the soaking warmth of the summer rain.

## ***Eight***

When McCord's phone rang he moved lazily toward it, gave a sleepy answer and winked at Marisa as she snuggled closer to him. "What?" His voice shot up an octave, and he sprang from the bed as if it were electrically charged. "Damn it!"

He ran through the house, red boxer briefs in his hand, grabbed the remote control and raised the volume on the television. Marisa followed quickly, pulling Jonathan's T-shirt over her head. "What's wrong?"

*That's right Janet, as the fire rages out of control we are learning that there is much more to this than meets the eye. The police have corded off a large area with crime scene tape. That's not a common occurrence while fire fighters are still battling the blazes. According to the store owners next door, the flower shop closed suddenly a few days ago after an unmarked police car swooped into the alleyway and whisked an unidentified female away. Now, according to my sources, the shop owner, Katherine Potts, may indeed be the lone witness against the serial killer called The Breaker. Of course I can't verify the accuracy of the witnesses' account, but I can tell you that just a few moments ago, Detective Richard Dell of the San Diego PD arrived. It is believed that a second detective is en route at this time. If the assumptions are true, then the next official arriving will be Detective Jonathan McCord also of the San Diego PD.*

*Janet, the two senior detectives each lead a different squad, and have only worked together on one case, and that is indeed the highest profile case in San Diego right now. The arrival of Detective McCord will answer a lot of questions*



*tonight. "*

"Oh my God, that's my shop." Marisa cried. "He burned my shop."

"It's okay, baby." McCord pulled her into his arms, "We need to get dressed. I've got to get down there."

"He knows who I am." She looked suddenly up into his face in terror.

He raised his hands onto her cheeks as she stood with her arms locked around his waist. "You've got to trust me."

"I do." Tears streamed down her face. "It's just scary to think that he knows who I am."

"Don't worry." He moved his face toward hers. "You're mine and he can't have you."

His lips touched hers with a soft description of how he felt and for the first time, maybe in her life, she knew what it was like to be completely safe.

"Now," he said as he spun her around, and slapped her on the butt. "Get dressed. I've got to get down there. I'll call Hammond and tell him to meet us at your apartment. You can stay with him and Bob until I'm finished."

She ran down the hall as quickly as she'd advanced up it only minutes before. Her stomach dropped. Her flower shop was gone, the one Ida had designed with her own hands. A treasured memento, she could never get back.

~ \* ~

As Jonathan reached for the door handle, his cellular phone rang, again. Joyce Shelton's confident voice said, "We're on our way to pick up Marisa. Give us three minutes, we'll take her home with us until you and Dell can come up with another plan."

"We?"

"Rick is with me," Joyce answered without hesitation. "I called Bob earlier and told him we might not be back to Marisa's tonight."

Jonathan glanced at Marisa but this wasn't a time to start quizzing her. He certainly would like to know, however, how Joyce ended up with Rick if she'd had an emergency with her parents. He could always hope that it had been a plan between the two women to each have a night of hot steamy fun. "Joyce and Rick are almost here to get you."

"Okay," she said softly as her hands trembled.

"I'll be over just as soon as I finish at the scene," he promised. "Don't be scared—those two could fight off an army platoon. You'll be fine."

She nodded. "Things are getting really serious now, aren't they?"

"I'm afraid so." He leaned in and kissed her. "But don't worry, he'll never get through three guards."

"Three?" Her pulse raced, it had been hell living with two guards. "I'm getting another guard?"

He cut his eyes toward her. "He's a part time guard."

"Part time?"

"Yeah, he's part time guard and part time pillow."

Her eyes were wide with surprise. "Really?"

"Yep, if the bastard wants you he's going to have to make it past two armed guards. Then he'll have to deal with me."

Car lights shone through the living room window and Jonathan looked out. "That's Shelton."

It was strange the difference three hours could make because suddenly McCord found himself walking hand in hand with his star witness. He was kissing her goodbye, and didn't care who saw. Earlier he'd been adamant that no one find out. He shook his head then shook hands with Rick Shelton. "I'll give you a call later. If it's okay with you, I told her I'd be by to stay with her tonight?"

"Sure, man." Rick slapped Jonathan on the shoulder. "Anytime, you know that."

The smile on Joyce's face answered any questions Jonathan had about whether he'd been set up for a hot night. He shook his finger at her then winked. "Thanks."

~ \* ~

McCord took a deep breath and stepped from his car. He locked his eyes on Dell and advanced toward him. He knew his presence confirmed they suspected The Breaker had started the fire. It also confirmed, even if he didn't want to admit it, that Marisa was the unidentified witness.

"Well, have you found out anything?" Jonathan asked, glancing toward the burning shop and the firemen struggling to keep the neighboring shops safe.

"It was definitely him," Dell explained as he met McCord's eyes. "Let me show you something."

McCord followed Dell to his car and stood behind the door as Dell bent inside. He took the plastic zipper bag Dell offered and gritted his teeth at the contents. "Where did you get this?"

"It was taped to the sidewalk in front of the store," Dell informed. "One of the firemen retrieved it before the heat destroyed it."

"She's with Rick and Joyce," McCord explained as he looked down at the snapshot of Marisa in the plastic bag. "How in the hell did he get close enough to take a picture?"

Dell shook his head. "Look at the back."

McCord flipped the bag and his temper shot into overload. He dared the sick bastard to try to make Marisa "#8" as was written on the back of the picture. "Is somebody taking pictures of the crowd? He's probably watching."

"Yep." Dell answered. "I have a guy here who is posing as a news photographer. What I don't understand is why he put number eight on her, when he's only killed five?"

"Either there are two that we don't know about, or the asshole is playing some kind of sick game," McCord snapped, turning to scowl at the crowd that could be hiding the serial killer.

"Did you say that Rick is with Marisa and Joyce?" Dell quizzed, "What happened to Bob?"

Jonathan stared at the fire and bit his bottom lip. Marisa's shop was burning right before his eyes and he wanted to smile at the question. He turned his attention toward Richard Dell. "Well, Bob went home."

"He quit?"

"No." Jonathan shook his head and stuck his right hand into his pocket and rubbed his left hand over his mouth and chin, fighting the smile that won its way onto his face. "She was with me, so Bob went home."

Dell scribbled onto his note pad then snapped his face toward McCord. "You mean?"

McCord nodded in confirmation. "Yep, there's no turning back now."

Dell shook his head in disbelief. "You just couldn't listen could you? It can't end well when you think with your dick."

~ \* ~

If Marisa hadn't known she was in love with Jonathan, she certainly did when he walked through the door of the extra bedroom she occupied at the Shelton house. His clothes were damp with sweat from being so close to the burning flower shop. His jaw was clinched in anger, his walk was confident, but his eyes smiled at her. "I've been watching on television."

"I'm sorry about your shop." He tugged his police T-shirt over his head, then reached for the snap on his jeans.

"Don't be." She shook her head and reached for him. "I wouldn't trade where I'm at now, even if I had the chance to change where I ran the day Ginger's body was dumped."

"Do you really mean that?" he asked as he lifted the covers and crawled into the bed with her. "You wouldn't change it even if you could? Those are strong words."

"If I hadn't witnessed him dumping that body I wouldn't have met you," she said as tears streamed down her face. "I don't need my old life back as long as I've got you."

"Well, snuggle in, baby," He kissed her on the forehead. "You're stuck with me now."

It was as obvious as the nose on her face that something was bothering him, and part of her wanted to ask, but the other part of her demanded that she not. She already knew too much, and knowing too much could get a girl killed.

He looked toward her, his eyes meeting hers and studying her. She swallowed hard. Whatever he was about to say had everything to do with her. "What?"

He cleared his throat, and fear leapt through her body. "He left something on the sidewalk naming you as number eight."

She fought the terror that swept through her and set her mouth in a tight line. She didn't want him to think she didn't trust him to keep her safe. That wasn't it. It was just a cold, sick feeling that anyone would have when they learned they'd been put on a serial killer's hit list. "What did he leave?"

He cleared his throat again. "It was a snapshot of you. On the back it has number eight written on it."

"A snapshot?" She asked. "You mean he's been close

enough to take pictures of me?"

"It seems that way," Jonathan admitted. "But that's not going to happen again. Tomorrow you go into a safe house and I dare the bastard to try it."

"A safe house?"

"Not my house, not yours. A location that isn't associated with you in any way."

She sighed. Another facet of her life was gone, and other than the breath in her lungs there was little more that The Breaker could take away.

## ***Nine***

McCord had known it was only a matter of time until the captain found out about his relationship with Marisa. It wasn't as if he was trying to keep it a secret, it was just that it had been the most of two weeks since Marisa had been able to visit the station. It had probably been when McCord had taken Bob off the night shift guard position and put him on during days with Tony that drew the attention.

The captain started asking questions when he'd specifically signed off on a request for four guards, and suddenly there were only three. He'd figured out that McCord was the fourth guard and it had escalated into a threat. The threat had fallen on deaf ears, however, or at least it had the same affect. McCord shot back a quick reply that the captain could take him off the case but he couldn't keep him out of Marisa's bed. It was true and the captain knew it.

There were only two things on McCord's mind; catching the serial killer and keeping Marisa safe. Everything else fell to the back burner. He just didn't feel right letting Marisa return to her apartment. If the killer was smart enough to get a picture of her and brazen enough to tape that picture to a San Diego sidewalk then burn a business, he certainly wouldn't think twice about her apartment. He'd discussed the situation with Dell and they'd agreed that Marisa needed to be at a safe house. Dell took the request to the captain. The process went smoothly for the District Attorney's Office to approve the request for a one bedroom suite at a local hotel.

~ \* ~

"I can't go home at all?" She whined.

McCord closed his eyes to the sound of her pouting voice. "I'm sorry, baby, but we just can't take the chance."

"How long?"

"Until we catch him," McCord answered with a simple, honest shrug.

She drew in a long, steady breath and released it just as slowly. If it had been anyone but Jonathan she might have kicked him in the crotch. She bit the corner of her jaw; she couldn't do that to Jonathan, for obvious reasons. "So, where will I be staying now?"

"Dell is getting you a room now," He said. "Tony is going to meet us at your apartment building so that you can gather up anything you might need."

She nodded, but that was easier said, than done. She had no way to know if she'd be dislocated a week or a year. "Okay."

He wrapped his arm around her as he walked her from Joyce Shelton's house and to his car. "We also need to talk about your shop. The DA is working on getting an allocation for your personal expenses. We can't expect you to just stop paying your bills while we chase a killer."

She took a deep breath. She hadn't wanted to tell him about her money this early in the game. She'd heard too many horror stories about people being used for their money, mainly from Kevin the billionaire. She wanted her relationship with Jonathan to be based on his feelings for her, not her wealth. "Okay then, there is something I need to talk to you about."

"Okay, what's that?" He asked as he opened the door for her, kissed her, then closed it behind her and made his way to the driver's door.

"I haven't told you about this because I didn't feel like it had anything to do with the case," she supplied.

He looked toward her and she could tell he hoped she wasn't keeping secrets about the case. He needed to be the judge of what was and was not case related. "What's that?"

She searched for the right words because she certainly didn't want to change his opinion of her in the process of telling him about her inherited wealth. "I won't need any money."

His eyes asked the question that he couldn't find the

words to ask.

Marisa explained how she had inherited Ida Lowry's wealth. It was quite a healthy sum of money, resorts and real estate. Ida's parents, David and Angela Talbot, were both born of money. Her father was the son of old Boston money and her mother was the daughter of a couple who owned several hunting resorts in the Alaskan frontier. Ida's parents had met when the Boston millionaires had gone on an Alaskan hunting vacation. The two had moved to San Diego at Angela's request to escape the cold of Alaska. Ida was later born, an only child. Of course, Ida had been the sole heir when the Alaskan resorts were handed down. As an added bonus, Ida also inherited a chunk of real estate and a large hotel near Disney Land, which had been a project of her parents. Ida had met her husband Jerry while he was in San Diego for a meeting. He'd continued to work on the railroad regardless of his wife's wealth and had retired only a few years before his death. Jerry and Ida had moved to Memphis, Jerry's hometown, to be near his parents who were in failing health. Ida and Jerry had remained in Memphis after his parents' death and Jerry died only a few years later. Having no children or grandchildren, Ida opened a flower shop to occupy her time. In the process, she'd met a young Marisa, struggling to make it through college. Quickly, Ida had taken to mothering the young woman and before Marisa knew it, she was in the will.

"So let me get this straight." McCord furrowed his brow with confusion. "You're a millionaire?"

It sounded funny to call herself a millionaire, when she'd been wealthy less than a year. She was used to living from check to check with Aunt Clara. She'd learned, while still with her parents, that hunger wasn't a guarantee food would always be on the table. "As strange as it sounds, yes, I am."

"Holy shit." The confusion on his face was washed away by disbelief. "Tell me about the hotels and the real estate."

She swallowed and hoped this wasn't the start of a disaster. She'd hoped he wouldn't care. "Well, I've only seen pictures of the resorts in Alaska, but I have driven down to see the hotel and real estate near Disney Land."



His eyes were the size of silver dollars. "Disney Land? You own property near Disney Land? And a hotel?"

She wasn't sure what to make of his reaction, but she forced a smile. "Well, the money goes into my account but Ida's business manager is the man with the plan."

He stopped at a red light and turned toward her. "Not to offend you, but I would have never guessed you were wealthy."

His words jolted through her and forced her to laugh. "No offense taken. I grew up dirt poor and I have no plans to let money change the person I am."

~ \* ~

McCord's mind was still reeling with shock. He couldn't believe that sweet, little Marisa had more money than most movie stars. He also hoped like hell that Tony Hammond didn't find out. Tony was almost as money hungry as he was woman hungry. The problem was that Tony had the looks to back up his attempts. He'd known Tony for more than ten years and it was no surprise that the man had never been damned to a night alone. Women were always willing to warm Tony's bed, and being the sport he was, Tony was always willing to let them do just that.

McCord met Marisa at the front of the car and wrapped her hand securely in his own. He couldn't help it that she was wealthy; the part of him that needed her so badly would have gladly accepted her no matter what.

"Good morning, Tony," Marisa said, giving the sexy blond a wide smile.

"Back at you, beautiful," Tony replied. "I hear that you and I are going to get a little hotel time."

McCord cleared his throat. "You heard wrong, Bob will be there, too."

Tony shot an innocent look toward Jonathan. "Oh hell, McCord, Marisa knows I'm harmless. Excluding the fact that I'd kiss every inch of her body, and lick all the wet spots, I wouldn't dream of touching her."

Marisa giggled. McCord didn't like it. "I suggest you keep your lips and your tongue to yourself. You may be former Secret Service, but I won't hesitate to kick your ass."

Tony's brows shot up and he turned his attention to Marisa. "Girl, you must have rubbed the good stuff all over

him," he said with a grin.

"Oh, Tony." Marisa waved him off and turned, making her way to the apartment building door. "You nut."

Tony stretched his hand toward McCord. "I'm just joking, boss. Marisa is the only woman I know who answers my questions honestly no matter what I ask. I respect her opinion and I certainly wouldn't take advantage of that."

McCord wasn't so sure, he remembered two years ago when Tony Hammond was the reason that Sergeant Hollins and his wife had gotten a divorce. Mrs. Hollins had packed her bags and left the Sergeant after a short affair with Tony. Of course, Tony wasn't looking for a long term relationship and he certainly wasn't looking for a wife. Sergeant Hollins had been fired when he leveled a threat at Tony. Sometimes McCord thought it would've been a service to the men of the world had Hollins carried out his plan.

McCord nodded. "Okay, that's fair enough. But I want to be sure that you understand, if you even approach that line with her, that I'll be so far up your ass you'll see me when you smile. Do I make myself clear?"

Tony looked toward Marisa who was standing just inside the glass complex doors, then he returned his attention to McCord. "To be honest with you, McCord, she's not quite my type. But I'm a grown man and I won't be talked to like I'm a pimple faced kid."

"Do I make myself clear?" McCord repeated.

Tony moved a step closer. "If you walk in one day and she has a freshly fucked look on her face, blame yourself."

"If you think I'm kidding, Hammond, you'll find out the hard way I'm not," McCord rumbled.

"And if you think I can't screw her, you'll learn the hard way." Tony smirked. "You opened the box, Pandora. Deal with it."

McCord gritted his teeth and folded his fist, but the sweet sound of Marisa's voice, as she walked back out to rush them, caught his attention. "We're coming."

Tony Hammond proceeded into the apartment complex without another word. McCord nodded his head because Tony wasn't playing fair. If he'd threatened to kick McCord's ass the fight would have been on. McCord might not have graduated top of his class at Secret Service

training, but he'd been in the top five percent in his Marine Corps hand to hand combat training. The lady's man, however, had issued the ultimate threat by promising to bring his sex appeal into the mix and that pissed McCord to no end. He could easily take Tony off the case, but Hammond was more qualified to guard Marisa than any two other choices combined. He'd been trained by the CIA and he'd guarded the President, but that didn't make it any less tempting to snatch him up and make the guy a lot less sexy.

~ \* ~

When they'd arrived back at the hotel, Marisa could tell that McCord just wasn't ready to leave her in the care of Tony and Bob. She crooked a finger toward him calling him to the bedroom. "I don't know what happened with you and Tony, but he's never so much as winked at me."

"It's just a guy thing." McCord snagged a strand of her long blonde hair, tugging her to him where he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her into his chest.

Marisa snuggled her face into his chest. "You looked like two dogs growling at one another over a bone."

McCord tilted back his head and faked a laugh. "We were just making sure that we understood each other. No harm, no foul."

"Okay, if that's what you say, I believe you," she stated, but it was far from true. There was something very wrong with the conversation she'd witnessed, and only time would tell what.

"You would tell me if he made an advance toward you, right?"

She nodded but she wasn't so sure it would be a good idea to do that. Of course, it hadn't ever happened and wasn't likely to. Tony was harmless enough that anything he said she could easily overlook.

"Would you tell me?" He asked again as he pressed her back and looked into her eyes. "Promise me that you'd tell me."

"What's with you, all of a sudden?" Her face burned from the sudden fear that she was in the middle of a male pissing contest. "What was said to make you think something was going on with me and Tony?"

"Nothing," he shook his head, then brushed his palm

down her cheek. "I don't think anything is going on. I just want your word that you'll tell me if he ever makes a move on you."

"Okay, I'll tell you. But you don't have to worry, it won't happen."

McCord gave her a slow, unsure nod. "Just in case, I want to know. Hammond is a good cop, but he's been involved in too many broken homes for my taste."

~ \* ~

It was two days later when she noticed the smooth, almost delicious, change in Tony. The look in his eyes was pure lust and something told Marisa that it had everything to do with what had happened with McCord.

"So, how was your night?" Marisa asked. The look on his face told her he'd gotten about as lucky last night as a man ever had.

"I had weird dreams." Tony gave his head a slow nod as he took a seat on, the standard two person, hotel sofa.

"About what?" Marisa glanced toward him as she made her way into the kitchenette.

"I better not say," Tony replied in a soft voice as he turned his attention to the remote control on the table.

"Are you okay?" Marisa quizzed, moving back toward him.

"Yeah." He pursed his lips and scratched his chin. "I just can't shake the images from my head."

"Was it a bad dream?" She asked, taking a seat on the arm of the sofa.

"Not quite." He sat forward and propped his elbows on his knees. "If you must know, it was about you."

Her face burned. "Me?"

He looked toward the bathroom door, as if reassuring himself that Bob was still indisposed. "Yes, you. Don't act so innocent. A woman that looks like you could probably hurt a man."

She waved him off and turned her attention to the television. "You're so full of crap. I thought you were serious."

"Oh, I'm dead serious. You were getting undressed to take a shower and caught me watching."

She went still, and part of her wondered if this was

really a dream or if it was happening because of the argument with Jonathan. "That's weird," she said simply.

"Not as weird as the way you pulled me down into the bathroom floor and rode me like a kid on her birthday pony."

She felt it in her bones, she needed to walk away. She took heed and rose to her feet.

"Marisa." He surrounded her wrist with the soft grip of his large hand. "I'm sorry I shouldn't have told you that."

"It's okay, Tony. I know that you didn't mean anything by it." Marisa reassured and recaptured her seat on the sofa arm. "Are you thirsty?"

He gave a slow confirming nod, never taking his eyes off the television. "Whatever you're having."

She handed a cool bottle of water his way a few seconds later and took a seat beside him when he shifted to one side of the sofa.

She tilted her bottle of water up, enjoying the coolness as it washed through her mouth. He reached for her opposite hand, and she looked down, keeping the water bottle pressed to her lips. He looked toward her, and she lowered the bottle wondering what in the hell was going on. He moved closer and nothing could have prepared her for the moment when he snatched her into his arms and kissed her.

She struggled away, dropping the bottle onto the sofa. He pulled her back. "Don't fight it."

"Stop it, Tony!" she snapped and struggled against him. "Now, I'm all wet."

Tony tilted back his head and chuckled. He pulled her back into his arms and pressed his lips against hers in an assault that might have melted a glacier. His tongue danced against her lips, then within her mouth as she attempted to speak.

She pushed away, struggling against him to get to her feet. "I don't know what happened between you and Jonathan, but don't drag me in the middle of it."

The bathroom door opened, and Bob had seen just enough; that things looked really bad. There she was in Tony's arms, at least until he'd suddenly released her like she was a hot potato.

She sprang to her feet, straightened her clothes and glanced toward Bob. Her expression told him that it wasn't

what he'd thought.

"Are you okay?" Bob's eyes trailed from Marisa down to Tony then back.

"I'm okay." She moved off toward the bedroom. "I think I'll take a nap."

~ \* ~

When Jonathan walked in the door, Marisa had two choices and she wasn't fond of either. There was a keen possibility that Bob had already spilled the beans and her silence would leave her to deal with the consequences of not keeping her word.

"Where's my girl?" He asked Joyce, who'd just arrived for second watch, as she took a seat on the sofa and flipped on the television.

"Same place she always disappears to when it's time for you." Joyce smirked and shot a pleased glance his way.

The bedroom door opened and her eyes met his. She wasn't ready for what was about to happen. She didn't think that Tony Hammond would be ready, either.

"Hey, baby," he said, his eyes filtering over her.

"Hey." She got onto her knees and crawled toward the foot of the bed. "How was your day?"

He stopped in his tracks, squinted slightly. "What's wrong?"

She wanted to laugh because it was amazing how easy it was for him to tell when something was amiss with her. She took a deep breath. "There's something I need to talk to you about."

"What's that?" he asked, and took a seat on the bed.

She puckered her lips and wrapped her arms around him, deepening the kiss that he offered. She didn't like knowing that Tony Hammond was the last man to kiss her.

He pressed her away as the kiss softened. "Wow that was a heck of a welcome kiss." He squinted toward her. "What did you do?"

"It's about Tony," she said, wincing and waiting for the verbal storm about to hit.

His face changed as anger swept through him like a typhoon through warm water. "He touched you," his voice stated more than questioned.

She hesitated. "I don't know what the two of you

talked about the other day but something was said that shouldn't have been."

"Answer me," he said, his voice as hard as stone. "Did he touch you?"

She nodded. "He kissed me."

"Whoa, wait." Jonathan jumped to his feet and waved his hand toward her. "Did you just say that he kissed you?"

She nodded in confirmation as her heart thudded wildly out of control.

"Son-of-a-bitch!" he snapped. "I told myself that he wasn't that stupid."

"What are you talking about?" Marisa quizzed, still poised on her knees near the edge of the bed.

"He told me he'd screw you just to prove that he could."

She'd never seen him angrier. A vein pulsed in his neck as he gritted his teeth and growled deep in his chest.

"Well, he had far too much confidence in himself." She said with surprise. "I'm looking at the only man I want."

"I'll be back." McCord spun on his heels and moved toward the door. "I've got some business to take care of."

"Jonathan, please don't," she begged.

He stormed out the door without as much as a goodbye. He had one thing on his mind, kicking Tony Hammond's ass.

~ \* ~

McCord popped the door of the squad room open with a bang as he stormed his way inside. He scanned the room for the bastard. But was this his fault? Marisa seemed adamant in stating that Tony had never even winked at her. It didn't matter, however, because Tony was wrong for touching Marisa, especially with his lips.

"I believe you're looking for me." Tony rose to his feet from the back of the room.

"Damn straight," McCord growled. "When you're on guard duty, you're not there to put the moves on the witness."

"But it's okay for you?"

McCord bolted toward him, only to be intercepted by a group of police officers. "Take it outside, McCord."

"Let him go," Hammond snipped. "He thinks he wants

it, let him have it."

When the cops stepped aside, McCord's left fist landed on Hammond's jaw so fast that he had no time to prepare and staggered backward from the jolt. McCord snarled when Hammond all but splattered onto the desk behind him. "Stay away from her."

Hammond lunged forward, shouldering McCord square in the chest. As the two pounded each other in something that looked as much like a choreographed dance as a brawl, they paid little attention to McCord's ringing cellular phone.

Moments later, the station phone began to ring and someone answered only to learn that the fire alarm had been activated at the hotel.

"We're on our way!" A policeman jumped to his feet. "The fire alarm just went off at Marisa Potts' hotel."

McCord and Hammond snapped to attention and bolted out the door as if they were attached at the hip. "My car!" McCord yelled.

The two sprinted down the steps and across the parking lot without another cross word. If the battle wasn't satisfied, then they'd have to resume it later. Marisa was in danger and they had to act fast.

"Gun it!" Tony said as he slammed the door behind him, and they sped away down the street.

"What in the hell am I doing?" McCord pounded the steering wheel. "Dell warned me that I was thinking with my dick."

Tony watched the road intently as Jonathan sped around the street corners, seemingly slicing the edges off the buildings. "Just get us there, man. It's as much my fault as yours. Hell, we were both trying to prove a point."

"Call Joyce's cell phone," McCord yelled over the screaming siren.

Hammond pressed his left fingertips against the roof to steady him. His right fingers fumbled with the numbers on his phone keypad. He pushed the phone to his ear and waited.

Jonathan glanced toward him, then back to the roadway. "Well?"

"Damn it." Tony slapped the phone against his thigh. "Somebody must have jammed her signal."



Jonathan jumped the curb and plowed the car through the grass to the front door of the hotel. Jumping out, they rushed into the building amidst the hordes of people making their escape. Jonathan dialed Joyce's number as they made a quick sprint up the emergency stairs.

"Shit, it still isn't working!" He struggled through the steady stream of people making their way down the stairs.

"San Diego PD!" Tony Hammond yelled up the staircase. "Move to your right. We're coming through."

The two pushed through the crowd and onto the fourth floor, then bolted down the hall. Jonathan's heart sank when he saw the door standing open on his approach. They split up inside the room, checking each room with the precision of a trained S.W.A.T team.

Through the hall they ran once again, each struggling against an overwhelming need to breath, and a stronger desire to find Marisa and Joyce alive. Jonathan's brutal voice shouted orders as he and Hammond made their way back down the crowded stairs, double time.

"I'll go this way," Tony said as he broke right at the ground level and into the crowd that filed toward the door.

McCord broke left, screaming Marisa's name, not giving a damn who saw the desperation of the San Diego Detective. He ran out the back exit, scanning the area with the mechanical speed of a droid.

His eyes locked on Joyce Shelton standing in front of the entry step of a fire engine, gun in hand. McCord sighed with relief when his eyes found Marisa sitting on the step behind Shelton. She was scared, and crying. He ran toward her, and Joyce Shelton stepped to the left when she saw him, but never lowered her guard.

His feet pounded the pavement, his body starving for oxygen. He couldn't stop until she was safe in his arms.

"Jonathan!" Marisa called as she sprang to her feet.

Joyce Shelton's palm signaled her stop.

"Don't move," Jonathan shouted as he closed the distance, fast.

Her face broke in fear. He ached to touch her, to make her feel safe.

"It's okay, baby," he shouted when he slowed his pace and opened his arms.

She jumped into his arms and wrapped her legs around his waist. He might have laughed if he wasn't scared half to death. He needed to get her to safety but he couldn't stop kissing her tears away long enough to move.

"Can you walk?" He asked, his breath labored from the diligent search.

She nodded and slid down him like a fire pole. "Is the building on fire?"

"I don't think so." Jonathan pulled his gun from its holster. "But we're going to get you out of here."

"He wants me dead, he doesn't care how many people die in the process," she said as tears streamed down her face.

"What he wants isn't always what he gets," Jonathan snorted.

Tony Hammond skidded to a stop near them. "Damn, I'm happy to see you."

"I'm okay, now," Marisa admitted, still clinging to Jonathan's chest.

"I'll bring the car around," Tony said breathlessly.

Joyce Shelton stood at steady attention, gun firmly gripped in her hands. She turned her attention toward Jonathan then back to the crowd. "He's here, I know it."

McCord's eyes scanned the crowd. "What do you mean, you know it?"

"Somebody knocked on the door three times," Joyce said. "They never identified themselves. Within twenty minutes this happened."

Jonathan watched as Tony inched the unmarked car through the crowd, and stepped out, gun in hand. They surveyed the area. Anything could happen once Marisa wasn't against the safety of the fire truck. He motioned toward them and opened the back door.

Jonathan nudged Marisa and they scampered toward the car and into the backseat where he forced her head into his lap. Joyce Shelton rode shotgun as Tony drove the car away.

## ***Ten***

McCord had special plans and he couldn't hide his giddiness despite the way his tough exterior seemed to forbid it. He wanted to get Marisa out of the one bedroom suite down at the hotel. He was tired of being there, too, and he was only there during the night hours. Marisa, on the other hand, was there twenty four hours a day. In fact, she hadn't left since the night they'd checked her in almost two weeks ago. McCord figured that she was going stir crazy; no one in their right mind could stay cooped up for that long and not lose control at some point. She'd been a fantastic sport about the entire thing, but something told him that she might not be so forgiving if she wasn't getting some very special attention from the lead detective on the case.

She'd closed down her flower shop at their request. She'd later lost it in the fire. It hadn't been a problem when he'd told her that it wasn't safe for her to stay in her apartment anymore. She'd been rushed out of the first hotel during a false fire alarm, they suspected was triggered by The Breaker. Her car had been on the impound lot for months, and she hadn't spent a waking hour alone since this whole ridiculous ordeal had started. She certainly was a special woman. She was special in many ways, one of which was lighting a fire in him that burned hot for hours.

~ \* ~

McCord looked out the front window to the cruiser parked in front of the house. Another was in the yard behind the house. He didn't want to take any chances with Marisa's safety, but he certainly thought she deserved a night somewhere other than that room.

Of course, Marisa had been happy to get the opportunity to spend the night at his house, for more than one reason, and a smile tugged at the corners of his mouth every time he thought of it.

"Come here," Marisa's voice called down the hall.

He entered the room and tilted his head slightly in question. "Yes ma'am?"

She patted the bed beside her, "You've been working hard. You deserve a massage."

His brows shot up. "You can't be serious."

"Lay down," she ordered. "And lose the shirt."

He happily complied with her demands, lifting his shirt over his head. He moaned in sheer pleasure as her hands coaxed his muscles into submission. He growled when she began kissing the back of his neck. He stretched his arms, bracing himself to roll toward her. "Careful, little girl, that you don't start something you can't finish," he said, propping his hands behind his head.

"I wouldn't dream of it. In fact, I'm about to finish it now."

He rolled his eyes when she kissed his pectoral muscles, traveling upward to his neck. He liked the moan that escaped her when the stubble on his face rubbed against the tender skin on her cheek. She teased his ear, nudging him to join in her game and he moaned, happy to be of service.

"Make love to me, Jonathan."

The low rumble that escaped him sounded like the motor-like purr of a cat. "My pleasure."

Slowly, she tugged her shirt over her head, then loosed her bra. Every time he looked at her, she was more beautiful. Her sensuality amazed him. When she slipped her jeans from her hips with a little wiggle, every manly urge within him was activated. His hand reached toward her, touching her trim waist. "You're perfect."

"Hardly," she puffed as he wrapped his hand around her waist and pulled her toward him.

He slid her panties off her hips toward the floor. He kissed her belly just because he couldn't resist, then he laid her on the bed. He yanked his police sweat pants from his waist and threw them onto the floor, then peeled down his

boxers. "I've thought about this all day," he said as he jumped onto the bed and teased his shaft inside her.

"Was it worth the wait?" She bit her lip, pressing her hands over his short hair.

"Absolutely," he said with a grunt as he stroked deeper.

"Do you have any idea how hot you are when you get that look on your face?" she asked.

"What look?"

"*That* look." She leaned and kissed his chest.

"You feel so good." He met her lips with his.

"I want to watch you," she admitted. "I love the look on your face when you finally get there."

He grunted; sometimes it seemed that she could bring him to orgasm with just her words. "So you're going to make me?"

She kissed her index finger and pressed it against his lips before she placed her hand against his chest, and he gladly complied and rolled onto his back. He moaned when she playfully bit his nipple and worked herself around, until she was able to straddle him, and slide down onto his shaft with little effort.

"Damn it," he grunted. "You look incredible."

"But do I feel incredible?" She teased. "Do I make you throb?"

He couldn't believe there was a woman like her. One that would stroke herself onto his shaft with the soft smoothness that left him begging for more. She was the one that relentlessly teased him, pushing him toward climax. "You feel incredible, too."

She looked down as she worked herself onto him, then licked her lips. He grunted and wrapped his hands around her waist and helped her with her rhythm. "That's it." She clinched her teeth through open lips.

He couldn't help the ever quickening thrust of his hips as he worked himself into her as she worked onto him. The moans that escaped her assaulted his senses to the point that there was little he could but submit to her demand. "Hold still."

She sucked in a deep breath between her clinched teeth. "Do it, Jonathan."

"Let go, baby," he murmured.

"Oh yeah."

"That's it, baby," he growled as he pumped himself up into her.

The vision of his shaft disappearing inside her was almost too much to comprehend. The sounds coming from her as she drew closer to her climax sent him reeling into orgasm.

"Oh God, that's it." She clinched her teeth, again, sucking each breath through open lips. "Come on, Jonathan, come on sweetie."

Her senses, mind and body reeled into orgasm and she could do little more than curl into a ball against his chest as he continued to stroke inside her.

"Are you finished?" he asked rubbing his hand along her shoulder.

She nodded as she took a sudden gasp of air. "My God, that was amazing."

"I'll say." He grunted as he watched her remove herself from him and snuggle into the bed beside him and then he kissed her softly. "Man, it's awesome to look at the other side of the bed and find you there."

"I'm pleased you think so." She kissed his arm.

The phone rang as they lay tangled with each other, enjoying the satisfaction that they had shared moments earlier.

"Do you always get phone calls, in the middle of the night?"

"No, I don't," he answered, accepting the cordless phone that she handed him.

"Well, if it's Sandy with a booty call tell her that you have all the booty you can handle."

He looked shocked. "How do you know about that?"

Her brows shot up. "Just answer the phone but be sure the bitch knows, I'll scratch her eyes out."

He smoothed his tongue over the roof of his mouth with a confident smack. "You have nothing to worry about, I'm finished with that." Then, to the phone, "Yeah?"

The voice on the other end wasn't Sandy. "Damn, that was hot. I bet that you haven't been fucked like that in a long time."

The look on McCord's face swept to anger. "What?"

"I'm actually looking forward to getting a little of that myself. If I'd seen this before I gave her a number she would definitely be number six."

Jonathan reached for the sheet and stretched it up and over Marisa. "Here's some news for you asshole, if you come within fifty feet of her, I'll kill you myself."

"Then you better get to killing," the voice rumbled as the line went dead.

"Get dressed!" McCord ordered as he snatched on his sleep pants, and grabbed his gun. He ran up the hall and out the front door without a single thought for his safety.

"What's wrong?" her voice echoed through the empty house.

McCord scanned the police cruisers parked on either side of his home. The men exited the vehicles and moved toward him. There had been no movement, no sounds, at least until Detective McCord ran out the door like he was being chased by a bear. "The bastard was here."

The officers reassured him, but no man could have known the things he knew if he hadn't been there. McCord had felt the look of satisfaction on the bastard's face. He'd seen red the moment he'd learned that someone had actually watched as the passion of their relationship unfolded.

He looked at the cordless phone, he still held in his hand, it was ringing again. It would've been too easy if there had been an identification number on the small screen. He wasn't that fortunate, however.

"Yeah?"

"Those time limits to trace calls are a bitch, you know it?" The caller asked.

"What the hell is your point?" McCord growled.

"It was just a statement," he taunted. "Somebody will screw up, they'll walk away or turn their back and she'll be mine. Like right now, who the hell is watching the witness if you're outside?"

McCord scrambled, waving his hand toward the front door and one of the uniforms bolted in that direction.

"Tell him not to run, she's already outside."

"You think this a game, don't you?" McCord said as his

attention turned to a small figure that advanced slowly, cautiously around the house. His heart pounded. He'd be damned to let the Breaker have this one. She was his.

"You're playing, aren't you?"

"Well, if you feel the need to break a neck tonight, give mine a try. Oh wait, you're too big a pussy to try to take on a man, aren't you?"

"We'll see," the voice replied a split second before the phone went dead.

McCord scanned the area, there were lots of hiding places in his subdivision, but before this was over The Breaker would figure out that even Hell wouldn't have a hiding place for him.

"You should be inside," he said softly as she continued to advance toward him.

"Out here I'm not alone," she pointed out in a whisper.

He held up his arm to her, and she walked into the safety of him as he wrapped it around her and pulled her close. "I hope you enjoyed it. Something tells me that before this is over you're going to be tired of me."

"How so?" she asked tilting her face toward his.

"From this moment forward, I'm your shadow."



## ***Eleven***

It had been two long years since Marisa had been to visit Aunt Clara in Memphis. So when the phone call came telling Marisa that her aunt had passed away, regret consumed her. So many times she could have visited, but she had let a fear of her past, of Ben Weaver, keep her away from her only family.

Marisa was thankful to have Jonathan to turn to, even more thankful that he'd be right beside her when she faced her past. She wasn't sure she could face that place without him; she'd barely escaped with her sanity the last time she'd visited. It was as if she was consumed, by feelings of failure the instant her feet hit the Memphis pavement. She was faced with constant reminders that Ben had once been hers, and the same cruel proof that he no longer was.

"So is that everything?" Jonathan asked as he looped the strap of their travel bags over his shoulder.

She gave a sad nod. "That's it."

He wrapped his arm around her and gave her a gentle squeeze. "We'll get through it, together."

She smiled and knew he meant it. Jonathan was nothing like Ben. When Jonathan McCord made a promise, you could take it to the bank. When Ben had made promises, they'd bounced.

~ \* ~

Jonathan looked down at his ringing cellular phone and rolled his eyes. "I forgot to tell Dell where the key to my locker is. He might need the evidence case."

Marisa pulled her fingers down his arm. "Let's hope not."

"Yeah, man, what's up?" Then, "Tell me you're not serious." He glanced at Marisa. His expression had told her that someone had discovered number six.

He was in a terrible situation. He couldn't leave Marisa, and he certainly couldn't act as if San Diego's serial killer hadn't struck again. He hung up the phone and met her eyes. "I'm sorry, baby, but we're going to have to catch another flight."

"Jonathan, Aunt Clara is dead. I'm the only person to make arrangements. I have to go home."

He drew in a long, steady breath and released it slowly. He understood her situation, and, considering that Clara was the closest thing Marisa had to a mother, he figured he was fighting a losing battle. He gave it a bit more thought and surmised that he had no choice but abandon the investigation and hope that Dell didn't miss anything.

She turned away. "Go. I'll be fine. If he's been on a killing spree, he has no clue I'm at the airport."

"I'm not leaving you. Nobody knows how long that body has been there."

"You can call ahead to Memphis and have a guard meet me at the airport," she suggested. "Will that not work?"

He took a second deep breath. "Damn it. I don't like this one little bit."

She blinked back tears. "Well, you have to catch him because he's already numbered me as eight and he's rapidly approaching that digit."

"I have an idea," he said as he looked over his shoulder at a young man wearing military fatigues near the large windows. "Wait right here."

~ \* ~

He walked toward the young man, there was just something about a Marine that set him apart from other military personnel, and this guy had the look. Thank God, for the booming Marine Corps base located not far out of town. He moved closer, recognizing the small cammie variations that identified him as a U.S. Marine. "Hello there, Marine. I'm Detective Jonathan McCord with the San Diego P.D., but more importantly, I'm a Staff Sergeant with the reserves." He pulled out his wallet and handed the young man his military ID.

"It's nice to meet you sergeant," the man answered. "I'm Corporal David Conely."

"I'm in a bad situation Corporal, I need to ask a brother for some help."

"Ask away." David rose to his feet.

It was moments like this that Jonathan was thankful for the Marine mentality, the one that made them all brothers regardless if they'd laid eyes on each other or not. The bond already existed, and the young man looking at him was as trustworthy as someone he'd hand selected.

"I've just been called in on an emergency at work. I'm traveling with a very important high profile case witness to Memphis for a funeral. Would you consider taking my seat and seeing to it that she makes it there okay?"

"It would be my pleasure." David confirmed with a nod. "What's her name?"

As quickly as that, he'd found a suitable substitute to stand in on the flight. He'd made the introductions, and told David that Marisa's life was valuable for many reasons, one of which was that she was his girl.

The minutes clicked off and the protective part of McCord forced him to stay until the plane boarded. He'd had Marisa and the Marine wait beside him until last call, allowing Marisa to see everyone boarding the plane. He didn't want to find out too late that he'd put her on a plane with the killer.

"I'll have a guard waiting for you at your gate." Then, to the Corporal, he said, "Thank you very much, Corporal Conely, this will not be forgotten."

"Simper Fi, sergeant, don't worry about her—it's my watch."

~ \* ~

Marisa waved goodbye to David Conely, as she sat down into the deputy's cruiser. It was nice of him to help her. In fact, she'd felt almost as safe with him as she would have felt with Jonathan. Almost.

She hadn't been shocked when the deputy explained they didn't have adequate numbers of officers on duty to do guard detail, but he would see to it that her area was patrolled regularly. Jonathan wouldn't be happy once he found out, but it was a little too late to try and change it now.

Thanking the deputy, she stepped from the car and made her way toward the home she'd known since she was ten. The place looked great, she'd made sure that Clara was cared for, and the crew had repaired the tattered old house back to its original luster. Aunt Clara had loved flowers and Marisa was pleased that the landscaper she'd hired had turned the side yard into the beautiful color filled garden she'd ordered.

For a brief, moment she thought she could hear Aunt Clara as she sang gospel hymns from the porch swing. She smiled at the size of the weeping willow that towered over the house; she remembered the day they planted that tree.

The steps leading up to the porch was where she sat the first time Ben had kissed her, many years ago. The porch was where he'd said his goodbye before leaving for basic training. Memories were ripping her apart and she'd yet to unlock the front door.

Inside, the smell of cinnamon potpourri filled the air, it was Aunt Clara's favorite smell. Ben had always joked that Clara's house was the only one in the county that smelled like apple pie every day. The soft glow of the sun through the eggshell color country curtains reminded Marisa of sunny spring afternoons when she, Ben and Clara would play card games for hours.

She walked toward her bedroom, and smiled to see the Strawberry Shortcake curtains still hanging on the windows. Clara had bought those curtains when she barely had the money to put food on the table. That had been the reason Marisa had suffered through her teenage years with those curtains. She took a deep breath as she gazed on the bed where she'd lost her virginity. Ben Weaver had said all the right things, and now she wondered how much more special it could have been, if she'd waited for someone who truly loved her. Of course, Aunt Clara was gone to town when the deed had happened, and Marisa had always wondered if Clara knew what happened. There was just something about Clara, a sixth sense that told her things she shouldn't have known.

It had been Clara's proverbial third eye that had predicted Marisa's broken arm in the fifth grade. It had been that same sense that caused Clara to drive almost two

hundred miles to Marisa's parents and ask them to give Marisa to her. There had been no food on the table for almost three days, it was summer break, and Marisa had eaten the last pickles from the jar several hours before Clara's arrival. Of course, Paul and Rhoda Potts hadn't cared about anything but their next high. They'd been flower children from the sixties and hadn't outgrown the need for drugs, alcohol, sex and folk music. Rumor had it that they'd both disappeared that afternoon, chasing the distant dream of another Woodstock. That had been fourteen years ago and Marisa had never seen or heard from her parents again.

She reached into her purse and pulled out her ringing phone. "Hello, handsome."

Jonathan's voice was full of worry. "Hey baby, did you make it okay?"

"It was great," she answered, reminiscing at the pictures on the wall near the door. "David even walked me to the deputy's car."

"What's the deputy's name?" Jonathan asked. "Let me talk to him. There are a few things I need to make him aware of."

"Well," Marisa stalled, "he brought me here, but he left. He said that they don't have enough people to do guard detail."

She cringed and waited for his reply.

"He said what?" Jonathan snapped, "Are you alone?"

"Yes." She sighed. "But don't worry, there's an excellent alarm system on this house and I know hiding places here that it would take someone a week to find."

"That's not the point," he scolded. "Are the doors locked?"

"I just walked in." She laughed. "I haven't even set my purse down yet."

"Well, lock the door and I'll call you back in about five minutes."

~ \* ~

The gentle rap on the door told Marisa that someone from the Sheriff's Department had arrived. She wondered what Jonathan had said in that five minute phone call. She made her way to the door and placed her finger on the alarm panic button just in case. "Who is it?"

"It's me, Mari," an all too familiar voice called.

Only one person ever called her by that name. Ben Weaver. Her heart sank, her knees went weak and it felt like every drop of blood in her body had made a frantic rush to her face. "Ben?"

"Yes, it's me," he said in a voice that sent chills of familiar ecstasy through her body.

She slowly opened the door, not sure if she was ready to see his blue eyes. It had been over four years, but he hadn't changed that much. His eyes were still, electric blue, and his hair was still jet black. The combination, of the two, was a lethal concoction that he liked to serve up to her, regularly. He wasn't twenty one anymore, but his body was just as perfect as it had been the day he graduated basic training with honors.

"How are you?" He asked, out of sorts, pushing his hands into his jeans pockets.

"Pretty good, how are you?" She asked in return as she battled a bipolar urge within herself. One part of her wanted to slap him silly and scream at him for the pain he'd put her through. The other part of her wanted to run to him and get lost in his arms. Thank God the thought of Jonathan McCord kept her firmly grounded.

"I'm okay. I'm stationed at Ft. Campbell now."

"Time flies," she said honestly. "I thought you had another year in Korea."

He swallowed hard, readjusted his hands deep in his pockets and exhaled. "I left Korea in the first year. I came back for you, but I missed you by four months. By the time I got my senses back and asked for new orders you were already gone," he explained as he walked inside the door and closed it behind him.

Her eyes searched him. Her heart pounded. No matter how much she tried to fight it, he would always be her first love. He was the man she planned a future with. A future, that until recently, she still dreamed of.

"Not now, Ben," she said silver tear drops welling in her eyes.

"Clara was mad as hell at me. She refused to tell me where you were. She said I didn't deserve another chance. Did she ever tell you that I was back?" He removed his

hands from his pockets, standing several feet away.

"She never told me." Mixed emotions rushed through her body. Would things be different if Clara had told her? Would she be Ben's wife, living in Kentucky?

"She gave me hell." He nodded with a weak smile. "I visited her every couple of months. She would chew me out for the first hour, but by the end of the visit she'd always cook dinner for me."

"She was it." Marisa crossed her arms over her chest. "Aunt Clara was all I had."

Ben stepped closer and pulled her into his arms. She struggled against his touch. "Stop it, Ben."

"It's okay, let it out. I'm not here to turn your life upside down. I'm here because I wanted to apologize to you and pay my respects to Clara."

"How did you know, I'd be here?"

He looked at her with disbelief. "Hello? Aunt Clara passed away. Where else would you be?"

She gave her head a slow nod. "I guess, you have a point."

He squeezed her tighter. "Besides, the funeral director told me that you'd arrive this morning to finalize the arrangements."

Marisa snuggled into the arms and chest she knew so well, and sought the refuge that she knew was waiting.

"Why did you do it?" She asked as she reached deep inside her fearless soul and found the ability to pull away from his cheating, lying arms.

"I know that I hurt you, Mari, but I wasn't prepared for what I found in Korea," he explained.

Marisa shook her head as he continued to explain that the women threw themselves at him. She didn't care how the rest of the world acted, she'd only cared about him. "You didn't have the decency to call me."

"I know, I was ashamed. I wanted you and I wanted them, too."

"Them?" She quizzed, her eyes wide. She'd heard he was now married with a child.

He dropped his head in something she thought was shame then, nodded. "It was endless, like fish in a barrel. I've never had so many women want me."

"Yes, you have," she bit, "You were the biggest jock, all the way through school. You had more girls wanting you than had Rob Lowe's picture on their walls."

"I have no excuse, that's why I'm here to apologize."

"It doesn't matter anymore." She turned away.

"I only have a couple of days. Don't shut me out," he begged.

"Shut you out?" She spun toward him. "You cannot be serious. You left me here wearing your ring, with a promise you'd be back in four months. Four months, Ben, not four years!"

"I'm sorry."

"There's someone new now," she shot out.

He stuffed his hands into his pockets. "Are you married?"

She shook her head and swallowed hard against the despair choking her. She'd never loved anyone as much as she loved Ben, at least until she met Jonathan. She was confused by the mix of feelings that consumed her and blinded her to the world.

"For two years I prayed for you to come back," she cried. "You never did."

"But I did. I didn't know where you were. Do you know how many Marisa Potts there are in this country?"

"Oh God, Ben, why now?"

"This was my only chance. I knew that I'd never find you with Clara gone." Another knock on the door caught her attention. "Excuse me."

She pulled the door open to find a young strapping deputy on the porch. "Hello."

"Ms. Potts, I assume?"

"Yes."

"I'm Deputy Skinner, I wanted to let you know that I'll be outside if you need me."

"Thank you." She pressed her lips together with a nod, then closed door behind her.

Ben furrowed his brow. "What the heck was that about?"

She took a deep breath and began explaining the saga her life had turned into. It sounded surreal to describe a woman sought by a serial killer, and that woman was her.



She'd explained that he'd killed his sixth victim minutes before she left San Diego and that was the reason she was here alone, and the deputy outside the door.

"You're telling me that you're dating the detective, and the dumbass let you come here alone?"

"I wasn't alone." She creased her brow and propped her hands on her hips. "A Marine escorted me safely to Memphis."

"A Marine? What kind of idiot would have a Marine escort his girl to another city? I wouldn't ask a Marine to take my dog to piss."

Marisa swallowed hard, fighting the desire to tell him to go jump off a cliff. "My boyfriend happens to be a Marine."

"I thought he was a detective."

"He is." Marisa gave her head a quick nod. "He's in the reserves."

"Well I'll be happy to tell the hothead that I'm not letting you out of my sight." Ben crossed his arms over his chest.

~ \* ~

It was a relief to learn that Clara had made her own arrangements. The only task Marisa faced was to provide the dress for the burial. She dreaded seeing her for the first time; it was an empty feeling to know she had no family left. In a way she was thankful Ben was there. It was as if he was giving her back a part of the life she'd lost.

She couldn't deny the feelings that consumed her as she watched Ben walking up the sidewalk leading the way toward Clara's front door. He'd been a very important part of her past, but not anymore. Perhaps there would always be a part of her that would love Ben Weaver, but there was no denying she was head over heels in love with Jonathan McCord.

Her eyes searched him as if she were drinking from a cool fountain on a hot summer day. She had wanted to see him suffer. To make him hurt like he'd hurt her.

He moved toward her with confident steps. He wrapped her quickly into his embrace, kissing her with a demand that should have left her wanting more. It did not. She felt a victory burning deep inside her. Finally she'd won the battle that would release her from the bonds of Ben

Weaver.

She took a seat on the sofa, and he sat down beside her. She just wanted to go to bed and forget about this awful day. If she could manage to get tomorrow behind her, then she could return to San Diego. To Jonathan.

"Well, I think I'll head off to bed." She said after a few moments of silence.

"Don't go." Ben's voice begged.

"I can't just sit here." She rubbed her palms on her thighs. "Things are different now."

He lifted his arm and wrapped it onto the back of the sofa. "So it means nothing that I came back looking for you, but Clara wouldn't tell me where you were?"

She drew in a deep breath and turned her attention toward him. "Look Ben, I'm sorry that Aunt Clara decided to keep your return a secret, but that's in the past now. I've moved on."

He looked down at the travel bag sitting near his feet. He leaned forward and snagged the pink lace that he saw there. "So I guess this is as close as I'm going to get to your panties, huh?"

She shot her glance toward him and reached for the panties hanging on his finger. "Give me those. You have no right!"

He snatched them away and stuffed them into his shirt pocket with a coy grin. "I'm kidding. I understand that you've got a lot on you right now. I'm not here to add to it. I didn't expect you to just welcome me back in your bed."

"Exactly what do you expect?" She rose to her feet and looked down at him.

"My first mission is for you to accept my apology. I'll have to get back to you on the plan after that."

She reached down and picked up the travel bag. "I can accept the apology, Ben, but don't be crazy enough to think it can be like it used to be."

## ***Twelve***

The crowd mingled in the last minutes before Clara's memorial was to start. She'd wanted an evening service for the simple fact that she wanted to be put to rest at bedtime. Marisa was honoring that wish.

"How are you holding up, baby?" Jonathan's voice asked from behind her as she milled around admiring Aunt Clara's flowers.

Marisa turned toward him. She needed his strong arms more than she ever had. "Jonathan, I'm so glad to see you."

He wrapped his arms around her. "I couldn't let you go it alone."

"I'm glad." She kissed him on the cheek. "Ben's here."

"How's that going?" He asked, then took her hand and nudged her toward the pews, as the ushers urged everyone to take their seats.

"Awkward, but it went as well as could be expected." She hesitated a moment before saying, "In fact there's something I want you to know."

"Oh boy, should I be worried?" His eyes searched hers, his brows peaked with worry.

"No." She said as they took a seat and she snuggled into him. "He was at the house when the deputy came back yesterday. When he found out about the case, he refused to leave. He actually spent the night in the house with me last night."

His expression was neither jealous nor anxious, but she suspected his emotions were somewhere between the two. "I'll ask one more time. Should I be worried?"

"No worries." She reached for his hand. "I told him about you."

"So is it safe to assume that he knows you're off limits?"

"That's a very safe assumption."

~ \* ~

As Marisa and Jonathan made their way out of the church, Ben was waiting. Marisa didn't have a clue what to do or say. She'd lost Aunt Clara, just suffered through her memorial service, and was hoping for a peaceful night alone with Jonathan.

Marisa's grip tightened within Jonathan's hand; she really wasn't looking forward to this moment. Jonathan looked briefly toward her, and his eyes instantly began searching for the object of her stress.

"You must be Jonathan." Ben said as he approached with an outstretched hand.

Jonathan nodded. "And you must be Ben."

Marisa swallowed hard. She couldn't have felt any more out of sorts if she'd been naked at a Sunday morning Baptist preaching. She'd never dreamed that the two of them would meet. Heck, she had assumed that she'd never see Ben again.

"I'm glad you showed up," Ben said. "I couldn't figure out why you let her come without a guard. Under the circumstances, I figured she'd have a constant shadow."

"Well, as I understand she had more than one guard." Jonathan raised his brows. "She told me you insisted on staying with her last night. Thanks, man, I appreciate that."

"No problem." Ben smiled. "I was happy to do it."

~ \* ~

A soft gentle breeze rustled the loblolly pines as Jonathan took in the beautiful sight of deer grazing by the light of the moon across from Aunt Clara's house. The smell of lilac drifted around from the side of the house. Crickets and bullfrogs sang their lonesome love songs. For a moment, Jonathan would have sworn that he was caught in a time long ago, when the important things were brining in the crops and listening to a beagle run a rabbit on Sunday afternoon.

"Are you okay?" Marisa asked.

"This place is wonderful. The air is fresh and the stars are bright. Do you know how long it has been since I saw stars this bright? The bullfrogs are singing and I'm with the most beautiful woman in the world."

"Well, first off, those aren't bullfrogs, they're Katydid. And second, the fresh air has obviously confused you if you think I'm the most beautiful woman in the world." She tugged his hand and pulled him toward the house.

"I hope the Army boy isn't under the impression that he'll be staying here tonight."

"I figured you'd want him to guard the porch since you relieved the deputy of his duty," Marisa teased.

He pulled her into his arms. "It keeps me busy protecting you from one man. I certainly don't need to add him to the equation."

"I was teasing. I understand."

"I'm just trying to figure out if you're trying to keep from making me mad, or if I actually got here before he made his move." He gave her a quick kiss.

She reached up and traced her index finger around his ear. "You're jealous?"

"Of course I'm jealous, " he admitted with a nod. "Every man is jealous—some just can't admit it. I'm also realistic and I know that you were engaged to him. And I certainly know that if he hasn't already made his move, that it's well on the way."

"To put your mind at ease," she stepped back and slid her palms down his chest. "He hinted, but he failed."

Anger swept through him like a wildfire on a hot summer breeze. He was glad, however, that she'd told him. The last thing he wanted, was to learn that she was keeping secrets, especially about someone she still had unresolved feelings for. "Good. That's one of my pet peeves, women who forget to tell the truth," he said, seconds before his lips met hers in warm a soft kiss.

~ \* ~

She unlocked the front door and keyed a code into the alarm. She told him to make himself at home while she prepared drinks in the kitchen. He was talking as he milled around the room looking at the pictures on the walls. She'd thought nothing of the silence that filled the house.

"Which bedroom is yours?" He broke the silence, his voice on edge.

She glanced toward him. "The door to your left."

"Where did he sleep last night?"

She wiped her hands on a towel and hung it over the back of a kitchen chair. "He slept on the couch. Why?"

"Well, maybe I should ask where in the hell you slept last night?" He demanded.

She turned toward him as she licked a piece of pecan pie from her finger. Nothing could have prepared her for what she saw. He was standing there with her panties hanging off the end of his finger. She stood shocked, wondering how she could have been so careless. She looked guilty as hell. Her only choice was to tell him the truth, but considering that he was holding her panties, he wouldn't believe it.

"Answer me, damn it!" he growled. "I want you to tell me, that you let me look that bastard in the face and shake his hand after he slept with you last night."

She shook her head. "That didn't happen. You have to believe me, Jonathan, we didn't have sex. It wasn't like that."

"Bad answer," he said as he threw the panties in her face. "I guess I should have knocked the damn smile off his face like I wanted to."

"Jonathan, he kissed me but it stopped there. I stopped it. I told him about you."

"Exactly how does a guy kiss you and you're damn panties end up in his bed?" he snapped.

"Look at me, Jonathan," she demanded. "For the first time in my life someone was more important to me than him. Once in my life I loved him, but now, I only love one man and that's you."

"Do you always get naked with other guys when you're in love? Maybe now I'm beginning to understand why he left your ass."

Her heart ached, even though she knew he was angry, it didn't make his words sting less. "I didn't get naked. I'm trying to tell you that it didn't happen."

"Save your breath."

She propped her hands onto her hips. "My travel bag

was beside the sofa. I'd opened it to get something out, he snagged my panties from the bag."

"Oh hell," he growled. "A four year old could come up with a better lie than that."

Her face burned. "It's not a lie. I could have stayed and wrestled him for them, which is what he wanted. I didn't figure that's what you'd want, however."

"Where is his wife?" He laughed without mirth. "Did he leave her, too? Damn, the guy sounds like a winner."

"He never got married." She moved back into his line of sight. "But I'm not worried about that."

"Well, how convenient, I guess I'm the only person who got screwed in the deal. Well, other than you, of course."

She took a slow deep breath and fought the tears twisting up her throat. "It didn't happen."

Silence engulfed the house as he snatched the phone book from the antique telephone bench and began thumbing through the yellow pages. He pulled his cell phone from his pocket and dialed a number. She waited, she had no other choice. Tears slid down her face to have to tell him the address for a cab. He was the best thing that had ever happened to her, and she'd lost him over a pair of pink panties.

Without a word, he snatched the front door open then slammed it behind him as he exited. She watched as he paced outside. His actions were a mirror of his angry soul. He was livid, consumed with a rage that left her almost as terrified as she'd been in the eyes of the serial killer. She took a deep breath and walked outside; she had to make him believe her. "Jonathan."

The look that he snapped toward her was as predatory as a mountain lion protecting a kill. "Go back in the house and leave me the hell alone."

"And let you walk away, believing something that isn't true?"

"Save it," he growled.

"But I'm trying to explain."

He closed the distance between them so quickly that her heart skipped and her breath caught. "You listen to me, and you listen damn close. Bitches like you are a dime a

dozen. I don't need an explanation. I'm stuck dealing with you until my case is solved, that's as far as it goes. I don't need the bullshit."

"So when I get home I have no protection?" she asked as tears slid down her face.

"You catch on quick," he snapped.

"How am I supposed to keep him from killing me? Especially after one of *your* cops leaked my identity to the press?" she bit back. Her life depended on it.

"I'm sure Dell will make arrangements for you." He glanced sharply toward her. "I'm sure you can find someone to keep you safe until then."

Fear swept through her like the frigid winds of the arctic. There was no one in her life, she'd suddenly lost everything. She'd trusted the San Diego PD to keep her safe; instead one of them had released her name to the press. Her shop had burned, the serial killer knew her identity and suddenly the one man who'd become her world hated her more than anyone or anything should ever be hated. She nodded at him, as tears continued to slide down her face. She began walking away and noticed the cab turn the corner.

"I already know I'm number eight. You just remember this, Detective McCord, you may think that I let you down, but you're wrong. What's going to happen when you realize, too late, that you're the one who let *me* down?"

The look he shot her way told her that if he had the choice at the moment he'd rather see her dead than alive. She turned away, there was nothing else to say or do. She had two choices. She could go back to San Diego and get it over with or she could wait in Memphis for the killer to find out where she was. She figured that staying in Memphis would add a few months to her life at most. She had the money to hire guards, or start over somewhere else, but what would be the point? Everything worth living for just left in the cab.

~ \* ~

He watched her walk away and something inside told him she was telling the truth. He wanted to believe her; he needed to believe her. She was the first woman he'd ever loved to a point that he would submit his life to the devil himself to save her. She was the one who made his heart



smile. The lump in his throat was choking him and he swallowed hard against it. What would he do if something happened to her? What if that damned serial killer made payment on his threats? What would happen to his world if he had to look down into her ashen, cold face, the way he'd looked into six others?

He swapped his ticket for an earlier flight and considered calling the sheriff to ask him to send a deputy. He wasn't responsible for her; they were only supplying security to strengthen their case. She was a grown woman and she'd crossed a line that she shouldn't have even gotten near. "Damn it," he growled as he waited to board his plane.

The minutes passed at a snail's pace and he finally reached for his cellular phone. He dialed Dell's number and waited for an answer.

"Hey, man." Dell's voice was a thankful break in the stress. "How are things in the south?"

"It's a damn nightmare." McCord rubbed his hand over his head and walked toward the glass wall, looking out over the planes. "I need for you to do something for me."

"Anything, man, you know that."

"Call Marisa and see if she's okay," he said.

"Okay? What's going on?" Dell answered, his tone moving from boisterous to concerned.

"Being totally honest, now that I've had time to think about it, I'm sure I just made a damn fool of myself." He continued. "Just make sure she's okay. Find out when her flight gets back into Diego and have someone waiting for her at the airport."

"What the hell is going on McCord? Who's with her now?" Dell asked point blank, anger obvious in his voice.

"Nobody. I guess it wouldn't hurt to call the local sheriff's office again." McCord explained as he paced the floor. "I'll tell you about it later."

"No need," Dell growled. "You broke the rules; you got involved with a witness. Now you're thinking with your dick instead of your head."

"I don't need this right now," McCord snapped in return, then quickly looked around to see how much attention he'd drawn.

"When she came to the police she didn't come looking

for somebody to screw her. She wasn't looking for a dick; she needed someone to help her. Why in the hell aren't you helping her?"

"Just please do what I asked," McCord begged into the phone. "Please do it." He closed the phone with an aggressive snap. He took a seat on one of the uncomfortable airport chairs and pressed his elbows onto his knees. His eyes kept returning to the cellular phone that he held in his hand as his head hung down in shame. He rose to board the plane. If they'd waited ten more minutes to start boarding he didn't think he could have stayed there. He would have been back in a cab headed to Clara's house.

Settling into his seat, he shoved his overnight bag under the seat in front of him. He relaxed his head onto the seat and hoped like hell that he didn't regret leaving Memphis. He needed time to sort through his thoughts, to figure out for himself if he loved her enough that it simply didn't matter what had happened with Ben Weaver. He needed to know if he was worthy of a woman like Marisa. Women like her weren't a dime a dozen. He'd only met one woman of her caliber in his lifetime and he'd been an idiot to leave her alone in a secluded country house while a serial killer threatened to kill her.

## ***Thirteen***

Marisa wondered what would happen to Aunt Clara's house when she was gone. There was no family to leave it to. Part of her thought that Ben Weaver should have it, if he wanted it. She'd lost enough because of him, though, and she certainly wasn't going to call him to ask his opinion. She would have her lawyers take care of it. Then, she had the task of everything else. She needed to get her affairs in order just in case the killer made good on his threat. It had been her decision not to answer Dell's questions when he'd called. It wasn't that she didn't appreciate his attempt; it was just that she honestly didn't have anything else to say to the San Diego PD. She'd made the decision to go to her apartment long enough to grab her important papers and get back to the airport. She'd made a last minute decision to head to Alaska. It would give her a chance to see her resorts and time to figure out what she'd do with her life. She could donate her car and the things left in her apartment to a charity that could sell them and help the needy. Once she left San Diego this time, she'd never go back.

As she made her way down the sidewalk to wait for her cab, Ben Weaver turned the corner. She took a deep breath; the last thing, she needed was to see him.

"I figured you'd leave today," he said as he pulled into the drive.

"I've got to get back and deal with the insurance company on my shop. There are a million things to do." She didn't need him to know the truth.

His eyes flowed toward the door then back to her. "Where's Jonathan?"

"He had to leave early."

Ben nodded a frown marring his clear features. "He left you alone?"

She tried to hide her despair. "He'll be waiting for me at the airport in San Diego."

"You've got to be shittin' me." He furrowed his brow. "He left you alone, again?"

She took a deep breath; she'd have to tell him the truth to get rid of him. "He found my panties on the sofa."

Ben sat silent for a few seconds. "And he thinks that we..."

She nodded in confirmation. "It proved to be a bit more than he could handle."

"But nothing happened. That was of your choice, of course. I was more than willing. But at any rate, it didn't happen."

She puffed out her lower lip and released a breath that sent her blonde bangs flying. "He didn't believe it. Being totally honest, with the evidence, I suppose I wouldn't have believed it, either."

"So, who's meeting you at the airport in San Diego?"

"His partner called," she said, choosing her words carefully so as not to lie. "He said he'd be happy to have a guard there if I'd give him my flight time."

"Well, get in and I'll take you to the airport. I feel sorry for the guy. It's hell for a man to live with himself when he does you wrong."

"In his heart he isn't wrong. Just like you did what you thought you had to do."

"That's why it's so hard." He glanced her way then pushed the truck into park. "Even then, I knew you were making excuses for me. You have the most forgiving heart I've ever seen."

"Thank you," She whispered.

"I can look at you and tell that you're in love with him. I sure would be honored if you had place for another friend in your life."

She smiled as tears streamed down her face. "There's always room for a friend."

"Get in." He stepped from the truck and walked toward the cab that pulled into the drive behind him.

She sighed as she watched him pay the cabbie for his time. Why hadn't she found Ben a few months ago when her heart was still free to love? That was a question she couldn't answer, however, and she had to play the hand that was dealt to her.

~ \* ~

Jonathan McCord felt like his best friend had died, and he couldn't help wondering if it was because he'd left Marisa alone to face The Breaker. He didn't understand the feelings he was having, he'd never felt anything like it before. It was as foreign to him as it would have been to ride a unicycle on a high wire. He knocked briefly, then made his way into Dell's office. He needed to find out how Marisa had been when he talked to her.

"You're just in time," Dell said with a wary expression. "I'm about to unpack the evidence and give it a once over."

McCord removed the jacket, he'd worn in his meeting with the captain, and hung it over the chair back. "Let's do it. We've got to put this bastard away, Dell."

McCord turned his attention to a bulletin board containing pictures of The Breaker's victims. His eyes scanned the victims; they were all young and beautiful. They each had a long life ahead of them, until some mad man came along, and snuffed it out for a thrill. With each victim the killer had escalated. He'd gotten braver and braver to the point that victim number six had been missing almost five days. The medical examiner told him that the poor girl had suffered terribly through them all. The sick bastard had repeatedly raped her. He'd burned her with cigarettes, pierced her skin to watch her bleed and other disgusting things that he didn't want to think of. Of course, the killer had done it all as the girl suffered from hunger and thirst.

"I talked to Marisa," Dell said nonchalantly.

McCord snapped his head toward him. "How is she?"

Dell bit back a smile and shuffled through a stack of papers. "Stubborn."

McCord wanted to smile but he couldn't bring himself to do so. "Why do you say that?"

"She refused a guard," He said. "She says that she's not coming back to San Diego."

"Is she staying in Memphis?" McCord's heart sank, and

his knees were momentarily weak.

"She didn't say," Dell said with a sad expression. "I believe that her words were that she planned to start over, from scratch."

McCord took a deep breath. "I said too much, Dell."

"Marisa is smart." Dell nodded. "Something tells me that she can disappear and he'll never find her. I sure as hell hope she can."

"She shouldn't have to, damn it," McCord roared as he took a seat and pounded his fist onto the chair arm.

"Well, it's too late for that," Dell bit back. "I'm not sure what you said to her, but she's damn determined to do it her way, now."

McCord swallowed against bitter tears climbing up his throat. He took a slow deep breath, released it and looked at the pictures on the board again. "I told her that she was on her own."

Dell shot to his feet. "You told her what?"

McCord looked at him. "You don't know what happened."

"I don't give a damn what happened," Dell protested. "She could've screwed another man on the table while you were trying to eat and you still wouldn't have had a right to tell her that."

"I can't take it back now," McCord fought the tears that continued to threaten.

"Damn you, McCord! The girl just lost the last family member that she had. She's had guards stuck up her ass for the past four months." Dell stormed toward McCord. "A serial killer has put a number on her head, for Christ's sake. You selfish bastard! One thing goes wrong in your life and you think the world owes you something."

McCord sat silent. He deserved every word that Dell said. It didn't make it any easier to hear by knowing he deserved it, however. The words stung like a bee on sunburned skin, and he couldn't have formed a sentence if his life had depended on it. That was probably the way Marisa had felt while he was saying all those crazy, heartless things to her. He'd taken her silence as an admission of guilt, and only now did he realize that the words had hurt so badly that she simply couldn't speak.

~ \* ~

Ben gave Marisa a hug. "Call me as soon as you get to San Diego."

"I will." She smiled up at him. "Thanks for the ride."

She wished she could love him again, the way she did before Jonathan McCord. She couldn't, however, and she'd learned firsthand that when you make a mistake, the last thing you need is the person you love turning their back on you. Perhaps she couldn't have a life with Ben, but she would never say the hurtful things to him that Jonathan had said to her.

Making her way to the departure gate, she submitted her ticket and boarded the plane with a few minutes to spare. She settled into her seat and slowly examined the man sitting beside her. He had no visible tattoos, no dreadful scar on his neck. She was safe for a while longer.

If things went as planned she would grab a taxi straight to her apartment. She wanted to get a few things; important papers, the engagement ring Ben had given her and other mementoes. She hoped that would take no longer than ten minutes, and she'd be out the door to a taxi and back to the airport. She had no clue where in Alaska to go, she hadn't actually given it any thought. She would call the Business Manager from the airport, and he could answer all her questions. Her thought process had been trained on finding a way for Katherine Marisa Potts to disappear forever. She'd learned long ago that everything was easier with money. Money was the only thing that she still had.

~ \* ~

She took a deep breath as the pilot started the final descent into San Diego. She looked at her shaking hands and wished she could harness the part of her that made her weak. She had to be strong, stronger than she'd ever been. There was no one left to depend on. Other than Ben Weaver, she didn't have a friend left in the world.

Her heart pounded like a base drum as she made her way off the plane and toward the ground transportation area. She hailed a taxi and crawled inside. Giving the cabbie her address, she explained that she wanted him to drive her to that location, leave the meter running and wait for her. She assured him that she would be no longer than ten or fifteen

minutes, and the price of the fare wasn't an issue.

She slid from the cab when it stopped alongside the curb. Her heart was about to jump out of her chest. This was the first moment since the entire nightmare had started that she'd been alone. She took a slow look around then made a quick trek toward the complex door. She spoke politely to a lady who was exiting the building and made her way around the corner and to the elevators. It had been weeks since she'd been in her home. She'd lived in that stupid hotel safe house, but in the end, all the time had been wasted. She slid her key into the lock and walked inside her apartment. Carefully, she locked the door behind her with hands that had long since surpassed a nervous shake. Everything looked normal in the apartment—that was a plus. She sprinted to the safe, keyed in the combination and pulled the contents from inside. She stuffed the contents into a beach bag. She grabbed a small pink jewelry box and stuffed it into the bag. She looked around, nothing else mattered.

She snapped her head toward a crashing sound at the front door. Her heart pounded painfully inside her chest. As the door swung open, her eyes rested on the one human she feared more than death itself. The scar beneath his ear was visible, even across the room. It was too late to worry about it now but she'd given Jonathan a good description of him.

The smile that spread across his face couldn't have been duplicated by any movie team in Hollywood. "So we finally meet again."

Her breaths came shallow and fast as her chest heaved. If she'd only had three more minutes, she would have made it. Three minutes didn't seem like much time, but when it's the amount of time that separates you from life or death, it's an eternity.

She dropped the bag, remembering that the killer had gotten his name because he broke the necks of his victims. She wouldn't be much of a fight for him, but if she could only buy herself a few seconds... In those few seconds, she could run like the wind.

"So, you plan to fight, do you?" He moved toward her.

Her legs felt like noodles, and her hands shook violently. He looked like a normal guy, wearing a blue three button pullover, jeans and tennis shoes. He was far from



normal and the sick smile on his face was proof.

~ \* ~

Jonathan McCord reached for the ringing phone on his desk. He pulled it to his ear and hoped like hell that someone wasn't calling to tell him that they'd found number seven. "Detective McCord."

"Jonathan McCord?"

"Yes."

"This is Ben Weaver," the voice barked over the phone.

"Well, hello, Ben Weaver," Jonathan bit with a snide smile. "I guess you've called to gloat."

Ben cleared his throat. "Actually, I called to tell you that you're wrong about Marisa. Things may have looked bad, but I assure you nothing happened."

"And you are telling me this why?"

"She's in love with you, dumbass," Ben growled. "Trust me, I tried, but she wouldn't have any part of it."

"Well, this is certainly big of you." Jonathan's voice dripped with sarcasm. "What are you really up to?"

"Look, I screwed her over. I know what kind of hell you're faced with," Ben explained. "She deserves to have what she wants, and unfortunately, that's you."

"So let me get this straight," Jonathan started. "You've called me out of the goodness of your heart?"

"I'm calling because it should've been you meeting her at the airport instead of your partner." Ben advised.

"Airport?"

"I dropped her off at the Memphis airport this morning," Ben explained. "Her flight should have arrived about forty minutes ago."

"San Diego?"

"Yes, San Diego. Why, else would I be calling you?"

"Are you sure it was San Diego?"

"Yes," Ben snapped. "I saw the ticket."

"Dear God." A feeling of death rushed over him like rain, summer rain.

"What's wrong?"

"She refused a guard when my partner offered it," Jonathan said softly. "Where was she going?"

"She said she was going home."

"Call this number back. Give the dispatcher your number and she'll call me with it. I'll call you when I find her."

He slammed the phone into the cradle and jumped to his feet with such force that his desk shifted. He ran into Dell's office. "Marisa is in San Diego."

"What?" Dell asked, looking up from a mountain of paperwork.

"Let's go, damn it! Her flight landed forty minutes ago, and she's on her way to her apartment."

McCord tore out of the lot like he was in pursuit of a serial killer, because something told him he was. The serial killer's words over the phone echoed in his ears. *Somebody will screw up, they'll walk away or turn their back and she'll be mine.* The car zoomed through town, lights flashing, siren screaming and him silently praying that The Breaker might not have been on his toes this time.

~ \* ~

Marisa moved slowly around the table. If she could get him on the back side of it, then she'd run like hell and take her chances. Of course, he hadn't successfully killed six women by being a stupid hunter, but it was the only chance she had. Her eyes came to rest on a bowl of decorative ceramic balls on the kitchen table. Rick Shelton had said that a strong arm could easily kill someone with them, they were so heavy. She snatched the bowl to her. A lucky pot shot hit the killer on his neck.

"You bitch, you're not playing fair." He pressed his palm against his neck then checked it for blood.

"Who are you to talk about fair?" she spat back as she hurled a second ball at him, this time missing as it tore through one of the canvas Kinkadee paintings in the living room. A third found its target and left the killer trying to shake the pain off his arm. The final ball aimed directly at his crotch met its target with vengeance. When he doubled over in pain, she ran past him. He reached out, snagging her foot and sending her flying across the room. She scrambled to her feet a split second before he reached her. She backed away realizing far too late that there was nowhere to run.

"Game over," he said through gritted teeth. "That last move will cost you."

She felt the handle of the poker in her hand as she backed against it. She wrapped her hand around it and waited one second, then two. When she swung it was with every ounce of energy and strength she had in her body. It cracked against his head. Blood splattered across the room and he stumbled back. As she lifted the poker a second time, it was as if a demon was released within him. He growled loudly and tackled her like a giant cat. When his hand covered her mouth and nose, the world faded away.

~ \* ~

The unmarked car screamed into the lot at the apartment complex and McCord jumped from the car and rushed into the apartment building, hoping for the best, expecting almost anything, but finding the worst.

"Oh, God." Jonathan moaned with a defeated voice. "Marisa!"

Dell bolted through the apartment, but the rooms were empty. "She put up a hell of a fight."

Jonathan walked toward the poker lying in the floor. Did the blood belong to Marisa or the killer? Time would tell. He pressed his hand over his hair, and cringed to think that she was on her own. His body was a battleground, as fear, anger, and despair raged within him, each hoping to claim a victory over him.

"There was a cabbie outside," Dell said as he ran past McCord and down the hall.

"Damn it," McCord spat as he followed Dell down the hall.

~ \* ~

"How long have you been here?" Dell asked sharply as he approached the cab.

The cabbie looked toward Dell. "About twenty minutes, why?"

"Who are you waiting on?"

"My fare," The man explained. "She said to keep the meter running and she'd be back."

"What did she look like?" McCord asked laying his hands on the window ledge.

"She's really pretty. Long blonde hair, up in a ponytail."

"Did you see anyone else go in since her?" Dell

coaxed.

"Just one man," the cabbie answered.

"Has he been out?"

"He left about ten minutes ago," came the answer.

"He was driving a red Honda SUV."

"What did he look like?"

"Average size," the cabbie answered. "He was hurt when he left. His head looked like someone popped him good."

"Was he alone?"

The cabbie nodded. "Yeah, it was just him but he had one of those big rolling suitcases with him. I figured his wife kicked him out."

"How big was the suitcase? Was it big enough for your fare to be in?"

The cabbie gave it some thought. "Yeah, it was big enough. It would've been a tight squeeze but she would've fit."

## ***Fourteen***

Marisa woke in a cold sweat, her eyes burned and her throat was parched. Her body ached, but only seconds passed until she figured out why. She was in a small box. What was going on? Of course, she knew that he'd captured her, and she could tell by the sounds, that she was in a vehicle. Time passed and the miles clicked away and each mile took her farther from civilization, farther from help. When she squirmed, the box flexed and she moved her hand an inch or so to feel a zipper. She gave it some thought, she was so confined that she couldn't budge, but if she was right, then she was in the big rolling suitcase from her closet.

The vehicle stopped and her heart sank. The motor went silent, a door opened and closed and footsteps walked on hard ground. She heard a trunk or hatch when it popped but all that told her was that she was about to endure several days of hell before he finally killed her.

The suitcase bumped and shook as he pulled it over rocks and through something that felt like sand. She heard a door as it opened, then silence and a jolt that left her reeling in pain. If she hadn't known better she would have thought that he dropped her off the roof of a house. She'd be lucky if she didn't have broken bones. She heard weird stepping sounds then shoes on concrete. When she heard the zipper, adrenalin rushed through her body like a tornado through Oklahoma. She took a deep breath, balled her fists and came out swinging when he flipped the lid open and reached for her. She battled him in the darkness, and her right fist ripped through the open gash on his head.

"You stupid bitch!" he growled.

His fists pounded back blow after blow. She felt like Rocky Balboa was fighting back out of the darkness. That was okay, however, he'd have to kill her before he raped her. She'd made up her mind that Jonathan McCord was the last man to have her and it would damn well stay that way. She kicked and scratched and tried like hell to put her finger through his eye. Time after time, she pounded the wound on his head until he finally landed a solid fist on her head that sent her thudding against a concrete wall. His footsteps disappeared, and a sound above her was evidence that he'd made his way out of the room.

Marisa heard a moan, and fear swept over her. The room was dark, and the surface was cold concrete. She sat silent for several minutes; she wasn't quite sure what to make of the moans only feet away. The sobs were distinguishably female. "Hello?" she finally whispered.

The last thing Marisa remembered was being tackled by The Breaker. She had to assume that he'd taken her to his hiding place. The same place where he'd raped and tortured his other victims before he killed them. "Are you okay?"

"I'm alive," a fragile voice said. "You fought, he doesn't like that."

"Who are you?" Marisa asked.

"Sally Franks," she said, her voice defeated and scared.

Marisa felt the surface around her. "Have you seen this room with the lights on?"

"Yes," Sally answered.

"What is it?"

Sally's voice cracked. "I think it's an old basement. The only way in or out is directly overhead."

Marisa looked up but her eyes only met more darkness. She'd toured the dungeons at Ft. Jefferson in the Dry Tortugas out from Key West, and they weren't a bit darker than this room. It was easy to see how a man could go mad in a dungeon. At least she had Sally Franks to talk to, but she couldn't imagine what Sally had gone through until she arrived. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm alive," Sally repeated. "The less you fight, the less he'll hurt you."

Marisa cringed. "I'm coming to you."

"He's going to kill us, you know."

Marisa crawled toward the sound of Sally's voice. "How long have you been here?"

"Three days. Three days of hell."

"What do you know about him?" Marisa crawled cautiously toward Sally's voice.

"He's horrible," Sally cried. "He has the coldest eyes I've ever seen."

"How often does he come in here?" Marisa asked.

"Too often, but only during the daylight hours."

"There are two of us, we can beat him," Marisa said with a promise of hope in her voice.

When Marisa wrapped her hand onto Sally's ankle the woman jumped. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to scare you."

"My grandfather was a policeman and I've tried to remember the stories that he told me," Sally offered. "I just can't seem to figure a way out of here."

"Jonathan will find us."

"Jonathan?"

"Detective Jonathan McCord." Marisa smiled into the darkness. "He will find us."

"You know him?" Sally asked.

"Know him." Marisa squeezed Sally's hand. "I love him."

"Well, I hope you're right. I'm not sure how much more of this I can take."

"There is no light above," Marisa said. "Is he not home?"

Sally took a deep breath. "He doesn't stay here. I can hear his vehicle go and come. There's no building overhead, when the sun rises you can see everything in here."

"Are there stairs?"

"No," Sally informed, her voice tired. "When he goes and comes he puts a ladder down here."

Marisa looked up again. If only she knew more. She knew her time was limited; she had to find a way out of this God forsaken place before the monster returned. "I'm sorry to keep asking questions but I need to know. How tall is this room?"

"At least ten feet. I've tried everything, there's no

use."

"You listen to me," Marisa said as she turned to Sally, feeling then pulling her hands down the woman's wet cheeks. "Until we're dead, we will try to get out of here."

"He won't be back tonight. He's a creature of habit."

"He doesn't come at night?"

"He's already been here," Sally cried. "Once he's finished, he won't be back 'til morning. Most of the time, he stays here all day."

Marisa hoped that Sally couldn't hear the sigh of relief that left her body. She was terrified to be facing the things Jonathan had described. She wondered how many of those things Sally had already endured. *Three days of hell*, Sally had called it and that led Marisa to believe poor Sally had lived it all. "What's in here?"

"Four or five old school desks, a pad locked trunk, a box of old quilts and a box of magazines."

Marisa's heart raced as vivid memories of old cartoons entered her mind. It had been silly to think of such things at a time like this, but it seemed cartoon characters could make a ladder out of anything. "Could we stack all that stuff up and reach the top?"

"I'm sure it's possible if you could see what you were doing. But the only time that it's light enough to do it, he's here," Sally said. "But, I'm not really able to climb anymore."

"What's wrong? What did that bastard do to you?" Marisa ground out. "You can tell me, I'm in the boat with you."

"Well, he spends the day in here. He brings one of those portable DVD players and watches snuff films and satisfies his manly urges. My ankle is sprained, but being honest that's one thing he hasn't done to me. I had the same idea as you. I fell off the top and did this to my ankle. When he got here the next morning, he beat the hell out of me for trying to escape. He laughed at me because my ankle was hurt then stacked all the stuff back into the corner."

Marisa battled the sick feeling in her stomach; she could tell in Sally's voice that she wasn't giving the full story. Part of Marisa understood why, it was probably easier to act like it had never happened. "Tell me where the stuff is."

"Go directly across the room then follow the wall to



the corner. Everything is in that corner."

Marisa leaned in to Sally and wrapped her arms around the woman. "I'll get us out of here. I promise."

"Even if you get to the top, the door is locked." Sally sighed. "Like I said, I've tried everything."

Marisa released a sigh of disgust. It had been a good idea, but she had no reason to think that she was the first to think of it. If she got hurt trying to escape she would be no good to herself or Sally.

"What else have you tried?"

"Nothing." Sally relaxed her head against the wall with a gentle thud. "You'll see at daylight, the door is our only hope."

"Traffic?"

"None," Sally answered. "I have no clue where we are, but we aren't in the city anymore."

"Is the door metal or wooden?"

"Wood. The sun coming through the cracks is the only light I've seen since I've been here."

"If I find a way out can you walk?" Marisa asked.

"What's your name?" Sally's touched Marisa's leg.

"I'm sorry, I'm Marisa Potts," she said as she rose to her feet and walked carefully across the room.

"Well, if you can get us of here, Marisa Potts, I'll crawl if I have to."

Reaching the wall, Marisa realized how small the space was and reality pounded through her chest like a stake through the heart. There was nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. If he came in, they were easy prey. Even if they escaped they had no clue how to get to safety, for all they knew, he was somewhere waiting for them to succeed. After all, he'd probably spent untold hours watching Marisa's apartment until he finally got his chance. Something told her that the man had the patience of Job but the demeanor of the devil.

"Get ready to crawl," Marisa said. "I'm getting out of this hell hole."

~ \* ~

Jonathan McCord studied the photos on the board but his eyes kept moving to a photo just added. Marisa's face was there, smiling back at him and he wondered if she was

dead or alive. He and Dell had wondered about another missing woman, named Sally Franks; if she'd end up being number seven. If so, then his number eight was already in hand. The bastard had escalated his torture with each victim. Thinking back, the first had been fortunate enough to have been killed the night he abducted her. The second and third victims he'd kept for two days. The fourth and fifth he'd kept four days. The sixth had suffered through five days of hell and the pattern didn't look good for Marisa and Sally Franks.

"There are almost twelve thousand red Honda SUV's within a fifty mile radius. The numbers triple at a hundred miles out," Dell said as he returned with a stack of papers.

They had talked to the cabbie until he was tired of talking. He'd been a tremendous help, and had described the wound on the man's head in graphic detail. In fact, according to the medical examiner there was little way the man could have survived the blood loss without medical attention. There had been no one in with a head injury, at least not fitting his description in the past twenty four hours, to any hospital within a fifty mile radius. There were still people making phone calls in the squad room to hospitals farther out, and it looked as much like a telethon in there as an official police space.

"Are they still narrowing the search?" McCord asked.

"That's all we have," Dell answered. "Unless one of the security cameras at the bank across the street caught something, we're at a dead end."

"How's that going?" McCord asked, rubbing a hand over his head as he paced the floor.

"They have two more angles to view. The first three caught nothing."

"Damn it." McCord grabbed the video projector and hurled it against the wall. "What are we missing? We've got to find her, Dell."

"I have an idea," Dell studied his partner.

McCord looked at him with hopeful eyes. "What?"

"We could go public with the description that Marisa gave us. How many people out there can have that same scar and tattoo?"

"Let's do it." McCord jumped to his feet.

"There's one problem. The captain doesn't like the

idea. He says, we'll start a panic. Men with facial scars and tattoos might find themselves faced with angry mobs."

McCord took a deep breath. "So, it will be a busy night on the beat."

"He said no, McCord. If we do this, it will be career suicide."

"Then you keep the captain's attention for a while," McCord said with a firm nod. "If it means finding Marisa, he can have my damn badge."

It took the most of ten minutes for McCord to make the phone calls to the local television news networks, but, just as planned they'd met him fifteen minutes later at the steps of city hall. He took a deep breath as he walked, toward the group of reporters, waiting on the steps. He wasn't sure this was going to work. He was willing to take the chance. Even if it didn't, he'd probably have to surrender his shield, but he'd never stop looking for Marisa.

"Good evening, everyone, I'm Detective Jonathan McCord of the San Diego PD. I've called you here because I need your help. As most of the city knows, we've been searching for a serial killer for the past several months. During that time we were fortunate enough to have a witness who could identify certain markings on the man we call, The Breaker. We've recently learned that a man fitting his description has taken that witness from her home and fled."

A reporter stuck up his hand. "Do you have any idea if the witness is still alive?"

Jonathan swallowed hard, he didn't like the thought of answering that question. "To be quite honest, this predator has kept each victim alive longer than the last. At this point, we're looking at not only one, but two victims that he may have with him at this time."

The silence among the reporters was frightening as they hung on his every word. There would be no denying the part he'd played in this. He was on live television, for heaven's sake, and chances were that the Captain was already on his way from the PD to city hall.

"We need your help. I want to give the public the description our witness gave us. I ask that you consider what I'm saying carefully, because the witness was very specific

about the things she remembered. Our witness verified that the man is 5'9 to 5'10" in height. She remembered a large scar under his left ear that extended down his throat to his collar bone. She also remembered a tattoo, on his left forearm, of a snarling dog. She believed it was a bulldog with a yellow sun behind it. Our witness says this man is in good physical condition and is a strong runner. We do believe, according to another witness's accounts that The Breaker sustained a serious head injury during the process of taking our case witness. If you know anyone who fits this description, I ask you to call 555-978-3746 as soon as possible. Please do not confront anyone you think fits this description. Remember, this person is a killer. Thank you all for your time."

"Detective can you tell us if the witness is Katherine M. Potts, the owner of the floral shop that burned several weeks ago?"

He locked eyes with the reporter, as his skin tingled with alertness. "I'm sorry but I can't discuss any other information from the case file at this time."

He looked down at his ringing cellular phone as he walked down the steps and toward the car. He took a deep breath. It was one of two people, and chances were that Dell would call from his cellular phone. "Yes, sir?"

"Have you lost your damn mind?" His captain ground out. "You'll start more mob hunts than we could break up with three times the officers that we actually have on duty."

"If we don't do something, we're going to have two more dead women on our hands," McCord spouted.

"And I suppose, the fact that your girlfriend is one of those women has nothing to do with it?"

"Oh, yes, sir, it has everything to do with it." His voice was clear and confident. "And if he hurts her, you have my word, I'll rip his guts out and shove them down his throat."

"Get your ass back to the station. I need to have the dayshift report in; the phones are lit up like Christmas trees."

A bright smile swept across his face. "On my way, sir."

~ \* ~

Marisa's hands found the trunk at the corner of the small room and she pushed it to the area she believed was

below the door. She lifted it onto its end and hoped like heck that ceiling was ten feet and not twelve. She made her way back to the corner and scooted the box of quilts toward the trunk. Carefully, she lifted the box onto the trunk in the blackness and measuring by her body height she guessed the stack was at least five feet tall. She returned again, then again until the old school desks sat firmly against the trunk to brace it. "Can you help me with the magazines?"

"Sure," Sally replied, but her tone suggested that she didn't have much faith in Marisa's intentions. "What have you come up with?"

"Well, I'm 5'9" so I won't need a lot of lift if it's a ten foot ceiling. I turned the trunk on end. Then I put the quilt box on top of it. I took each of the desks and braced the sides of the trunk. Now I'm going to put the magazines in the desks to give them some weight."

Sally began to cry. "My God, you're brilliant."

"Hardly." Marisa looked toward Sally's weak voice but only found darkness. "Let's just say invention was the product of desperation in my life until I turned ten."

"Why?" Sally asked as she gave a painful grunt and fumbled blindly to find the desk pockets.

"My parents were always too drunk or high to care if I ate," Marisa explained. "When you're hungry, you learn to climb to where the food is."

"Well, I'm not glad that you went through that, but I'm proud you retained the knowledge. How old are you, Marisa?"

"Twenty four," She said, "My birthday is next month."

"I'm twenty six. I just got married four months ago."

"Congratulations." Marisa took a deep breath. "If you don't mind, brace the trunk all you can."

"Here." Sally reached for Marisa. "Use my hand."

"Thank you."

Marisa felt like she was climbing into a dark hole not knowing what was inside. The dark hole however, had to be better than what was waiting for her where she was. The trunk wobbled, but it wasn't any worse than it had been to balance on the back of a chair to get the crackers from the cabinet when she was seven. "I can reach it."

"Great, just great," Sally shot back.

"The bad news is that I can't feel the door." Marisa puffed. "We'll have to try again."

"Here, take my hand," Sally said. "Maybe I can help you find the right spot."

"Good idea." Marisa said fumbling in the darkness back onto the floor.

Sally moved away and Marisa heard as the woman slid her back down the wall and took a seat. "What are you doing? We have to get out of here before he comes back."

"I know." Sally moved again. "That's where I always sit. I had to find my way from there."

Marisa pressed her lips firmly together and gave her head a gentle shake. "I'm sorry, Sally. I know this has been awful for you."

"It's, okay. I did all this stuff when he first left me here. I thought you might succeed if I helped."

"Thank you."

"Here." Sally called a few feet away. "This is close. The sun always rises close to where I'm standing."

Marisa grunted and strained against the trunk, boxes and desks. She'd wasted valuable time getting the location wrong. She had to do it right this time.

Taking Sally's hand once again she steadied her tall frame atop the quilt box and reached up. "I feel it. Good description Sally, we're dead center of the door."

"That's great— it took me two hours to find it the first time," Sally admitted. "And my stacking plan wasn't quite as sensible as yours."

"It's only sensible if it works." Marisa pushed on the door with a loud grunt. "You were right, it's locked."

"Now what?"

"Let me think just a minute," Marisa said.

Silence filled the room and Marisa wasn't sure if it was because Sally was giving her time to think or if Sally had an idea of her own.

"Maybe we could break the top off the desk," Sally suggested. "Could you hit hard enough with it to break through?"

"It's worth a try." Marisa squatted carefully, relieving the stress of standing on jello-like legs. "I'm coming down."

"Here." Sally placed a warm hand on Marisa's leg.

"Take my hand."

"Okay, let's see if we can do this," Marisa said with a hopeful voice.

They pulled and grunted and finally Marisa flew across the room with the desk top in her hand. The fear was evident in Sally's voice as she asked about Marisa. The soft painful voice that flowed from Marisa's lips was evident that the only thing broken was her pride and maybe her butt bone. Back atop the stack, Marisa took a deep breath. "Now would be an excellent time to pray."

"I have been," Sally said firmly. "In fact, I think I'm the reason you're here."

"How so?" Marisa grunted as she hit the plank with the edge of the board.

"I prayed that God would send someone to get me out."

Marisa bit her lip and gave Sally's words some thought. There were many times that she'd prayed for God to send someone to get her out of her parent's house. Then along came Aunt Clara. "I can't believe that I would be the answer for that prayer. God has awesome resources at his disposal. He doesn't need to use someone like me."

Blow after blow Marisa hammered the door, but it seemed hopeless. She felt like she'd ran five miles and she was yet to make a single step toward success. She took a deep breath and heaved with all her might; there was no time to waste. The board moved. The sound of nails stripping filled the cold dark air.

"Oh my God, you did it." Sally laughed. "You did it!"

Again and again she pounded until the board flew free. With long arms she reached out, knocking away some type of heavy plastic cover. "The moon is out. The bastard covers the door so you can't see it through the cracks while he's gone."

She traced the edge of the door hoping for a latch, but found a pad lock. "Damn it."

"What?"

"It's pad locked."

"So, we're stuck?"

Marisa grunted as she hammered at the next board. "If one will break, they all will."

"Thank you, God, for this woman," Sally said with a warm voice.

The board gave way under the pressure. Marisa grabbed hold and heaved herself up and out of the hole. The moon was bright in the sky and it was easy to tell that they were somewhere out of town because there was nothing but silence and darkness. "I'm out, can you climb?"

"Absolutely," Sally's happy voice replied.

"Take your time," Marisa advised. "First the desk, then reach high."

"Okay," Sally said. "Where are you?"

"Just hold your hands up." Marisa anchored her legs wide, then reached deep into the darkness for Sally Franks. "Okay, I've got you. Up you go onto the trunk on three. One. Two. Three."

Marisa exhaled a lion-like roar as she strained against Sally's weight. She refused to leave the woman behind. There were too many times in her own life that she'd been left behind. When she helped Sally from the dungeon the woman wrapped around her like a glove. Marisa could feel the gratitude as it poured from Sally's body, but this was no time to stop for a thank you.

"Wrap your arm around me," Marisa said. "Give me all the weight you need to."

"Thank you so much."

"Don't thank me yet, we have no clue where we are. Now, let's get the hell out of here." Marisa advised.

~ \* ~

"More than twenty people have called in the last hour, who say, that the man we are looking for is Ralph Labadee. He played minor league baseball until two years ago when he got kicked off the team. Are you ready for this?" Dell asked.

McCord nodded.

"A woman brought him up on rape charges and said he'd tried to kill her."

"Was he convicted?"

"He got off on an incompetence plea." The captain explained. "He'd had a car accident a few months before that really did a number on him. He found some quack that admitted on the witness stand that it could've impaired his ability to make rational decisions."



McCord's blood ran hot. "Well the son-of-a-bitch is going to need more than a plea this time."

"We'll get him." Dell slapped McCord on the shoulder.

"Do we have a photo yet?" McCord turned his attention to Richard Dell. "A location, anything?"

"They're pulling it now." Dell motioned as he turned to walk away. "By the time we get down to records, they should have it."

There was a strange feeling brewing inside McCord, and he wasn't sure he was ready to deal with it. If Labadee was really the man they were looking for, then it meant one of two things. Either Marisa was alive or she was dead. If she was alive then he would get the chance to apologize. If not, well, he didn't know if he wanted to live through that. Certainly, he wanted to live long enough to make Labadee pay. He wasn't sure, however, if he was willing for justice to be served. He wanted Labadee to know what it was like to suffer. He wanted to be the man to look into his eyes then break his neck.

"McCord!" A voice yelled as the two detectives made their way out of the room.

"Yeah?" McCord shot back.

"We just got a call from a small hospital in Escondido," the man said. "Ralph Labadee left there an hour ago; he received treatment for head trauma."

"We've got 'em." Dell gave his fist a quick snap of victory. "Let's go."

Down the stairs and into the records room they ran. McCord's face finally glistened with a bit of hope.

"Here, you go," A friendly female voice said while handing a stack of papers toward Richard Dell. "This is your guy."

There were no questions when McCord looked into the face on the license photo. He'd heard Marisa describe that face a thousand times. The scar was there, just as she'd described and to McCord, his eyes looked predatory. "Is this his current address?"

"Oddly enough, he dropped off radar after his trial last year," the woman admitted. "I called the rental property owner and he doesn't live there anymore. But I ran a check and found that he bought a spot of property, outside town,

during the time that he was playing in the minors. Satellite imagery doesn't show any structure at the location, but there are several fallout shelters in that area."

"Fallout shelters?" Dell asked. "Like in the 60's?"

"Exactly. The way I understand it, there are about thirty in that area. Unfortunately, there aren't any visible on the satellite imagery, either."

"Is it possible that he's there?" Dell asked.

"It makes sense." McCord glanced down at the maps. "It would be an excellent place to keep a woman out of sight for a week."

"Let's roll," Dell said. "Thanks, Tess."

"Anytime, guys."

~ \* ~

It hadn't been the easiest walk ever but Marisa hadn't expected it to be. She respected Sally for gritting her teeth and pushing forward. The woman's ankle had swollen to a point that the pain was evident, but she just kept walking. They'd walked for two hours and hadn't seen the first sign of life. Marisa had considered what they would do if headlights suddenly appeared in the distance, and she still wasn't sure. The road was their only hope of getting out of there alive.

"Oh God, what do we do?" Sally asked as headlights appeared in the distance.

"We've got to hustle," Marisa said as she tugged Sally off the road and toward a large field of knee high desert grass. "Lie down and stay still."

"What if it's him?" Sally asked. "How will we ever get out of here if he finds out we're gone?"

"I thought you said that he doesn't come at night?" Marisa quizzed.

"He doesn't." Sally wrapped her hand around Marisa's. "If he's here something is wrong."

"Just relax. Remember, that we stick together no matter what. If we have to we'll beat the hell out of him."

Sally moaned, her teeth chattering with fear. "He's too strong."

"It shouldn't be him if he's a creature of habit," Marisa said. "It's still several hours until daylight."

The sound of a car cruised by as Marisa and Sally held their breath. Marisa gave Sally's hand a gentle shake when

she felt her fingers tightening within her own. They had no idea what the killer drove, so it wouldn't have helped to look. They simply had to take their chances and avoid all cars because staying on the roadway could be a lethal mistake. "Let's stay in the grass and keep walking. If you see or hear anything, hit the deck."

~ \* ~

It had taken the detectives the most of an hour to get fallout shelter locations in the area where Labadee owned property. It had been a quiet drive, with no activity and decreasing hope that they'd played a good hunch. McCord sighed as they pulled up to the eleventh site, with only thirty six more to go. Thinking back, this had been a crazy idea. Why would a killer bring his victims into the desert, then torture, rape and kill them, then bring them back to the city to dump their bodies? There was no logical reasoning behind that, but he'd been desperate for any idea to find Marisa. Each hour that passed gave the killer more time to succeed in his mission. The likelihood of finding Marisa alive grew less by the minute.

"Over here, McCord!" Dell yelled. "They've been here!"

McCord ran so quickly toward the fallout shelter that he stumbled and fell. Scrambling to his feet, he made his way to the shelter.

"She's alive, McCord." Dell met McCord's eyes with a sigh of hope as he scanned his flashlight over the door where Marisa had escaped, then her ladder.

"Damn, that woman is a genius." McCord tightened his chest muscles, and stared at the homemade escape ladder. "That's why I love her."

"Let's go find her." Dell rose from his knees and slapped McCord on the shoulder. "I know it's going to break your heart but I think you better hang out the window and scream her name. If she's smart enough to get out of that place, she's smart enough to hide. We probably drove right by her on the way in."

## ***Fifteen***

When a small SUV suddenly appeared from a hidden side road, Marisa and Sally found themselves locked in fear. There was no way they could run, Sally wasn't able and Marisa wasn't willing to leave her. They'd vowed to stay together and face him. If the driver of the SUV was him, then it was show time. Marisa's mind traveled back a few hours ago when he'd knocked her block off. He was a strong man, and she wasn't sure that she and Sally stood a chance in a fight against him.

The vehicle skidded to a stop, the door flopped open and he stepped from inside. Marisa looked toward Sally, the tears in the woman's eyes and her swollen leg said she wouldn't be much help in a fight. "A finger through the corner of his eye will drop him on the spot. We have to kill him, it's our only chance."

"Don't leave me," Sally begged.

"I'm not going to leave you," Marisa promised. "Just do what you can."

"It seems the both of you have a lesson to learn." His feet crunched against the gravel.

His head was bandaged, and would make a very good target. Their only choice was to find his weak spots and hammer them. He looked like the devil standing there with the moon shining bright behind him.

Marisa pushed Sally slightly behind her. "Are you with me?"

Sally looked around, her voice desperate. "Do you hear that?"

"What?" Marisa asked as she spent her time glaring at the predator walking slowly toward them. The monster knew they wouldn't run, that they couldn't run.

"It's a car!" Sally said as she seemed to lose thought of her leg and ran toward the distant headlights.

The killer bolted toward her, and Marisa knew it was now or never. She wasn't ready to face him again, but she didn't really have a choice. Sally had gone enough rounds with him, and she deserved a free pass.

~ \* ~

"There are headlights up ahead," Dell announced. "Grab the binoculars and see what's up."

McCord reached for the binoculars and lifted them to his eyes. He focused the lenses and studied the car's progress. "That car is stopped."

Dell accelerated forward as McCord fought to keep his extended eyes on the vehicle ahead. "Where are the NVG's?"

"Glove box." Dell continued to blaze down the roadway.

McCord threw the binoculars and struggled with the latch on the glove box. He ripped the night vision goggles out, his favorite shades suffering the consequences. He activated the power on the night vision goggles and steadied them against his face. He scanned the area near the vehicle then suddenly his eyes caught three figures on the distant roadside. One figure was running, and struggling to do so. The second was a taller, stronger figure, and he knew the silhouette well. The third was a man, and he was closing the distance quickly between he and the women. "Floor it!" McCord yelled. "It's them and the bastard has found them."

Dell smashed the accelerator to the floor and didn't let up. They had worked for months on this case, it was finally about to come to an end. It was up to them if it was a happy ending. If they could stop The Breaker with six kills, seven when you counted the male eyewitness, it would be bitter sweet.

"He's mine," McCord informed. "The son-of-a-bitch wanted to make it personal. He's got it."

~ \* ~

The car grew closer. Suddenly blue lights began to flash. Marisa's heart leapt; she knew who was in the car. Richard Dell and Jonathan McCord had pieced the puzzle together. They had closed in and if they could hold out for a few more seconds the victory was at hand. "Go to the car,

Sally— it's Jonathan! Run, Sally, Run!"

As the seconds drew to a close, Marisa knew she would be the target. If he could end the game by killing her, then The Breaker would still win the battle he'd started with Jonathan. Little did the man know that McCord really didn't care if he killed her or not. She knew better than to think that because he was pissed when he'd left her alone. He'd been wrong for leaving her but she knew it was because he was hurt. She was sure he felt guilty for having said it.

"Keep going, Sally, he's after me!" Marisa yelled as she bolted back into the grass.

"You bitch!"

"Marisa!" Sally screamed as she collapsed onto the road when Dell brought the car to a stop.

~ \* ~

"My God, what a woman," McCord yelled. "She's leading him away from the other woman."

"Get your ass in the wind, McCord. Don't let that bastard get her," Dell shouted with excitement as he skidded the car to a stop.

McCord hit the desert grass running. He didn't care what he had to do, where he had to go or how long he had to run; he would kill the bastard that was chasing Marisa if he had to follow him to hell to do it. "Marisa!"

"Jonathan!" Her voice answered.

"This way," he yelled. "Come to me." His stride was wide and it felt like he was running on a treadmill in a dark room. His heart was pounding— everything depended on his ability to save her.

His eyes caught sight of her light colored clothing. He wanted to sigh with relief but he still didn't know where the killer was. "That's it, baby keep it in the wind." His voice was winded but not tired. Suddenly, he saw the white T-shirt that pursued her. He pushed forward, running harder as the distance rapidly closed between the three.

"Jonathan!" She screamed.

"Keep running!" He answered as she passed him like a gazelle.

When the figure that chased her turned abruptly and changed directions, victory swept through McCord's body. He couldn't shoot the guy, not in the back, anyway. "Not

tonight, you bastard."

Labadee was a strong runner; he'd stolen many bases in his career. McCord was stronger. As a Marine he hadn't had the luxury of running in light clothing and cleats, but rather in combat boots, complete battle dress uniform and a forty pound rucksack on his back. If this dumbass, thought he was going to get away tonight, then he could just think again.

~ \* ~

Two figures entered the dim peripheral beams of the vehicle headlights. It was nice to see that bastard running for his life. He'd controlled the situation for so long it had slipped his mind that men like Jonathan McCord existed. Marisa ran toward them; she had no explanation for her actions other than she loved Jonathan McCord.

When McCord took a flying leap, The Breaker rolled onto the ground under McCord's weight, like a bowling ball down a polished lane. The distant lights cast haunting shadows behind the two figures. It was obvious that the killer hadn't expected the rage suddenly released on him. Marisa was glad she was there to see it. She'd seen Sally's face for the first time a few moments before and the sick bastard needed his butt kicked. It looked, however, as if he was going to get more than just kicked.

It wasn't a fist fight but rather something that looked more like a choreographed martial arts movie as it played out. Jonathan McCord had laughed and wondered if his hand to hand combat training could have taken Connie Brick. In that conversation, he'd failed to mention that his training could have taken Superman had the need arose.

As quickly as it had started, The Breaker's body fell lifeless to the ground. Marisa watched as McCord stood there taking in the sight of the coldest bastard he'd ever had the misfortune of knowing. She stopped some thirty feet away, giving his mind time to register what had just happened. The summer rain as it engulfed him and turned toward her.

She ran toward him and jumped into his arms, wrapping her legs around him. Relief rushed over him as his arms folded around her pulling her into the security of his chest. "Are you okay?" he asked breathlessly.

"I'm okay." She kissed his face time and time again.

"God, I'm glad to see you."

"That bastard hit you," he said as he examined the lumps and bruises on her face.

"Thanks to you, he won't ever hit me again." She smiled and tightened her arms around his neck.

"I'm so sorry." A tear streamed down his face. "I didn't mean the things I said."

"I know." She pressed her lips to his. "I love you."

"Marisa, are you okay?" Sally's voice asked from the back seat of the car, as Dell moved it closer.

She turned toward Sally's voice. "I'm okay Sally, are you?"

"Yes, thanks to you." Sally's face broke in tears. "I take it that he's Jonathan."

Jonathan walked toward the car with Marisa still attached to him like a piece of Velcro. "Yes, ma'am, it is nice to meet you, Sally." He pulled his phone from the holster. "Call your husband, I happen to know that he's worried sick."

"Were *you* worried sick?" Marisa slid down his tall frame and traced her finger down his chest.

"If the squad room had carpet, he would have worn it smooth," Dell gloated.

Jonathan's eyes were suddenly large with surprise. "Oh, shit, I didn't call Ben back."

"Ben?" Marisa asked with surprise.

"He called me to chew my ass out," Jonathan confessed looking into her eyes. "He's the reason, we knew you were in town."

"Ben did that?" Marisa blinked back tears.

"Yes, he did," Jonathan admitted. "He set me straight on a few things, too."

"So, you believe that nothing happened?" she asked.

"First, I don't care what happened because it doesn't change a thing. Second, yes, I believe you, and I'll never doubt you again."

She wrapped her arms around him and pulled his lips to hers. "You better not, or I'll cut you out of the will."



## About Arlene

Arlene Knowell lives with her husband in a small town in North Mississippi. She is a lifelong animal lover and enjoys working with her agility dogs when time permits. Working full time and managing a home leaves little time for hobbies but she finds time to escape her troubles and responsibilities by writing. She loves to travel and hopes that someday she and her husband can retire and travel extensively. Until then however, the rat race continues, and she learns day by day that it isn't about who finishes the race first, but rather who stops to appreciate the sunsets along the way.

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