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SOMETHING BLUE

THE GUARDIAN AGENCY

URSULA
SINCLAIR

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Something Blue

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Something Blue

Ursula Sinclair

Book Two of the Guardian Agency Series

~DEDICATION~

This one's for my girls.

Never surrender your dreams.

Chapter One

He squeezed his eyes shut to better immerse himself in the sensation of sinking into her tight, wet sheath. Molten lava surrounded him, heating him, lifting him, but as always, at the point before sweet release, his eyes popped open. The dream dissipated, and there she was, getting into the limo. Soon it would no longer be only a dream.

He'd followed her from the hotel. It was so easy. He stayed behind the paparazzi vehicle. When the dark limo turned into the driveway of a church, the move surprised him, but he didn't slow down or make the mistake of following them. The van of so-called photographers tried to pull in, but someone stood at the entrance, stopping them from going any further. He drove yards beyond the driveway, checking his rearview mirror to make sure her car hadn't just tried to turn around.

A small sedan pulled out of a parking spot down the road a bit, and he took it. He turned off the car, grabbed his camera, and headed back toward the church. Just another asshole trying to get a shot of a rock queen.

The paparazzi van and an SUV with two other photographers stopped just beyond the entrance. Like parasites, they spilled out and lined the sidewalk in front of the church. Fighting for the best angle, they shot wildly at whoever stepped out of the limo and went into the church. Crossing the street, he walked down the sidewalk past the entrance to the church until he'd circled around to the alley behind the building. A few cars were parked in the church parking lot, and besides the two men posted at the gate, another stood at the rear entrance. The entire setup looked like a wedding or some shit. As long as it wasn't *her* wedding, he didn't give a damn. That bastard boyfriend of hers was in jail. Good. One less person in his way.

After walking a full circle around the block, he returned to his car. He'd spotted a better parking spot and moved the car there. His new location gave him

a clear view of the entrance to the parking lot, as well as the front of the church. Tonight was the night; she was finally where he could reach her. Time for him to act. He'd stay a few more minutes, just to make sure they weren't leaving right away, and then he'd return to the hotel before she did. Sooner or later, she'd show up, and he'd be waiting. He wondered if she ever thought about him.

"Tell me that's not who I think it is."

Even before Noah spoke, Simon had already turned around to see what caused the commotion at the back of the room. The two men stood at the altar with their best friend and business partner, Ross Marshall. The three ex-Rangers owned the Guardian Security Agency together. They provided security consults to commercial properties, as well as personal bodyguard services to the rich and famous.

Simon laughed. "Okay, I won't."

As groomsman, Noah Lorren flanked Simon Blackcat who, as best man, stood beside Ross, the groom. Tonight was the wedding rehearsal and dinner. Three more days before Ross got leg- shackled for life. The only people supposed to be there were both sets of parents and those in the wedding party, minus the bride's sister, Eboni, who was home sick with the flu. When the famous face framed by the wild mane of trademark curls came into view, Noah knew what had Simon snickering. A frustrated Noah raked his fingers through his short-cropped blond hair. Ross turned to grin at Simon, sharing in the joke at Noah's expense. They both knew the woman entering the church rubbed him the wrong way, but they didn't understand why. So, in typical guy fashion, they treated it like a joke.

River Blu entered the building with her entourage of sycophants, who took up seats in the last three rows of the church. River Blu, his childhood friend and the woman he had been hired to protect, one and the same. She had been a pain in the ass when they were kids, and nothing had changed. Except, everything had.

"Now, now," Ross said, stepping out of line to halt him from moving in the woman's direction. On more than one occasion, Noah had threatened to turn her

over his knee and give her the spanking she deserved, promising it wasn't one she'd enjoy.

Ross and Simon were very aware that *that woman* drove him nuts, and he had become River's bodyguard only because of a personal request from her mother. When his own mother had died when he was fourteen, Lilly Blu became like a mother to him. So when Lilly called to tell him her daughter's life was in danger, he had no choice but to accept the assignment and had been by River's side for the last six months. Six months of going slowly insane. The little girl he'd once adored with the big voice had grown into a first-class diva, spoiled to the core. At least the voice still existed, and damned if he hadn't noticed she'd grown into it. "What the f—" He caught himself when he felt the pastor's gaze fasten on him. He glanced at the shorter, older man who frowned at him. "Sorry, Pastor. What's she doing here?" He took another step in her direction, but Simon grabbed his arm.

"Hey, you have a rehearsal, remember?"

"It's cool," Ross said. "I told her to come. By the way, she'll be at the wedding. When she heard you couldn't be available to her until Sunday because you were a groomsman at my wedding, she offered to sing at our ceremony and the reception. As a personal favor."

"What?" Noah hissed in disbelief. "I already set it up to have Frank and Alex watch her. The woman is unbelievable. I am not her only bodyguard."

"She's also a paying client." Ross shrugged. "And for some godforsaken reason she only feels safe around you."

The bride-to-be, Shanna, leaned back to stare at him. "Yeah, unbelievable she might be, but like I was going to say no to having a mega rock star sing at my wedding? Dream on." She turned to face her impromptu audience and said, "Hey, River, can you do me a favor?" Shanna glanced back at the pastor. "One sec, Pastor Terry." Releasing Ross's hands, she walked toward the back of the room. Noah couldn't hear what she said to River, but he knew it didn't bode well. When River faced his direction, then stood up and moved to stand next to Shanna, he knew it meant trouble for him.

The woman personified sex. Already on the tall side for a woman, but did she hide her height? Hell no! She favored those damned four-inch heels. Even though

he couldn't see her shoes, he knew she wore them. They made her long legs look even longer, and she had the abso-fucking-lutely best body of curves he'd ever seen. Curves he wanted nothing more than to get close to. Again. He shook himself. Not going to happen. Noticing her outfit, he frowned. She had no trouble showcasing said body in those tight-ass jeans, and that short jacket did nothing to hide the cleavage displayed by her plunging neckline. As if wearing ten beaded necklaces around her neck provided any cover. Yeah, a frigging walking wet dream that had been plaguing him since she'd gone and grown up on him and strutted that fine ass in front of his face.

Ten years ago, when he was in the military, she'd written him, asking him to take her to her prom. He'd gotten leave, but was sent out on a mission and didn't make it back in time. In truth, after being ambushed, he'd been lucky to make it out alive. But he'd managed to get a four-day pass—fifteen hours of which were eaten up in travel—and gone home to see her. He didn't make her prom, and after the things she'd said to him when he called to apologize, he didn't dare miss her eighteenth birthday. It had already been two years since he'd last seen her, and he missed the braces-wearing, gawky, shy teenage girl he'd left behind. Instead of his pesky friend, he found a siren whose call he couldn't refuse. They'd both grown up. No longer children or just friends.

Five minutes after he hugged her parents, she'd gotten him outside with his old violin case in her hand. "I'm glad you're here," River said.

"Why'd you bring that?" he asked, glancing at the case she carried.

"Let's go down to the lake. I want to hear you play for me."

When had her voice taken on those husky notes? "I haven't played in years. Not sure I remember how." They'd always shared a love of music, but the last time he'd played was the day he'd left for the military.

"It's like riding a bike—you never forget." She took his hand and, entranced by her voice and the beautiful young woman she'd become, he followed, knowing he'd play again for her. At the edge of the lake, they sat side by side. She placed

the violin case between them.

"I'm glad you're okay." She squeezed his fingers before releasing them to pick up a small rock near their feet. "I'm sorry I yelled at you for missing my prom, but I understand." She sent the rock skipping across the water's surface.

"This feels familiar." He smiled at her and picked up his own rock. It didn't travel anywhere near as far as hers. "You always were better than me."

She opened the case, took out the violin, and passed it to him. "Stop stalling. Play."

"It's probably badly out of tune," he said, reaching for it.

"No. I had it tuned. Now play."

He didn't need to ask her what. Years ago, he'd created a piece, right there, just for her. Standing up, he righted the violin on his shoulder until his chin rested in place. He raised the bow and plucked the strings to check the tune. Almost perfect. Making a few adjustments, he positioned his fingers and played.

She lay down near his feet, her hands behind her head, and stared at the sky. Even that seemed familiar, yet not. For one thing, he didn't remember the rise and fall of her chest being so provocative. When did she get breasts like those? He closed his eyes to blot out the sight and concentrate on the music, allowing it to carry him away. Yet always, always aware of the girl in front of him, who was now all grown up.

Drawing the last chord, the note vibrated into the wind, and he opened his eyes. He placed the violin and bow back in the case, then moved it out of the way to sit down beside her. He didn't know what compelled him to shift his body closer to hers, but then again he did. Her green-eyed gaze turned and met his. Without a word exchanged between them, he lowered his head toward hers. Before their lips touched, her arms wrapped around his neck, drawing him down.

He wasn't a virgin, but she damn well better be. A double standard, but she belonged to him, always had. They both knew that. But he'd always been hers. So he kissed her softly, gently, because he treasured her above all else. Holding himself back, not wanting to scare her.

"I'm not a child anymore," she whispered.

"Yeah, I know." He'd waited for her for so long, but never realized what he'd

been doing until he saw her again. When she tugged on him, bringing his body down to lie over hers, he didn't resist. At twenty, and horny as hell, he wanted her and had no control.

Their bodies fit together like puzzle pieces that had never gone missing. He'd always known where to find the matching piece and intended to claim it one day. Today. Please, God, today.

"Are you sure?" he asked, praying she would say yes, dreading it, too, because he had to leave her and didn't know how to do that. Already, he ached at the thought of saying goodbye.

"Yes. I've always known it had to be you," she said in her siren's voice.

She raised her hips to grind against the boner he'd been sporting since he'd seen her come down the stairs of her home. Her mouth covered his, and he licked the edge of her closed lips. She gasped at the touch, and when she opened her mouth, he stuck his tongue inside and moaned. This was not the first time they'd kissed, but the first like this. No longer innocent.

River. Oh, God. River.

"Hey man, you okay?" Simon's voice edged him back to the present.

"Yeah," he managed to croak, but his thoughts were still stuck on the woman standing in the aisle with Shanna. Dammit, she'd been the one who left *him*. She'd been the one who refused to wait. She was also the one he couldn't forget. So many regrets.

She'd moved beyond him, gone on with her life and been successful, all without him. With that voice of hers that sounded like sin. She'd sold enough records that her last four albums had gone double platinum. It started with some contest in a little dive six years ago. From the moment her first single hit the top ten charts, her concerts sold out. Of course, neither Shanna nor Ross would say no to River singing at their wedding. Hell, even he'd be hard pressed to say no, not that he even inhabited the same universe as marriage. No, she didn't need him, not the way he wanted her to. She never had. It still hurt.

“You sure you’re okay man?” Simon persisted.

“No.” Something in that one-word reply quieted Simon. Noah could only stand at the altar near his friends and stare as River walked beside Shanna toward the altar. When she moved, each step hinted at one thing. Sex. And damned if he didn’t feel as though she walked down the aisle toward him.

He shifted his stance in an attempt to loosen up his trousers a little. Didn’t help much. So he placed his hands strategically in front of his fly, which suddenly felt awfully tight. A state he found himself in all too often around this sex bomb. One he didn’t like, but he hadn’t been with a woman since he started this case. He prided himself on being professional. It wasn’t as if he hadn’t guarded beautiful, spoiled women before, but none of the others affected him this way.

Yet, something about River had the blood in his body flowing south each and every time she neared. And even when she wasn’t around, she was never far from his thoughts. He’d gotten to the point where he no longer listened to his favorite radio stations because they played her music at least twice every hour of every damn day. Lately, he’d been sticking to the oldies-but-goodies stations and classic rock, nothing prior to 2000.

Shanna pointed to the empty spot in front of Christy, one of her bridesmaids—the spot Eboni should have occupied.

“Now what do you suppose they’re up to?” Simon asked Ross.

“Whatever it is, it’s gonna be good,” Ross said, rubbing his palms together.

Noah ignored them and glared at Shanna, who in turn ignored him, so he shifted his gaze to River. A mistake—she stared right at him. That famous, bright white smile in her luscious, strawberry-colored mouth curved up into a grin, showcasing a small beauty mark at the side of her lips. Damn! That wicked grin let him know she could read his mind, knew she made him uncomfortable, and loved every minute of it. Yeah, put on this planet to torment him. The woman even had brown hair with natural red highlights to go with those green eyes and the temper to match it. He loved her coloring, honey with heat, a perfect blending of her mother’s pale, Welsh features and her father’s darker, Ethiopian skin.

“Okay, I think we should start over now that we’ve got someone to stand in for Eboni.” It took him a second to understand Shanna had been speaking, and

another to understand what she said. Hell of a bodyguard he made, not paying attention to what went on around him. “This way we’ll all know where we should be and when,” she continued.

“That’s an excellent idea,” Pastor Terry said. “Let’s take it from the top, then. Ladies, if you go back into the hallway, we’ll restart the music.”

Noah stifled a moan. River wasn’t the only one who liked to torment him. Shanna treated him and Simon like two younger brothers, and in the months since her engagement to his best friend, she’d become like a sister to him, as well. Worse, she seemed to sense the effect River had on him and had no trouble teasing him about it. Like making her a member of the wedding party, so he’d have to spend even more time around her.

“Should we go back to the waiting room?” Ross asked.

“No, that won’t be necessary,” Pastor Terry held up a hand. “You men may stay where you are.”

Since this wasn’t a large bridal party, Noah didn’t have to escort anyone down the aisle, for which he’d be eternally grateful. The escorting part would only happen after the ceremony. He much preferred to stay in the background of things. Ross had twisted his arm to even get him here. His buddy Simon, with his keep-away-from-me body language, made Noah look like the life of the party. Mr. Wallpaper himself.

The women returned to the back of the church with the rest of the wedding party, to wait for their cue. As soon as they closed the door, the sound of Tchaikovsky’s *Swan Lake* came from the clarinet, beautifully played by Shanna’s fifteen-year-old cousin. A few seconds later, the pastor’s coordinator opened the door, and little Amy walked through, holding a basket, pretending to drop rose petals on the floor.

The little girl with her gap-toothed smile turned his frown into a grin. She’d made it about halfway down the aisle when Christy, her mother, started down. Amy took a seat in the front row, and he winked at her. She winked back and turned her head of brown, curly hair around to stare down the aisle. Christy took a half dozen steps toward the altar before movement drew his gaze to the back of the church. River started down the aisle, holding a rose. He couldn’t take his eyes

off her. Again, there was that punch to his solar plexus, as if she walked the aisle toward him. He trembled. When she stood next to Christy, her gaze never left his. Not even when The Wedding March started, and Shanna took her first step down the red carpet toward the altar, where in a few days she would join her life to Ross's. His body might have been twisted in that direction, but his gaze remained locked to River's.

When Shanna stood beside Ross, she blocked his view, and the spell River held over him broke. His ears perked up when the pastor got to River's part in the ceremony.

"Ms. River, will you come and join me here?" The pastor pointed at a spot on the pulpit beside him. "And what song will you be singing?"

"It's something new. We're still working on the album, so this will be the first public unveiling of this particular song."

"A new song! You're kidding." Shanna turned toward River and hugged her. "Thank you, thank you. This will be a wedding to remember."

"Wow!" Ross exclaimed. "Yes, thank you."

Shanna and Ross couldn't thank her enough.

"Truly it's my pleasure," River said. Then she moved to stand near the pastor and sang, without the benefit of any musicians to back her up. She didn't need any—the song perfectly suited her voice. Damn, he recognized it. She'd put words to the song he'd written for her so long ago. She sang of a forever kind of love. One that time, place, or circumstances couldn't stop. When it ended, Shanna wrapped her arms around Ross, in tears. He couldn't see Ross's face, but his own body had gone rigid in an effort not to show how much the song affected him. He knew damn well the power it could hold over Ross, who in three days would marry the love of his life. The lucky son of a bitch.

Thank God, this torture was over with. At some point after the ceremony ended, he must have zoned out, because he heard Ross saying, "Then it's settled. We'll see you at the restaurant." Ross clapped him on the back, while Shanna grinned. She had insisted on having the rehearsal dinner at the restaurant he co-owned, so they'd closed the place to the public for the evening. "Noah will see you get there safely," Ross continued.

Ross's last words penetrated his wondering mind. "What?"

River smiled. "Let me tell my posse to go back to the hotel without me, and I'll be back."

Oh, joy!

Chapter Two

Noah wouldn't put it past River to arrange things to get him alone. He was probably the first man ever to turn down her advances, but she was just getting over her boyfriend of a year. A boyfriend who got drunk one night a few weeks ago and smacked her around. Earl, whose jaw he broke when he found him, and who now sat in a jail cell. He hoped he'd rot in hell.

He would not take advantage of a vulnerable River. No matter how much his libido pleaded otherwise. Sex would be meaningless to her anyway—she'd made that clear. She just wanted to see what he'd learned in the intervening years.

The night the bastard was arrested, he'd taken her back to her house. He'd hugged her, trying to give comfort, but somehow they'd ended up in a lip lock. In fact, she'd jumped him. But her words still rankled.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" he'd asked, pushing at her arms. Obviously out of his mind, pulling away from her. But her lip was still bruised from where that bastard hit her.

"Chill, Noah," River said, lowering her arms from around his neck. "I wanted to know what you taste like these days, that's all." She stepped away from him and shrugged before casually removing her earrings, as if what she'd done was no big deal.

"What?" He couldn't believe her attitude. He didn't want to believe she'd turned into someone he no longer knew—the diva the world proclaimed her. But maybe he'd fooled himself.

"You heard me. I was curious. I enjoyed making love to you when we were kids. It would have just been sex now. No biggie. I just wanted to see what you'd learned in the intervening years."

He rubbed his palm over his face. "You're kidding!"

"No, no, it's cool. My bad." She waved her hand with an overly large, oval double ring in front of her face, emphasizing the point, before turning and walking into her bedroom. When she closed the door in his face, reality struck.

He'd turned down a woman he still wanted, but he didn't have the nerve to open the door and finish what she started. She still had no idea what she'd done to him.

He'd taken two steps toward the door, then turned away. This was a rebound thing. She cared for her bastard boyfriend and needed time to heal after what he'd done to her. She wanted someone to comfort her, and he was the lucky bastard who happened to be around. That's what he told himself, because it was the truth. Besides, she was a client. Yeah, like that ever stopped any of them before, but he didn't want a casual relationship with River. She presented a danger to him in more ways than one.

"Okay," she said—his personal nemesis standing in front of him. "I'm ready."

Her words brought him back to the present. God, he had to start paying attention to the right here and right now.

"Well, I'm not sure I am." He spoke the gospel truth.

She flashed him a grin he remembered from their youth, and he had to fight not to answer it with one of his own. He noticed her hair appeared tamed, pulled back into a ponytail, and the clothes she now wore were less in your face, and the top of her head reached his chin. She'd changed clothes and shoes with her social secretary, Linda. They sometimes did that to throw off any paparazzi following them. Hopefully, the parasites would follow Linda and the limo back to the hotel.

Noah waited a few minutes after everyone left, until he got an all-clear call from Frank, then he snuck River out a private, rear entrance. It was dark, but the area was well lit, and there was no place for anyone to hide in the nearly empty parking lot. Still, he scanned the area for lurkers before taking her to his car, parked near the rear door.

River waited for him to get in and start his car before saying, "Don't worry. I promise I won't bite. Much."

If he thought he'd been hard before, he'd had no idea what hard meant. In such close quarters, surrounded by her familiar citrus fragrance, his stomach tensed up and his groin ached. His grip on the steering wheel tightened. He'd given her a bottle of that particular brand of perfume for her fifteenth birthday. And he'd sent her a bottle to her mother's house every birthday since. Even

through the years when he thought she'd hated him for leaving her, or forcing her to leave him, he still sent it, and liked that she never sent it back.

"Do we have to go to the restaurant?" she asked.

He glanced over at her. "You know I do. But if you don't feel like it, I can drop you off at the hotel. Frank followed the limo, so should already be there. He can guard you."

"No. I...I want to be with you."

Something in her voice seemed off. "What happened?"

She turned to stare out the window. At first, he thought she wasn't going to answer him, but then she spoke. "I got a package today."

"What? How the hell did that happen? The hotel was supposed to be secure." The reason they were staying in a hotel to begin with was because her place was being fumigated for rodents. Her housekeeper had seen two rats in the kitchen. At least, she swore they were rats and not mice. Didn't matter; River, along with the band members staying with her while they worked on her latest album, vacated the house for her favorite hotel. He didn't blame them. "Stupid question. Probably someone from the pest control company let the press know what happened, and of course, from there it's easy to figure out which hotel you'd move into. Everyone knows it's your favorite. You've advertised the place enough."

"Yeah." She shrugged. "And money makes people do a lot of things. It's the price of fame."

Since River hit the top of the charts, she'd gotten letters from fans, most harmless, some creepy. A few months before, one piece of correspondence in particular took on a psychotic bent. The nut case who wrote it claimed she belonged to him, and that in another life they'd been husband and wife, and he had a duty to instruct her. Other letters claimed she showed too much of his property in public, or he didn't like a particular word in one of her songs and she had to cease singing it. They were never signed, only rubberstamped with a blue rose design. A design that resembled her signature logo of a blue carnation, which appeared on all her albums.

One day, a blue rose appeared, tucked under the windshield wiper of her car,

and another was delivered to her recording studio. When someone tried to grab her in a parking lot one night, the police and everyone else around her took the threats against her more seriously. She didn't see the person who had come up behind her and seized her around the waist and neck, but she'd put up a fight. A passing car scared the person off.

Now she rarely ventured anywhere alone, which she didn't like, and all her mail and packages were screened before she touched them. But things had been quiet for weeks, and they'd become complacent. In his business, always a dangerous thing.

"You still need to be cautious." He frowned. "Maybe we should have moved you someplace else."

"Too late now," she said.

He raised his arm to tap the Bluetooth receiver on his ear to call Frank, when she stopped him. "No, it's okay. It wasn't exactly a package. Poor choice of words. It was only a half dozen blue carnations tied with a black ribbon."

"That shouldn't have upset you." He wondered why no one told him about the flowers, and who sent them to her. He didn't have to wonder long.

"They were from Earl."

He quickly turned his head in her direction. "Dammit! How did those get through to you?" He was going to beat the shit outta someone for this screw up. Earl Kline was her bastard ex-boyfriend, the wannabe singer who put his hand on her face and now sat in a jail cell. "How did Earl manage to arrange for flowers to be sent to you?"

"He probably got one of his friends to send them to me."

"You should have refused delivery."

"They'd already been checked as harmless and sent up to the suite. One of my people took them along with the card. They were sitting in a vase on the table in the entryway, and I glanced at the card." She smoothed some loose strands of hair away from her face. "I threw both the flowers and the card in the trash. Happy now?"

"Not quite. What did that degenerate say?"

She sighed, staring straight ahead. He turned into the driveway of the

restaurant, but instead of pulling up to the valet area, he parked the car himself and shut off the engine.

“Well?”

“He said he was sorry, and asked me to come and see him.”

“Like hell if I’ll allow that.”

Her head turned slowly in his direction, and her gaze locked onto his. Uh-oh. He should have known better. He almost groaned. Stupid, stupid, stupid. Never, ever give a woman an ultimatum, especially a woman like River. The last time he’d done that, she’d left him...or he’d left her.

“What did you say?”

But he’d be damned if he’d take it back. She opened the door and headed toward the restaurant entrance. He jumped out and hurried after her, coming up behind her to hear her ask a valet to call her a cab.

“Ignore that,” he said to the young man. “I’ll take you back to the hotel.” The valet prudently left them alone.

She swung around to face him, both anger and sadness shining in her green-eyed gaze. At least the swelling on her lip had gone down. He never in his life wanted to see her face marred like that again.

“No. Like you said, you have to be at the restaurant.”

He grabbed her elbow and walked her back to his car. He was surprised she didn’t pull away again.

Nothing was going as it should. But River was never the type to give in to what life dictated. Like her parents before her, she tended to make her own rules. Who would have ever thought a woman reared on a farm in Wales and a man raised in a poverty-stricken village in Ethiopia would meet and have anything in common, much less get married—and stay that way for thirty years. But that described her parents. Lilly and Amare Blu gave that same determination to their only child. She went her own way. That kind of drive showed in the unique mix of her music and shot her to the top of several recording charts. It also landed her in trouble.

She'd never loved Earl. She'd only loved one man for all her life, and he stood in front of her. All six-foot-two, blond-haired, cobalt-blue-eyed, solid muscle of him. But he didn't know it. Nor would she enlighten him. He hated her. Oh, he desired her, but he hated her too. And she still wanted him. Complicated didn't begin to explain their relationship, such as it was.

Earl suspected she had a past with Noah, and that she hoped for a present. Knowing he only had half of her attention drove him over the edge. Hell, less than half, because her music held most of it. Her music meant refuge and salvation, and saved her after Noah left her. Earl had been okay with music coming first with her, until the day Noah showed up. Even though she thought her feelings for Noah were in the past, one second in his presence and she knew that for a lie. So did Earl. She'd never told Noah they'd fought over him the night Earl struck her. But she suspected Noah had guessed they'd argued, and that he was the cause. She'd refused to hire a different security firm. She wasn't sorry when she returned home from the doctor and Linda told her Noah had beat the crap out of Earl. She'd like to give him a good kick herself. Bastard struck a woman. Struck *her*.

"I'm sorry to take you away from your friends," she finally said, trying to rein in her instinctive reaction to lash out at him for putting her in this position. She enjoyed being in control, but she never could control Noah.

Usually their shared background didn't bother her much. She couldn't change things or make up for old regrets. She had been young and stupid, but maybe she needed to let Noah go in order to discover the depths of her talent. And her music...she'd never give that up. Not even for Noah. After the threatening letters, her mother said she would call Noah. She didn't protest. She'd been uneasy. Since he'd shown up, she hadn't had a moment's worry, yet, she was still scared, just for different reasons. While Earl hurt her body, Noah could destroy her soul. The thought of him leaving her again...well, it terrified her. Her music might not be able to save her a second time. Perhaps the time had come to clear the air and put what happened behind them.

"It's okay, they won't even notice I'm not there." He pulled out his cell and called Ross to let him know they weren't going to make the dinner.

“I’ve missed you. I’ve missed my best friend.” The words popped out before she could call them back.

His gaze clashed with hers. At one time, she’d known every curve of his face. The man could still name his price in any modeling agency in New York or L.A. There were new lines at the sides of his sexy mouth, but those just made him seem more masculine, and his eyes had really aged after he enlisted.

She almost smiled at the surprised expression on his face. She didn’t know what prompted her to tell him she missed him. Maybe she did. In truth, she’d been wondering how the man he had become made love, as compared to the boy who had been her first love. Her woman’s intuition told her, as good as it had been between them when they were kids, it would be even better now. The handsome boy with his whipcord leanness had turned into a man with strength to showcase all that leanness. His lanky frame had filled out with exactly the right amount of muscle. Big enough she’d need two hands to wrap around those biceps, but not so bulked up he couldn’t easily wrap his arms around her.

His hair had gotten darker with age, no longer that light blond, but still cut short. The scar over his eyebrow saved him from having too-perfect features. A scar he had come by in war. Those dark blue eyes were sharper and didn’t miss much; she had a hard time staring into them without wanting to lose herself in there.

But he hated her. That knowledge only made her act more the prima donna around him than usual. Treating him like hired help, instead of the man trying to keep her safe.

Perhaps she’d never gotten over him leaving her. The attraction between them still drew her to him. If they could just sleep together once more, maybe they could get it out of their systems and get on track with their lives.

It seemed like an eternity before he finally replied to what she’d admitted.

“Yeah. Me too.”

“Thank you for everything you’ve done, and I’m sorry for not always doing as you’ve asked.” Then she changed the subject before he could reply. “I really like Ross and Shanna. They’re good people and make a beautiful couple.”

“Apology accepted. And yeah, they’re the best, and they do. Thank you for

singing at their wedding.”

“Not a problem.” She didn’t want to say it was her way of staying close to him. She liked his friends and wanted to get to know them better. People who were important to him—the way she used to be. She put her head back and closed her eyes. Sometimes this business jaded a person, so it wasn’t always easy to tell friend from foe. In spite of their history, or maybe because of it, she could trust Noah be her friend. She pressed her fingertips on her left temple and massaged the area.

“A headache?”

Trust him to notice. “A small one, nothing ibuprofen can’t handle. It’s stress.” She laughed.

“What’s so funny?” Noah asked.

“Nothing. Can’t remember the last time I ate, so I think this may be from hunger.”

“We’ll be back at the hotel in a couple of minutes. I’ll order you room service.”

“Hmm, what if I said I don’t want to go back to the hotel? Too much stress there, and I don’t really feel like dealing with all that right now.”

“What—you’re kidding me. I thought you enjoyed all that center-of-the-universe bull.”

“Most nights, not this one.” As soon as she walked in, there’d be at least two people waiting to pounce on her with questions. Her manager and secretary, for starters. They still needed her answer. She hadn’t decided whether to do the winter concert after performing in ten US cities in fifteen days, followed by a sixty-day world tour. She still had to finish the new album too. They hadn’t even gotten through this first concert. Decisions, decisions.

“When was the last time you took a vacation?” he asked. “A real one.”

“Vacation? What’s that?”

“Yeah, I hear ya. But seriously.”

“I haven’t taken a break in years. There’s a reason my albums sell well. I either spend all my time in the studio or on a bus or plane. I stay visible. I’ve got homes in three places, but I’m never around long enough to watch the grass grow.”

“I’ve lived here for the last two years and love it. But don’t you spend most of

your time here in L.A.?”

“Actually, no. Most of the time I’m on the East Coast.” After the attack, she hid out at her parents’ farm. They owned about a hundred acres of land in the Shenandoah Valley, West Virginia. No reporter could get on the land without trespassing. In that area of the country, everyone carried firearms, and the locals didn’t take kindly to trespassers, so she’d been able to heal in peace. That only lasted about a week, though, before she got antsy and had to return to the studio again, working on what she hoped would be her best album ever, which said a lot considering all of her others won awards.

“All right,” Noah said. “Where would you like to go instead? I guess we can go to another restaurant.”

“Not exactly what I had in mind, either. The minute I stepped inside a place, there’d be cameras all in my face.”

He glanced in the rear view mirror, something he’d been doing periodically since leaving the church. Something he always did when he drove. Must be a bodyguard thing.

“True,” he said. “We’re lucky there aren’t any on our tail now. I suspect they think you’re either back at the hotel with the rest of your crowd or maybe at the restaurant. So where do you want to go?”

“Take me home with you.” She took a chance with her request, but she had nothing to lose and maybe something to gain—if only for one night.

“What!” Again, his head swung around to stare at her before facing the road again. He’d looked at her a lot tonight, but then again, she’d been saying some surprising things.

She didn’t know if she should laugh or cry at the shock in his voice and the expression of horror on his face. That told her a lot, so she played it cool. Forever the diva rock star. “Chill. I’d like to see where you live. That’s all. No big deal. I just don’t want to go back to the hotel tonight and face the posse.” She sighed. “I’d like one evening of peace and quiet.” Which was the truth. She also wanted to spend that evening with him—in bed, if she could work it.

The silence lasted so long she didn’t think he’d agree. “There’s no food at my house,” he finally said.

She forced herself not to smile, to show him her pleasure in getting him to take her home. He never could resist her. “I’m not picky. I haven’t had a really good pizza in ages.”

“Thin crust with pepperoni and extra cheese.”

She grinned. “You remembered.”

“Works for me. I’ll let Frank know you’re not going to return to the hotel tonight.”

He placed the call, spoke for a couple of minutes then hung up. “They’re not back at the hotel yet. Jefferson wanted to stop to get some food somewhere.” He made another call and placed the pizza order. “That’s done. My place isn’t far. The pizza should be there a few minutes after we get home.”

Home. He had a place he referred to as home. She’d lost hers the day he left her—or she left him. After all these years, it was no longer so clear to her.

Chapter Three

River didn't know if being alone with him was the right thing to do, but she'd gone long past caring. She wanted one night with him. Just one, being his River again, before she went back to being the person everyone expected her to be. *The female rock star of the ages*. She read the tabloids.

The place Noah called home surprised her, but then she really didn't know this Noah. But whatever she expected, it wasn't anything like the very modern, very California, Spanish style rambler. Noah was a country boy, like her, comfortable in the mountains. This was California. A far cry from the blue-tipped mountains back home, but maybe not so different after all. There was the outline of hills in the distance.

"Not what you're accustomed to, I'm sure." He pulled into a short driveway and cut off the engine. "But still a far cry from the Shenandoah Valley."

They got out of the car, and she heard the crash of waves against the shore. They were near the ocean. Noah loved water almost as much as the mountains. He opened his front door. Waving before him, he indicated she should go in first. She stepped into a wide, gray ceramic tiled foyer and had to walk down two steps the width of the room. One continuous great room encompassed a living, dining, and kitchen area, done in shades of sea blue and gray. The sickle shape of the room created various focal points from any location. To the shuttered windows taking up most of the room, to the huge stone fireplace with a painting of those very mountains they hailed from.

She walked directly over to the door in-between the windows, unlocked, and opened it. Moving out onto the wooden deck, she stood at the railing.

"Mmm, I think I understand why you bought this place." He came to stand beside her, resting his arms on the wooden railing and looking out over the Pacific Ocean. A fine mist obscured the scenery, so she couldn't see much. "I bet when the sun's up, this is a spectacular view."

"Yeah, it is."

She twisted so she could lean her elbow on the rail while facing him. “You’ve done well for yourself.” Her hand rose to rest on his forearm. “Your dad would be proud of you.”

His father died just right before Noah joined the military, and they had been close.

“Yeah.” He stared at her hand resting on his arm before looking into her eyes. “I know.”

“I’m proud of you.”

He straightened, but before she could move away, he covered her fingers with his. “Are you really?”

“Of course I am.”

“Funny. I thought you hated me.”

“For a long time, I thought I did.” She didn’t have the courage to ask him if he still hated her. He’d cared about her, and she’d hurt him. Hurt them both. Still, it was years ago.

“What happened?” he asked.

“I grew up.” She turned to gaze out at the dark water. “Do you still play?” She wondered if he’d recognized the song she sang at the rehearsal. Not the words—those were new. She wrote them the night he walked back into her life, lyrics for the music he’d created for her when they were both teens.

“Sometimes.”

She turned to face him. “But still not in front of an audience.” From the way his body tensed, she knew she’d guessed right. “Your friends don’t know, do they?”

“No. It’s...too personal.”

“I understand. Will you play for me?” She wanted to know if that bond still existed between them. For a moment she thought he’d refuse, but then he moved away from her, back into the house. He returned a moment later, with his case. The same one he’d had ten years ago. She’d sent it to him after he’d left. He placed it on the small table and removed the violin. She sat down on the lounge chair and watched him, his movements so familiar because she’d watched him do this countless times. Then he played.

She didn't know how long she sat there, unable to take her eyes off him. The clouds shifted, revealing a strip of moonlight that framed his left side, and the music surrounded the night. Bringing light to the darkness. He played their song, and she sang. Her voice blended perfectly with the melody. They made beautiful music together. They always had. Finally, he stopped and placed the violin back in its case.

She got off the lounge and came over to him. When he straightened up, she stood in front of him and did what she'd wanted to do for years. She put her free hand around his neck and brought his face down to hers. He didn't resist. His mouth covered hers, and his tongue didn't bother to ask for permission before its entrance.

This time no boy kissed her—an experienced male in his prime led their kiss. She hummed into his mouth.

“Oh, God!” he moaned, as his arms around her waist pulled her flush against his hard thighs and his even harder arousal. He lifted her until she stood on her toes, as if to bring her under his skin. She wanted to crawl into him.

Putting thought to action, she pulled back and tugged at his shirt, but a pounding on the front door finally registered in her hearing.

“Shit!” he said, resting his forehead against hers. “I better get that.”

Grabbing the violin case, he walked away from her and back through the open door. She remained on the deck, looking up at the sky, enjoying the cool night breeze against her flushed skin. Waiting for Noah to come back heat her up some more. But instead of the feel of his warmth around her, she heard his voice calling her inside for a slice of pizza.

She turned toward the door, but he'd already moved back toward the kitchen area. There was no table, just a center island with a couple of high-backed stools, on the other side of the range. The pizza lay on the counter, and he'd already put out napkins. He opened up the refrigerator when she sat down. His violin case was nowhere in sight.

“I've got a couple of beers.” He glanced at the counter near the sink where a small wine rack held two bottles. “And red wine.”

“Beer's fine,” she said. “You still play beautifully, even better than when we

were kids.”

“Thank you.” He grabbed two chilled bottles from the fridge, opened them, and sat down. She raised her beer. “Here’s to old friends.”

“I can drink to that.” He touched his bottle to hers.

“Did you like it?” she asked, after taking a sip. “The words I added?”

“Yes. They fit.”

“I’m going to give you credit for the music.”

His body stiffened. “Don’t. It was always yours.” He picked up a slice of pizza.

She followed his lead, but she was no longer hungry, at least not for food. But she didn’t know how to get back to where they had been on the deck, because she was sure he’d put on the brakes.

And he still denied his music. His father had taught him, and he’d only ever played for his father—and for her. Because he played for her tonight, that gave her hope they might have a relationship, but he still didn’t trust her. She didn’t blame him; she’d given him plenty of reasons. Unsure herself what she wanted from him. At that moment she had one need. For him to make love to her tonight and remind her at least one person simply wanted her for herself.

When he finished the slice of pizza and picked up his beer again, she stared at him until he put it down, then rested her hand over his. “Make love to me, Noah.”

“What? Wait.” He shook his head. “I’m sorry—that shouldn’t have happened earlier. I’m not...I’m not sure what the hell that was.” He didn’t move his fingers from under hers, though.

“Oh. I think you do. We’ve been dancing around each other since you came back into my life again. There’s still something between us. Don’t try to analyze it.”

“But you see, it’s my business to analyze things.”

She got off the stool and turned him around to face her. “Not tonight.” Stepping between his legs, she wrapped her arms around his neck. “Make love to me tonight. Help me forget who I am. Help me remember who I was.”

“And what happens tomorrow?” His words were soft.

“Whatever comes, comes.”

He must have been out of his mind. Why the hell did he bring her to his home? Much less play the violin for her. He never, ever played for anyone. His music was private. Not even his closest friends, Ross and Simon, knew he played. But he suspected why he did it. River. He wanted her to get to know him again, to remind her what they meant to each other, and because he still wanted her. He'd never stopped.

When a woman like River Blu threw herself at him, what red-blooded, card-carrying heterosexual male said no? He'd worry about the repercussions later. He could make love to her and keep his heart out of it, he told himself. He'd done it before with other women, and he had a hot, luscious woman wrapped around him. He'd learned a lot about pleasing a woman since the first and only time they'd made love. Knowledge he would willingly share with her.

He placed his hands under her butt, lifting her as he stood up. "Wrap your legs around me?"

"You're crazy," she laughed.

"Yeah, but do it anyway."

She did, and he covered her mouth with his, placing kisses on her neck as he navigated his way to his bedroom. He laid her on the comforter and moved away.

"I'm going to pull back the shutters." He continued toward the windows and opened the shutters wide. "I think in the morning, you'll love to see the beach."

They couldn't see the ocean, but they could hear the sound of the surf. Not much beat making love to a woman with the sound of the water roaring in his ears. He turned to gaze at the beautiful woman on his bed, and his heart missed a beat. He moved back to the bed and shut off the bedside lamp. His house sat up on a hill, and no one could see into the bedroom from the beach. Even if they could, he wouldn't care, but with River, he preferred caution.

Although caution wasn't on his mind as he reached for one of her feet. He undid the straps of first one sandal, then reached for her other foot and did the same. He dropped both sandals to the floor. "Aren't these more comfortable than those five-inch monstrosities you normally wear?"

“For your information, they’re only four inches, and I usually don’t have to walk around in them for very long.”

“Mmm.” He moved up to unsnap her jeans, and she tugged on the shoulders of his shirt. “Patience,” he told her. “Let me undress you first, and then I promise I’ll get just as naked.”

“Well, when you put it that way,” she purred.

She relaxed back into the pillows, and he straddled both legs, watching her while he undressed her. The chiming of his cell distracted him from the sight of her zebra thong. Bending down, he picked up the phone he hadn’t even realized had fallen to the floor from his pocket. His eyes were still on her when he answered it.

“What?” he said into the phone.

“There’s been an incident. Linda was attacked at the hotel—she’s in the hospital.” Frank’s words took the fire out of his blood and sent chills down his spine.

“Be right there.”

“What’s going on?” River asked.

He tugged her off the bed, pulling her jeans back up around her hips.

“Something’s happened. We’ve got to go.”

He picked up her shoes, putting them on her feet, in more of a hurry to get them on than he had been to take them off.

“What happened?” She snapped her jeans.

“I don’t know all the details, but that was Frank. One of your people was attacked at the hotel.”

“What? Who?”

“Your secretary, Linda.”

“Oh, God. No. Is she going to be all right? What happened? Where is she?”

“Come on. She’s at the hospital.”

Silence filled the interior of the car as they raced to the hospital. The kind of

silence that held fear she never wanted to experience again. The knots in her stomach pulled tight, giving her cramps. Linda was more than a personal secretary; she was like a sister. The only person other than her parents who knew what Noah once meant to her.

Noah had been on the phone twice more since they left his house. The hospital wasn't very far, but every mile dragged into five. She couldn't help feeling somehow responsible for whatever happened to Linda.

"You know, she's my best friend," River whispered. "The one who's stayed by me all these years of insanity."

"I know," he said. "She told me once you met when you waitressed together at some bar."

"Yes. It was Linda who put my name down the night I won the singing contest that started my career. We've always taken care of each other. She kept warning me against Earl, from the first time she laid eyes on him." She'd also been the one that night who stopped him from beating her to death. "I need her to be all right. This is my fault." Tears slowly coursed down her cheeks.

Noah took her hand and squeezed it. "Whatever's happened, this is not your fault. And I know Linda won't blame you."

They parked and ran to the emergency entrance. Frank and her manager, Jefferson, met them as soon as they came through the door.

"How is she?" she asked looking back and forth between the two men.

Jefferson opened his arms and she stepped into his embrace. "She's still in surgery," he said.

She stepped away from him but kept hold of his arm. "What...what happened?"

A flash went off, blinding her, and Noah shouted, "Get her out of here."

Jefferson wrapped his arm around her and backed her away from the multiple cameras and paparazzi suddenly appearing in the hospital and blocking the emergency room entrance. Frank and Noah spread their arms wide and stood in front of them, keeping them from following her. Jefferson took her over to the row of elevators and got her on the first one that opened. Right before the doors closed, she saw nurses and security people helping her bodyguards to get rid of

the photographers.

“Shit!” she cried. “Bloody damn parasites.”

“Ones that we need, babe.”

She stepped away from him. “Not now. I don’t need this right now.” The elevator stopped, and the door opened. “Where are we?”

“Come on. We can wait in peace here. Frank and I were only down there waiting for you.”

A nurse’s station was staffed by four women, but only one looked up and nodded at them. Jefferson seemed to know where they were going because he didn’t bother to ask for directions. He turned right, then left down a long corridor, stopping at the first set of double doors they came to. He pushed the doors open for her to enter a small waiting area furnished with a long couch, a few chairs against the walls, and a large, flat-screen TV in the corner tuned to a movie with the volume on low. Thankfully, no one else occupied the room.

She didn’t bother to sit down, just turned to face her manager. “Now tell me what the hell happened to Linda? She is...is she going to be all right?”

He placed his hands on her shoulders and squeezed them before lowering his arms. “She got hurt pretty badly, but she’s going to be all right. Nothing that can’t be fixed.”

She paced in front of him. “What the hell happened?”

“After we left you, I took everyone for takeout, then we went back to the hotel and ate up in my room. I wanted to make sure our people got a restful night so we’d be in shape for the video shoot tomorrow. Which I’ve already cancelled.”

“Good.”

“Anyway, Linda said she was tired and wanted to change then go to bed. She still had that wig and your clothes on. I walked over to your suite with her, but stayed outside a minute to confirm something. God, I’m sorry I left her alone. If I’d only stayed until she’d changed.” He raked a shaking hand through his hair. She’d never seen pulled-together, calm, cool Jefferson rattled. “She...she was attacked there.”

“What...” Strong arms slid around her, holding her close against a solid chest. She shivered and glanced over her shoulder. “Noah,” she moaned turning her

face into his embrace.

“Come on, baby, sit down.” He guided her over to an armchair and sat on its edge with his arm around her shoulder, hers on his thigh. She didn’t know how long they sat there before she could gather her thoughts.

“Go on,” she said to Jefferson, but Frank answered her question about what happened.

“Apparently, Linda surprised someone who’d snuck into your room. He was waiting in the bedroom closet.”

She stared at Frank, a horrible thought forming. “For me. He was waiting for me, wasn’t he?”

“Now, we don’t know that for sure—” Jefferson began.

“Bullshit,” Noah growled. “We damn well know the attack was meant for River. What I want to know is how the hell he got in there?”

Her head rested against Noah’s side, the vibration of his heartbeat echoing against her body. She didn’t have to see his face to know he was angry and scared for her. He also probably thought he’d failed her. But he hadn’t; he’d saved her. If he hadn’t taken her home, she would be lying on a surgical table, or worse, but at the same time she’d gladly change places with her friend.

“Go on, Frank...what...what happened?” she managed to ask from within the comfort and security of Noah’s arms.

Frank took a step forward. “He must have surprised her, grabbed her, and dragged her into the bathroom. At that point, he must have realized it wasn’t you. He had her for about ten minutes.”

“That’s ten minutes more than he should have even been there, Frank. I swear, we’re going to get to the bottom of this fuck up.” Noah tightened his arm around her shoulder.

“I told you, I think this guy was already in the suite. No way he got past me.”

“He got past you at least once,” Noah all but growled.

“No way. No fucking way.”

“Wait a minute. Are you saying you didn’t see anyone enter or leave my suite?” River asked.

“That’s exactly what I’m saying. I was standing beside the door when Jefferson

accompanied Linda into the suite, Jefferson came right back out. About ten minutes passed, and there was no sign of Linda when she'd said she'd be right out before she'd gone in. I tapped on the door, but got no answer, so I opened it, calling her name, and still got no reply. I checked the suite, knocked on the bedroom door, then opened it. There was no sign of Linda, but the bathroom door was closed. That's where I found her. I immediately called for an ambulance. I didn't want to leave her until help arrived. It took maybe seven minutes for the EMTs to get there, along with the police. I didn't hear or see anyone else going in or out of there until the cops showed up."

"Do you think one of my people did this?" Her voice trembled in outrage, just voicing the question.

"No, absolutely not," Jefferson said, shaking his head.

"Wait a second. Are you saying the only people who entered were the emergency folks and the cops?" Noah asked.

"Yeah. That's what I'm trying to tell you."

"I want to see the video feed on that floor for who came in and who came out," Noah told Jefferson.

"I'm on it." Jefferson stepped away from them and pulled out his cell phone.

"Go on, Frank." River leaned forward. "Finish it; tell me all of it. What happened to Linda?"

"I'm sorry. He had enough time to do some serious damage. He used a knife on her." Frank paused, his gaze shifting to Noah sitting behind her for confirmation to continue.

She shook her head. "I want to know. I need to know all of it." She held a fist to her chest. "Linda is like a sister to me. That should have been me in there. Tell me all of it," she repeated, hanging onto Noah's hand and leaning into him for strength.

Frank took a deep breath. "He'd used something, maybe chloroform, to knock her out, so she felt nothing. She'd been wearing that wig to appear more like you. He pulled that off and hacked off her hair. Then he carved a line on the side on her face, and the design of a flower on her stomach."

"My God! Oh, my God!" River cried. Noah picked her up and sat down,

bringing her to sit on his lap, wrapping his arms around her. She had no idea how long she cried while he held her.

“Excuse me.”

They all swung in the direction of the voice. A man dressed in olive green scrubs stood in the doorway. Before he could say another word, River stood up and asked, “Is Linda going to be all right?”

He walked toward them and reached toward her. “You must be River Blu.” He shook her hand. “I’m Doctor Barker.” He looked at Noah, who’d shifted to stand beside her, then nodded at Jefferson and Frank. “Yes. Your friend is going to be fine. She’s in recovery right now. The wounds weren’t life threatening, and I managed to repair most of the superficial damage. Now, she’ll have some slight scarring on her stomach, even less on her face. Nothing that makeup can’t cover.”

Relief overwhelmed her. “Thank God.” The bones in her legs lost the ability to hold her up, but Noah stopped her fall.

Chapter Four

He'd known she'd show up at the hospital sooner or later. *Goddammit!* He hadn't meant to come out of the shadows for nothing. It was supposed to have been *her*. Not the other one, that bitch girlfriend of hers who still hung around. At least he had the satisfaction of a little payback. He remembered well how Linda used to make fun of him. Thinking of the knife slicing into Linda's skin gave him great satisfaction. She wouldn't be making fun of anybody anytime soon. In those days, River had been the only one who paid him any attention at all, but mostly even she ignored him. Now, River would be more wary than ever. He grinned. All part of the fun. Having her scared showed she respected him, took him seriously. She'd no longer ignore him.

He had to be patient; sooner or later another opportunity would present itself. River needed to be taught a lesson. She shouldn't be singing about sex and making love with other men, dressing like that for anyone else but him. She used to tell him he was her number one fan and always waited for his thumbs-up when he watched her perform a couple of nights a week. At those times, she paid him the most attention, but that was before she'd been *discovered*. Still, her siren's voice was meant for him, would belong to him alone, once he took her. Tamed her.

Movement brought him out of his thoughts. There were too many people around for him to try to get into the hospital room unseen. As the security people moved forward to keep back the photographers, he slipped away into the shadows. He'd wait. It was what he did best. He'd return to the hotel, make sure her stuff hadn't been moved. She'd come back for her things or someone would take them to her. Either way, he'd find her again. *Patience*.

Noah had his arms around River because he needed to hold her, to know she was

safe, and also to hold her up if she needed it. As she did at the moment.

“River, Dr. Barker is a top plastic surgeon,” Jefferson spoke up. “I called your personal physician in route to the hospital, and he recommended him. Luckily for us, the doctor happened to already be here visiting a patient.”

“Thank you, Doctor,” Noah said.

“When can I see her?” River straightened up, holding on to Noah’s arm.

“Right now. I understand that you’re listed as her emergency contact. But only you and one other person, please. She’s still not fully awake.”

River glanced up at Noah. “Come with me.”

He took her arm, glad she’d asked for him to go with her. They followed the doctor back down the hall, past the nurse’s station, and through a set of double doors. He led them to the second door in the unit. The uniformed police officer stationed in front of the door clued them in to which room belonged to Linda.

“It’s all right,” the doctor told the officer. “This is Ms. Blu, who is listed as Ms. Lake’s next of kin.” He turned back to River and Noah. “Please don’t stay long. What your friend needs now is rest and time to heal.”

“Thank you, Doctor.” River shook his hand. “Thank you.”

“I’ll check on her again in the morning.”

Noah nodded to the guard, and they entered the room. River walked over to Linda’s bedside and took her hand, the one free of tubes. Tears ran unheeded down her face. Her friend’s head looked exactly like Frank said. Someone had taken a knife to it and hacked off her hair. It hadn’t been as long and thick as River’s, but now, it sat on her scalp in uneven nubs. White padding covered the side of Linda’s face.

He put his arm around River’s waist. “She’s going to be fine.”

“I know.”

“And I don’t want you to worry. I’m going to find out who did this. I swear to you.”

She turned to face him. “I know that too. I remember.”

He’d made another promise to her a long time ago, to be home for her eighteenth birthday. He smiled. “Yep, I keep my promises.” At least one of them.

“I know.” She moved closer to Linda and kissed the undamaged side of her

face. Squeezing her leg, she backed away.

“Come on,” he said.

“I don’t understand, Noah. How could this happen? Why attack Linda?”

“He thought she was you.” He didn’t add the bastard probably intended to either take her or kill her. While he could feel sorrow about what happened to Linda, the thought that River might have been killed put ice in his veins. “I fully intend to find out how in hell the bastard got in. And take steps to make sure it doesn’t happen again.”

They were approaching the waiting area, but River stopped in front of the door and placed his palm on her chest. “Don’t make promises to me you can’t keep. Fate has a habit of getting in our way.”

“Not this time. I’m not letting you out of my sight until this maniac is caught.”

“So what do you plan on doing? Gluing me to your side?”

He stroked the side of her face. “You’re goddamned right.” He noticed Jefferson standing at the door. He came over and interrupted them. That was the only thing stopping Noah from taking her in his arms and kissing her.

“How’s she doing?” Jefferson asked.

“She’s sleeping,” River said. “Oh God, Jefferson, her face.” The man opened his arms, and River went to embrace him. Noah’d never really noticed, but some women might find Jefferson attractive. Noah found him soft, with his thousand-dollar, custom-made suits, meticulous air and a natural tan some people spent a fortune to achieve. More focused on his career and not really interested in a relationship. But something in the way he held River had alarm bells going off in Noah’s head.

A surge of adrenalin wound its way through Noah’s system; his body leaned forward to take River away from Jefferson before he realized what he was doing. *Mine*. The thought vibrated through the cells of his body; he used every disciple he knew to relax his posture. That might have been the truth at one time, but not anymore, River wasn’t his. Sexual attraction, that’s all they now shared. Well, almost sex. She backed up out of Jefferson’s embrace and turned those beautiful, green, tear-filled eyes to his. Yeah, except he wasn’t so sure about anything anymore.

“What’s the plan?” Frank asked.

“Have you heard anything about the video from the hotel yet?”

“No,” Jefferson said. “But I’m not sure there’s been enough time to get it. I spoke to the hotel manager and told him we needed it ASAP. He said he’d call his security people to have them pull it for us.”

“The cops will be asking for it, too,” Frank said.

“Yeah, but I want a look at it,” Noah insisted. “More eyes on it, the better. The police might already be there trying to get a copy of it. I want one too.”

“I’ve already called Simon to tell him what happened,” Frank said. “He told me to tell you he can go over to the hotel if you need him to.”

“River can’t go back to that hotel.” Noah shook his head. “Her room’s now a crime scene, and it’s no longer safe.”

“I know. I’ve already made arrangements at another hotel. One not quite as well-known.”

“What about the crew and my stuff?” River asked.

“They should already be on the way over there,” Jefferson said. “Patti packed a few things for you and took it over, but I’ll go back tomorrow and have the maids pack up the rest.”

“I’ll text you the address for the new hotel,” Frank said.

Noah couldn’t fault Jefferson. He was actually a pretty good manager. “Good. I’m going to take River over there. Tell Simon to wait to hear from me,” he told Frank. “At no time should River be alone until this bastard is caught. And I want all her rooms swept before she sets foot in them.” He glanced at Jefferson. “Tell this new hotel no packages are to be sent up to her rooms.”

“Okay,” Jefferson agreed. “I’ll meet you all back there, and hopefully by then, have news about the video.”

“What about all the press waiting for me downstairs?” River looked from one to the other.

“I’ll take you out another way?” Noah said. “Through the delivery entrance in the kitchens.” He turned to Frank and Jefferson. “You two go out the front.”

“Should I make a brief statement?” Jefferson asked. “By now I’m sure someone’s told the press about the attack.”

“Mmm, yeah. That might work. Just say one of River’s associates was attacked, and she’s visiting her friend.”

“I know how to play this, and I’ll keep it brief.”

“Fine. You two go ahead first. We’ll follow behind you.”

River had been quiet, not common for her. “You okay?” Noah gave her a hug.

She wrapped her arms around his waist. “As long as you’re with me, I will be.”

He kissed the top of her hair and led her out to the elevator. They kept their arms around each other. When the elevator opened up on the cafeteria level, they got off. He’d been in this particular hospital before and knew the layout. They’d once been bodyguards to a high profile CFO. He didn’t want the press to know about his surgery for fear it would affect the stocks. They had come in through the cafeteria entrance and left that way. No one saw them. Noah used the same route now and hid River in the loading area while he went to the parking lot, making sure no one paid him any attention by walking unhurriedly to his car. He drove back to the delivery entrance and texted River. She came right out and got into the passenger seat.

“Now what?” she asked.

“Now, we go back to the hotel and take a glance at that footage.”

“And afterward?”

“Depends on what we find on the video. But until this is over, I don’t leave your side, unless either Frank or Simon is with you.”

He could hear her taking a deep breath. “It’s going to be okay,” he said. “I promise.”

“Maybe.”

“Another thing. You won’t be staying at the hotel.”

“I’m not?” she asked. “Then where will I stay?”

He turned toward her, only to find her gaze already on him. “With me, at my place.”

“Okay. When Jefferson brings my stuff to the new hotel tomorrow, I’ll grab a few bags.”

He shook his head. “No. You won’t be there that long, and you won’t take anything. As far as anyone is concerned, that’s where you still are. That includes

your people. You're gonna be too upset to see anyone. Whoever attacked Linda knew where you were staying. He managed not only to get in, but out without anyone seeing him. The fewer people who know where you are or aren't, the better. He found you once, he can find you again, especially if you stay in a local hotel."

"Jefferson will know I'm not there."

"Yeah, but he's not going to know where you are. Only that you're with me. I'll leave Frank and Simon to work with him on keeping your people calm and letting him communicate with you."

"How long do you think I have to stay with you? I do have an album to finish. And there's a concert coming up. We cancelled the rehearsal for tomorrow, but more rehearsals are scheduled for next week."

"You'll stay hidden until this nut job is caught. Let's take it one step at a time. First, we examine the video, and then we make a plan."

Noah didn't add he also intended to take the opportunity to find out once and for all if there was still something between them. Because God knew he'd never quite gotten over her. He stopped at a light and picked up her hand which was resting on the console between them. When she didn't immediately pull back, he raised it to his lips. Continuing to hold onto it, he placed it on his thigh, taking pleasure from the fact she didn't try to move it, but squeezed him instead.

Frank was waiting for them in a secluded underground parking area of the hotel and took them up to the hotel room in the freight elevator. When they got there, a heavysset man sat on the couch with a laptop on the table in front of him.

"Noah, River, this is Mr. Doggin, head of the other hotel's security," Frank said.

"Well, did the video show anything?" Noah stood near the table, River at his side.

"Yeah, it did," Frank said. "We've been viewing the footage."

"Look for yourself." Doggin angled the laptop so Noah could better see the screen. Doggin touched a few keys, and the screen expanded to a wide view of the hallway. It showed a rather large man—judging from the doorways he passed, under six feet—dressed in a hotel employee uniform entering the suite. He kept

his back to the camera.

“Were you able to get a shot of this guy’s face from a different angle?” Noah pointed at the screen.

“Only in profile. It’s like he knew exactly where the cameras were placed and kept his face away from them,” Doggin said.

“Do you recognize him?” Frank asked.

“No, but I don’t know all of the employees.”

There was a knock at the door, and Frank answered it. Jefferson came into the room, and they introduced him to Doggin.

“What took you so long?” River asked.

“Went back to check on Linda one last time.”

“Good,” River said.

“What’s going on?” Jefferson asked.

“Take a look at the picture on the computer screen,” Noah said. “This is the guy who entered the room.” He glanced over at River, but included Jefferson in his question. “Do either one of you recognize this guy?”

They shook their heads.

“I’ll print up a few pictures and pass them around to the staff,” Doggin said. “See if anyone recognizes him. And I’ve already sent the video feed to the police.”

“Okay, good,” Noah said. “Do you think you can send it to our people, too? We have facial enhancing software that could be helpful.”

“Sure.”

“Was there any footage of him leaving?” Noah glanced up from the screen.

“No. He’s the only one who entered the suite, and there’s no shot of him coming out. Ms. Blu’s suite and the three others for her people are the only rooms on that side of the building, but there’s no connecting door in her room to any of the others. I checked the video from the time he entered until over an hour later when the police arrived. The only other people entering the suite before that were Mr. Jefferson and the young lady who was attacked, and Mr. Jefferson was the only one who left.”

Noah frowned. “Then how did this guy get out?”

“Maybe he went over the balcony?” Jefferson suggested.

"Maybe," Noah agreed. "Can I see the footage after the police arrived and Ms. River's assistant was removed?"

"No. But I can send that to you, too."

"Don't you have it here?" Noah asked.

"No, it's part of the main feed. I have to get back to the hotel. Everything is in an uproar over what happened. I can email a link to you as soon as I get over there."

"Thank you. Do that as soon as possible, please. Go ahead and include anything else up to a couple of hours after the police left."

Doggin stood up with his briefcase, and they shook hands. "Thank you for all your help." River also shook his hand. Noah gave him the email address to send the link to and showed him out.

When he returned to the living area, Frank said, "By the way, there was a detective here earlier. He's spoken to everyone else already, but would like to interview River."

"But I wasn't even there." River frowned. "Why would he want to talk to me?"

"Standard procedure." Frank shrugged. "Especially if you were the intended target. Here's his card," Frank said, passing it to Noah.

"It's late. I'll call him in the morning and set up an appointment. Also, call Simon to let him know what time to relieve you tonight." He glanced at his watch. "Or make that early this morning. I want one of our people outside the suite at all times. I'll stay with River."

"Do you think that's really necessary?" Jefferson leaned forward from his chair as if to emphasize his point. "My room's right next door. We can unlock the connecting door, and I can alert you all to any problems."

"That connecting door will remain locked," Noah said, not liking Jefferson having that kind of access to River one damn bit. Nor the fact he managed to get a room connecting to River's. "And I will remain in the suite. No one comes in or goes out of here tonight." He wanted to make sure Jefferson understood he could not enter in the wee hours to check up on her. River might not be there.

"Look, guys," River interjected. She'd been perched on the arm of the couch, but stood up. "I'm tired, and I'd like to get up early to go back to the hospital, so

I'm going to bed now." Without another word, she turned around and walked into her bedroom, shutting the door behind her.

"Well, appears we're going to call it a night, so good night." Noah walked toward the door. He stopped to open it and looked back. Frank walked past him, but Jefferson took his time getting to the door.

Frank took up a position beside the door and pulled out his phone. "I'm going to call Simon to have him come relieve me in a few hours. Do you need him to check in to let you know he's here?"

"Yes."

"Okay. I'll be back in the morning and see you then."

Jefferson stopped in front of Noah. "I can..."

"Good night, Jefferson." Noah gave the man no choice and let him know it. As soon as Jefferson crossed the threshold, he closed the door and locked it, exhaling the breath he'd been holding for a while. Walking around the room, he shut most of the lights off and made his way over to one of the chairs. He moved it to a shadowed corner of the large room and pulled a table near it. It had been a long night, and he'd decided to move River later in the morning to give her a few hours sleep. Sitting down on the most comfortable-looking chair in the room, he placed his gun on the table. The angle gave him a good view of the door to the suite, the connecting door, as well as the bedroom. But he still couldn't relax. After a while, he put his gun back in the side holster, got up, and knocked on the bedroom door before turning the knob.

The world as he knew it stopped. The sight greeting him he'd take into death with him.

Chapter Five

River had trouble getting her lungs to cooperate and drag in air. The image of Noah wearing a gun strapped to his side and framed in the doorway had her entire body paying attention. The towel wrapped around her suddenly felt too heavy, too confining. Hell, even her skin felt hot and tight. His gaze roamed all over her body; he might as well have been touching her with fire.

"I...I came to tell you go ahead and catch a few hours sleep. We'll leave later. Is everything all right?" His voice came out rough, as if he had trouble speaking.

She had a little trouble responding herself. For the first time in her life, her vocal chords didn't respond on command. She had to swallow twice to get any words out. "I...I'm not sure."

He pushed the door open wider and stepped across the threshold. "Me either."

They both froze, staring at each other. She knew he was trying to read the invisible signals flowing between them. She sure was. Once, those signals had been crystal clear, but time and life had gotten in the way, and she could no longer understand the language. But she understood the need. She couldn't let things end this time without being with him. If even for one night.

Taking a deep breath, she released the towel. His eyes followed the fall of the material as it pooled around her ankles, and she heard him groan as his gaze slowly roamed over her body. Her mirror told her she was beautifully built by any standards, and the flash of appreciation and lust in his eyes confirmed it.

He took another step into the room and closed the door. Before he could change his mind, she met him halfway and placed her arms around his neck.

"Jesus, River, you're beautiful." He stepped away to remove the gun and holster, laying both on the nightstand. Then he returned to her, clasping her waist and pulling her flush against him before lowering his mouth to cover hers. He tasted of hope, want, need. He tasted of passion.

She opened her mouth and breathed him in. His body followed hers down to the bed. His weight rested heavily on top of her, but she welcomed it. When he

raised his head and lifted his chest off her, she tightened her arms around him even more. She didn't want him walking away again.

"Help me get my clothes off," he whispered.

"Oh."

He grabbed the bottom of his shirt, pulled it up, and she helped him. Taking the garment away from him, she threw it to the floor, while he sat up on the side of the bed to remove his pants. The ripple of the toned muscles on him had her itching to explore. She reached to touch him but stopped when he took foil packets out of his pocket and tossed them on the nightstand. Her gaze swung back to him in time to see him take off his gray briefs and pitch those to the floor. Her breath caught in her throat. Long, thick flesh sprang free, and a flicker of silver beneath the head of his cock caught her attention.

She leaned forward. "Whoa! I don't remember that."

He flashed her a wicked grin, all teeth. "You've never seen a male piecing before?"

"No. I know some male entertainers and females have genital piercings. They talk about it, and in this business, not surprising, but I've never seen one. Not up close and personal like this. Is that a Prince Albert?"

He grabbed himself and stroked from the base to below the tiny silver balls on either side, just at the edge of his mushroom head. "Well, this is similar. It's a frenum piercing—PAs usually have a ring through the head."

Unable to resist, she sat up to touch him. He seemed bigger than she remembered, fuller. When her finger touched the silver balls, his flesh jumped. She pulled her hand back. "Does it hurt? Did it hurt?"

He shook his head. "Not at all. I've had it for years now."

She raised her eyebrows at that. "Is it safe?"

"Yeah, it's fine. There's nothing to worry about with this kind of piercing. I'm safe. I've been tested, and I always use condoms."

They stared at each other. She knew they were both remembering at least one time he didn't.

But she didn't want to think about that. The jewelry fascinated her; this aspect of him fascinated her. She reached forward to caress the tip of his head. Steel

wrapped in smooth silk. One of her backup singers swore she only slept with men who had piercings because it enhanced sex. “Why?” she asked.

“My friends and I got drunk one night and got inked.” He turned his left bicep so she could see the red, white, and blue banner with the word RANGER across it. “But I passed out, and my buddies thought it would be a great joke to add jewelry. Thank God, Simon was clear-headed enough to have them do this type of piercing, knowing this is something that can be easily fixed.”

She glanced up at him and lowered her hand. “Simon, your partner?”

“Yeah, partner, buddy in madness and mayhem. We served together.”

“I thought so. Does he have one too?”

“As far as I know, I’m the only lucky one who had this done.”

“Was Ross one of the other friends?”

“No, another guy in our unit. Anyway, after I came to and recovered enough to beat the shit out of them, I decided to keep it, and I got the last laugh.”

She moved to touch him more fully this time, and he surged into her caress. “Really.”

“Oh, yeah,” he purred. “Let me show you.”

He took those words right out of her mouth. Moisture had begun to pool between her legs from the moment she lay on the bed; his jewelry, and words only made sure she’d continue in that state. Keeping her eyes on him, she scooted back up until she lay flat again. She raised her arms toward the headboard and stretched out her legs. Only then did he move to cover her with his body.

The sensation of his skin against hers lit a match within her. The heat from his flesh scorched into her, branding her. One of his hands covered her fingers, digging into the headboard, while he moved his body over hers, his weight molding her into the bed. Her pelvis lined up perfectly to feel the masculine hardness of him, the glide of the little silver balls over her shaved mound shot pleasure through her system.

“Oh, God,” she cried spreading her legs open wider for him. Her juices flowed even more in anticipation of his possession; it wouldn’t take much to send her over the edge. She expected him to kiss her, but instead, he let go of her hands, lowered his head, and licked the top slope of her breast. The tremor started in the

region of her heart, but it spread like wildfire through the rest of her body, finally settling in the very center of her core. She released the headboard and clutched his shoulders, her nails digging into his skin as she came.

“Mmm, you are still so responsive,” he murmured.

She wanted to tell him only ever with him. He didn’t even need the erotic jewelry—usually her lovers had to work to get her to this point. Noah did it with no more than his touch, but she looked forward to all of him. She couldn’t tell him that; it would make this more than just sex, so she placed her mouth over his, pouring her need for him into the connection. And while she might have initiated the kiss, he took control. His tongue led and hers followed in a ritual mating dance. His hand moved to cover her breast, and he raised his head to stare at her.

“Are you sure?” he whispered.

She stared into his beautiful eyes, wishing the love shining in them wasn’t only the product of her memories and imagination. If tonight was all they had, so be it. In the morning, she’d have to tell him the truth about what happened ten years ago, and drive him away from her. Again. “Yes, Noah, yes.”

Noah stared down at the beautiful woman spread out before him. So many thoughts ran through his mind. Most of all, the tremendous loss for their years apart, but now, just thankful to have her back in his arms. He kissed her lips, already swollen from his earlier kisses. Wanting to take his time with her, he moved to her neck, but the persistent throbbing and fullness in his groin said that might not be possible. At least not right then.

When she raised her chin, he followed her silent signals and moved to her collarbone, sucking and licking until his mouth covered one plump breast, while the other filled his hand. He laved her extended nipple, sucking on it until the tip became hard and pointed, before moving to the other one until he brought it to the same state. Her soft, mewling sounds of pleasure urged him on. She had been holding him to her breast, but when she pushed him away, he complied by

moving his mouth to her stomach and licking the silver belly button ring she had there.

“I’m not the only one who likes body jewelry,” he said. When he’d decided to keep his own, he knew she would have approved. If she’d known. He grinned into her smiling gaze.

When he swirled his tongue into the indentation of her belly button, her eyes shut and her head dropped back. She wore the expression of a woman immersed in the pleasures he created in her body. But he wanted her gazing at him.

“Look at me,” he commanded. “Watch. Let me gaze into your eyes while you watch me loving you.”

At the sound of his voice, she did as he asked and arched her back in an effort to move him farther along. He grinned. “So impatient.” River was an exceedingly sensual being—it showed in her music and the way she moved. He’d learned a lot about pleasing a woman since the first time they’d made love, and intended her to reap all the benefits of his knowledge so she’d never be able to forget him. ‘Cause he sure as hell never quite got over her, no matter what he told himself.

“Stop talking; keep pleasing,” she gasped.

“Your wish, both of our pleasures.”

He put all thoughts of the past out of his mind and shifted until he lay between her legs. Placing his hands on her thighs, he spread her wider and stared at her. For a moment, the sight of her glistening flesh mesmerized him. “Gorgeous,” he said, “and I’m going to eat this until you scream my name.”

Putting action to his words, he covered her woman’s core with his mouth; extending his tongue, he swirled it around her nub. His reward, a gush of her nectar. Then he sucked and licked her in earnest. Her hips rose to grind herself even more onto his face. He moved one hand off her thigh and placed two fingers into her opening, while he continued to suck on her clit. The minute he did, her body shook under him.

“I’m coming,” she panted. “Oh, God. I’m coming.”

He stopped abruptly. “Oh no. Not yet. Not without me.”

“What...” Her chest heaved.

“You heard me, wait.” She stared at him in shock, and then her cranberry-

painted mouth curled into a smile. Her heavy breathing settled down.

“Then hurry,” she pleaded. “Hurry.”

Moving quickly over her body, he grabbed one of the condoms off the nightstand. He rolled it on himself, then lay over her. “Spread your legs wide for me.”

She pulled her feet up and bent her knees, holding herself open for him. He raised her hips, and in one smooth stroke, sheathed inside her. “Now,” he cried going in so far he hit her cervix wall and his balls slammed up against her outer lips. Her inner muscles squeezed around his swollen shaft, and she came in one long, continuous burst of pleasure. He had to concentrate to keep from joining her. Not yet, not yet, he chanted in his head, all the while he pistoned in and out of her. Groaning in satisfaction at each contraction of her muscles around his sex and the friction created by the metal embedded below the crown of his head as it glided against her tight inner flesh.

“Oh, God! Noah!” she screamed.

“That’s it, baby. That’s the music I want between us.” When her tremors ceased, his movements slowed, so he could catch his breath. He continued to glide in and out of her, but the motion was more like a soothing caress lulling her body to rest, but his only got harder with want for her, and he pulsed within her. “My turn,” he moaned.

Her body went completely limp, her orgasm stronger than any she’d ever experienced. She had no energy left. Noah had learned a thing or two since their first time together. But when he moved again, every cell in her body sat up to take notice. As if she hadn’t just had one of the strongest releases of her life. Maybe she wasn’t so tired after all.

His flesh pulsed as he slowly pumped into her, each stroke deeper than the last, and the silver balls stroked her inner walls, adding a completely new and different level. The pressure in her core began again. Unable to hold her pleasure in, she cried out. A woman could die from this kind of satisfaction. She had no

intention of doing that. She'd much rather enjoy it.

He raised her legs until her knees pressed against his shoulders. She held her arms around his neck and flexed so she met him stroke for stroke with a clenching of her inner muscles around his sex.

She shut her eyes and immersed herself totally in the rhythm they made, in the music their bodies created every time their flesh touched. They reached the crescendo together and fell over the edge. The notes of their lovemaking still lingered in the air around them—in the harshness of their breathing and the ripples coursing through her body to his and his back to hers. Joined, their energies created one endless circle, one she didn't want broken.

Still sheathed in her, Noah put her legs down, straightened them out, and rested his forehead on hers. She still had her arms around his neck. Strands of his damp hair fell unto her face, but her hair was in the same condition. They'd created a lot of energy; both their bodies were drenched. She would put this to music one day.

His arms rested beside her head, as if he tried to hold his weight up so he wouldn't crush her. But she welcomed the feel of him. She welcomed everything about him.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Better than okay."

"That's good."

"I see what you mean about that piece of jewelry." She grinned. "Who knew?"

Too soon, he pulled out of her and rolled to his side before getting off the bed. He headed for the bathroom and came back without the condom. Turning off the lights, he climbed in beside her, and she scooted over to make room for him. Reaching for him at the same time he gathered her in his arms, she rested her head on his chest. He brushed hair away from her face.

"Get some rest for a couple hours," he said. "It's been a long day, and night."

"What if I don't want to rest?" She didn't. If she only had this one night with him, she wanted all of it. Raising her head, she smiled at him. "I think we're both a little sweaty and could use a shower." She couldn't really see his face in the dark, but she felt him grin. He took her hand and rose from the bed.

Ursula Sinclair

“Come on.”

Chapter Six

Noah glanced over at the woman curled on her side. He read Simon's text. Doggin had sent the footage from the hotel. Simon was outside the room waiting for him. He smiled as he made his way out of the bedroom and away from River. Reluctantly, he closed the door behind him.

Yawning, he opened the door and let Simon in, gesturing for him to set the laptop down on the coffee table in front of the couch.

"Guess you're not getting any sleep," Simon commented.

"Just pull the damn thing up."

Simon grinned, but sat down and opened the laptop. Noah sat beside him and watched as he accessed the file. The video footage confirmed a man dressed in the hotel uniform entered River's suite, but no one dressed in that uniform came out. Together, Noah and Simon watched the rest of the footage, fast-forwarding through most of it until River's friend returned to the suite.

"Son of a bitch got in and waited for her," Noah said.

They watched Jefferson enter the room with Linda, but only stay for a couple of minutes. He left alone. Frank stayed by the door, but ten minutes later when Linda hadn't come out, he'd entered the suite. The next visitors were four uniformed police officers, a two-man uniformed emergency team, and three firemen. Two cops remained outside, and the noise must have awakened Jefferson, because he opened his hotel room door, and when he saw the police, immediately tried to enter the room. Frank came to the entrance and spoke to the officers who then stepped aside and let him in. By then, other members of her band and handlers came into the hallway and crowded near the door. Jefferson came out for a moment to speak to them before disappearing back inside.

One of the firemen led the way out to clear a path as the two emergency guys—one in front and one behind—guided the stretcher out with Linda on it. Jefferson and Frank followed the stretcher. Noah and Simon continued to watch as everyone who entered the suite left. Finally, two plainclothes detectives showed

up and spoke to the two cops who'd remained to watch the door. They entered with one of the uniformed officers. Noah fast-forwarded, watching until the detectives shut the door behind them and crime scene tape was stretched across the door. One officer left with the detectives, the other one remained.

"That's it," Simon said. "There's been a cop stationed in front of that door since the attack. No one else has been in or out of there, except one of the band members, and Jefferson accompanied a maid to get some of River's things. Certainly no other hotel employee."

"Mmm." Noah got up and paced. "What if he were no longer dressed like an employee though? There were a lot of people milling around."

"Possible. He could have changed shirts or something, taken off his jacket. In all the confusion, he could have slipped through."

"Hmm, I've got an idea. Let's see the footage from when the cops arrived and count heads."

By the time they were done, and checked their numbers, they each had one extra in the number of people in and out of the room. "Well, neither of us counted Linda, so who?" Simon asked.

"Not sure. One more time, amigo."

"Got you, you bastard," Noah crowed. "That's him, the one clearing the way in front of the stretcher. Only three firefighters entered the suite, but four left."

"You're right. Bastard hid in the room the entire time."

"Hidden in plain sight."

"Yeah," Simon agreed. "I'll call the hotel security manager later this morning and see if we can get a look at the group with Linda leaving the building. Maybe we can get a clearer picture of this guy's face and ID him."

"Yeah, I don't think he left with the group of firefighters who'd arrived; they might have known he was an imposter. It may be our stalker planned to escape with the rest of the EMTs, since he was dressed like the fire personnel. He had the uniform ready to go. He must have worn it under his clothes, because I didn't see anything in his hands leaving or coming."

"Then he may not be as bulky as he appears, if he was wearing clothes under the hotel uniform. Something to keep in mind."

“Did the cops do a thorough search of the suite?” Noah asked. “Maybe he left the hotel uniform there. I’ve got the phone number for one of the detectives; I’ll give him a call. May be worth going over the suite, and not just the bedroom and bathroom where Linda was attacked. He hid somewhere in there, waiting for the cops and everyone else to arrive. I think he planned on either killing her and walking out in the confusion, or hijacking her away from the emergency personnel. He would have been alone on the elevator with them, and the element of surprise would have been on his side. Either way, this was well planned out.”

“Except he didn’t get his target,” Simon said. “But it’s worth another look-see at the place. Hmm, I think you’re onto something here. The closet, bedroom, and bathroom were dusted for prints, but I’m not sure if the rest of the suite was searched. Don’t worry about the detective. I know this guy. I’ll call him and give him our theory. By the way, he sent me a text. He wants to talk to River. He’s not going away.”

“He can talk to her tomorrow, or later today, by phone. No way am I bringing her in to the police station. She’d be mobbed.”

“Figured you’d want to play it that way, so I told him exactly that. But have River call the guy to get him off my ass.”

“All right, I will.” He frowned, thinking about Linda’s attacker. “The thing is, though, where was he hidden? I get that he took Linda by surprise, but when Frank entered, he didn’t spot him.”

“Frank told me when he found Linda, he stayed with her and called the cops. Then he searched the bedroom but didn’t want to stray far from her, so stayed with her until help came.”

“Then the door to the suite wasn’t covered and, the guy could have left then. So, why didn’t he?”

“Shit! He was still in the room somewhere. Frank would have seen him or heard him if he’d moved.”

“That’s what I’m thinking.” Noah paused, thinking of the layout of the other hotel room. “Tell the detective to have his people check the balcony. That’s the only place he could have hidden. It takes up the entire length of the suite. Once everyone was in the bedroom, he could have gone around to the living room and

entered through the balcony door there, like he'd been part of the emergency crew all along."

Simon slapped the coffee table. "Son of a bitch! Dude, this guy is a psycho, and a smart one at that. So you know if he found her once at a hotel, he can do it again."

"Yeah," Noah said. "I've been thinking about that, which is why I'm going to move her to my place for a few days. But only our people are to know that."

Even though Simon wore dark, wrap-around shades to shield his eyes both indoors and out, Noah could feel the curiosity in his friend's gaze. Given the way he'd complained about having to be River's bodyguard the last few months, the fact he offered to take her to his house must have rung curiosity bells.

"You're sure about that? We can put her in a safe house."

"You know as well as I do that ingress to my place is almost impossible without my knowing. It's the safest place for her to be for the next few days while we try to find the guy threatening her."

"I'll clear a route for you. I've got a blueprint of this hotel. Give me ten minutes to jam the video feed on this floor and the stairwell, and I'll pull my car around to the maintenance entrance." He explained where that was located. "Watch for the company's green SUV. Where's your car parked?"

"It's on the last floor of the garage, near the elevator. It's the 'stang."

"Great," Simon said, standing up. "We can exchange keys when you're ready to leave. By the way, what about Ross's bachelor party? You gonna make that? I've already briefed him about what happened."

"That's not until tomorrow night, so we'll see. You and Frank might be on your own putting it together. I'll let you know."

Noah closed the door on his friend and partner. The clock on the wall showed the time as 3:07 a.m., and he and River hadn't gotten much sleep. His fault. He couldn't get enough of her, and he hated to wake her up, but they had no choice. He needed to move her without anyone being the wiser for it. The fewer people who know her whereabouts, the better, and that included her manager Jefferson.

He entered the bedroom and turned on the lamp before sitting on the side of the bed and brushing the wild hair off the woman who lay still curled up naked on

the mattress near his hip. The light illuminated her body for him, making him want nothing more than to climb back into bed with her and make love until the sun went down again. But danger stalked her, and he had to get her out of there. She had to stay safe. Unsure what happened between them, he couldn't bear it if she didn't exist somewhere in the world, even if without him.

At his touch, she opened her eyes and grasped his hand. Turning it palm-up, she brought it to her mouth and kissed it. He curled his fingers into a fist to hold the caress there. "What's going on?" she asked, her voice slurred from sleep. "Did something happen? Oh God, is it Linda?"

"Shhh, no, no. Everything is fine. It's time to move you."

She blinked and rubbed her eyes. "Are you sure that's really necessary?" His thumb touched the side of her face. Loving the softness of her skin, he didn't want to stop. "This is a different hotel," she continued.

Oh man, she tempted him. But her safety came first. "One where someone might have already been bribed to tell anyone where you are," he explained.

"Ah, good point. Well, what should we do? I can't go back home yet. The place is going to be toxic for another day or two, so where are you taking me?"

"I wasn't thinking of returning you to your home."

"Then what?" she asked, confused. "We'd have the same problem at almost any hotel."

"My home."

Her head snapped back. "What?"

"It's completely safe there and isolated. I live on a private road. No one can park anywhere near my house or even in the neighborhood without a permit. There's 'round-the-clock roving security for the community. Unless you live in the neighborhood, even accessing the beach is difficult. You'd have to come in by boat, and even then, I'd see any threat coming before it was near enough to be a problem."

She nodded. "Okay. But what about Jefferson and the others? Your place isn't big enough to house us all, and we still have an album to work on, and rehearsals. The concert is in two weeks."

"Jefferson and the others can stay here and return to your place when it's

habitable again or whatever. You're going to have to hold off work on the album for maybe a week."

"But what about rehearsals and the concert?"

"You're going to have to cancel those."

She shook her head. "No, absolutely not. I will not let this madman terrorize me. No one gets between me and my music, and I will not disappoint my fans."

He wanted to argue, but knew it would do no good. Even though it had been a decade since he'd seen the stubborn, mutinous expression she'd worn as a child. When she said no, she meant it. "Okay, for now. Hopefully we will catch this guy before the date of your concert. We've got some information that will, with luck, lead us to him."

"Good."

"Now, I need you to get up and get dressed."

She sat up and stretched, all sleek lines and curves, totally uninhibited in her nudity. The tips of her nipples pebbled from the cool air. He raised his gaze to hers. He got hard watching her. And her answering grin told him she knew it.

He pushed himself off the bed and backed away. "Oh, no. We've got to go now." Because if she touched him, or he her, they wouldn't be leaving for a good long while.

"All right," she said, still grinning. "Since you won't let me play with my favorite new toy." She stared pointedly at his groin, which strained for attention even more with her gaze on him. He took a step toward her. "I'll dress quickly and pack a bag, then we can let Jefferson know what's going on, and he can tell the others." She moved to the dresser.

"No." Her words quickly doused the woody forming behind his jeans, making him able to think again with his big head. "I don't want anyone, and that includes Jefferson, to know what's going on."

She pulled her underwear on and headed toward the closet. "What?" She paused. "But we've got to let Jefferson know. He's my manager. He's got to be aware of what's going on, so he can rearrange the schedules. There's a lot of stuff happening right now for him to handle without Linda. He's doing his job and hers."

“Then let him handle it. If he needs to talk to you, he can contact you by cell phone. I want everyone thinking, for as long as possible, that you’re holed up at this hotel, in the room, scared out of your mind.”

“Scared, yes. Out of my mind, no. Angry, hell yes.”

“Good. Maybe this time you’ll listen when I tell you to do something.”

She pulled on a pair of gray jeans that might as well have been painted on and a tank top with a built in bra.

“I’m sorry about that,” she said.

One of the reasons this assignment drove him crazy was because she constantly changed her plans. Like showing up at the church when she’d been scheduled to be at rehearsal, or the time she had a hair appointment in L.A., and at the last minute, without telling him, she snuck through the back door while he waited in the front, and she and Linda ended up shopping on Rodeo Drive. “I know I haven’t been the best client, and, okay, I’ve probably acted like a first-class diva bitch around you.”

“Ya think?”

“Hey, I’m trying to apologize here. I don’t know. I wanted your attention.”

He looked her up and down slowly, letting her see the lust in his eyes. “Baby, I promise, you have my full attention.”

“All right, we do it your way. At least I can promise that for a couple of days. But then, I’ve got to rehearse with my band.”

One part of him heard her, the other part strained not to take her into his arms and peel those clothes off her beautiful body. Even when she had that dickhead of a boyfriend, there’d been heat between them. Which he knew Earl had been aware of. There’d been times he couldn’t hide his attraction to River. The bastard waited until Noah was gone before striking her. Noah wanted to kill him when he found out what Earl had done to River. It was Ross who’d stopped him.

He shook his head and moved over toward the door. “We’ll see. I’ll wait for you in the living room. Pack only one bag, and I’ll grab your guitar.” Jefferson had had it delivered, and he knew how much her music meant to her.

“I wouldn’t have thought a man who had the guts to get his dick pierced would be such a chicken,” she said to his retreating back.

He paused in the doorway, turning his head to wink at her. “Prudent,” he replied, and continued walking away to the sound of her laughter.

Her taunt hit home. He was chicken, scared about what happened between them, about what would continue to happen, that it would lead nowhere, but more worried about the nutcase stalking her.

Chapter Seven

Together, they walked into Linda's hospital room. If she had to stay hidden for a couple of days, she wanted to go and see Linda one more time first. She'd convinced Noah that at that twilight hour no one would be around. They got in the same way they'd gotten out earlier. This time, when River approached the bed, Linda opened her eyes and stared right at her. Linda's mouth curled up into a half smile, and River cried. The bandage prevented her friend from smiling fully.

"Oh honey, don't," Linda whispered. "I'll be all right."

But tears ran down Linda's face too. River took her hand and held it.

"I'll wait for you outside," Noah said and left the room, closing the door behind him.

"He's still one fine looking man," Linda mumbled. "And I still think you're crazy for not making another run at him."

"I'm sorry, so sorry," River cried out.

"Not your fault. Are you all right?"

River forced a laugh out and wiped her eyes. "You're the one lying in a hospital bed, but you're asking me if I'm all right."

Linda smiled again. "Oh, that hurt. Don't make me laugh. I'm sure Noah is taking good care of you. He'd better, or else I'll have to climb out of this hospital bed and kick his ass."

Her words were a little slurred, and Linda spoke softer than usual, but she could understand her. "Now, I know you're feeling better," River said.

"Yeah. Going to be fine. Just need you to stay safe. That man he...well, he's crazy. Tell Noah I said not to let you out of his sight."

"You don't need to worry about me. You focus on getting better. Besides, Noah's glued to my hip 'til this guy's caught."

"Good. Maybe you two can finally clear the air and get beyond the past."

She'd told Linda a long time ago about her complicated relationship with

Noah. Apart from her parents, Linda was the only other person who knew the truth.

River raked her fingers through her hair. “How do you tell a man ten years after the fact that you lied to him. You didn’t have an abortion—you had a miscarriage.”

“Ah, honey, you know it was one of those things.”

“I know. Everyone, even the doctor, said so.” She’d barely found out she was pregnant before she’d lost the child. She’d made the mistake of contacting Noah five minutes after she found out, begging him to come home.

“But how do I say, ‘Noah, I was a dumb kid, barely eighteen, scared and pregnant?’” She couldn’t handle it. Worried about what having a child would do to her dreams of being a rock star, worried about if Noah would still want her, still love her. By the time Noah could get leave to come back stateside, the fetus no longer existed. Not until then did she realize how very much she wanted that baby, Noah’s child.

“You should tell him the truth,” Linda continued.

“What truth?” She wrapped her arms around her waist. “There really is no baby.”

Linda sighed. “You let that man think you had an abortion, believe you claimed to love him, yet you got rid of his child because you were scared and selfish.”

“I let him think what he wanted to. Anyway, it no longer matters.”

“In the last few months, I’ve seen the way you watch each other. It’s what set that fool Earl off. You owe it to each other—okay, yourself—to tell him what really happened. You were only a kid.” Her words were becoming more slurred.

“Doesn’t matter.” River leaned forward to brush her hand against her friend’s arm. “You’re tiring.”

Noah knocked and poked his head in. “Sorry to interrupt, but the nursing shift is getting ready to change, so it’s best we go. The fewer people who see you here, the better.”

“Hi, Noah,” Linda whispered from the bed.

He moved further into the room.

“How are you feeling, Linda?”

“Like my face and stomach have been stomped on by elephants. But don’t worry, I’ll be fine. I just need you to promise me you’ll take care of our girl here.”

“You have my word. We’re going to get the guy who did this to you. Don’t doubt it.”

Linda yawned, then blinked.

“You go back to sleep,” Noah said.

“Yeah, that’s a good idea. Come and see me later.”

“I...I might not be around for a couple of days,” River said, her voice breaking. “Noah wants to take me into hiding.”

“Good idea. I knew I liked him. Don’t forget what I told you.”

“I’ll think about it.” She squeezed her best friend’s fingers and kissed the unbandaged side of her face. “I’ll come back and see you as soon as I can.”

By the time River straightened up and stepped away from the bed, Linda’s eyes were already closed.

“Come on.” Noah took her hand. “Let her rest.”

She followed him out of the room and nodded at the police officer standing at the door. They walked past the empty nurses’ station and left the way they’d come in. In the car, he asked her to give him her cell phone.

“Why?” River asked.

“It’s traceable. I want to make sure no one can find you. I’ll give you a phone later you’ll be able to use.”

“Okay, here.” She turned it off, handed it to him, and didn’t say another word during the drive to his house. Her thoughts strayed back in the past, to the day she’d sent him away, and he’d left her. He’d found her down by the lake, sitting on the grass in the exact spot where they’d made love. Their one and only time.

“River.”

She hesitated, she’d been aching to hear that voice for days, weeks, months. Now, it no longer mattered. The ache was gone. She held a rock and tossed it into the lake, watching the ripples fan out to the other side before it sank and

disappeared. Unfortunately, she couldn't disappear that easily. Having no other choice, she turned to face Noah. "So. You're here."

"What's going on, River?"

"Nothing. You're too late. I took care of everything on my own."

"What are you talking about?" He raked his hand through his short-cropped hair. "I've traveled for fourteen hours and made deals with the devil to get here. Are you or are you not pregnant?"

His beige-colored military fatigues hung off his lean frame and appeared slept in. Her own clothes hung off her too, like she'd lost weight, which she had. There were shadows under his eyes matching hers, but she didn't care. She had no emotion, nothing left in her to care. "No, Noah. I'm not."

He hung his head and stared at the ground. She couldn't tell if his posture reflected relief or some other emotion. Her own had been going haywire since he left her six months ago. Wondering if he really loved her, and if he did, why hadn't he come back to her as he promised. A few months into her pregnancy, she'd needed him, and it had taken weeks to reach him. Now, here he stood, three months too late. She couldn't live like that.

"Did you...did...", he stuttered.

She'd been hysterical when she'd finally spoken to him. She'd been bleeding for twenty-four hours and told him if he didn't come back immediately, she would get rid of the baby, and then she'd hung up on him. By the time he'd been able to reach her again, the baby was gone. Just gone, and she told him not to worry about it, it had been taken care of. But she'd been out of her mind with pain and worry at the time. She needed him, and he wasn't there for her. Her mind still wasn't quite right. On some level, she knew that, but her emotions ran all over the place and had her under their control. And the guilt. So much guilt. Maybe if she'd loved the baby from the beginning, the way she loved her music, it would still be there. At that moment, she hated herself, and she hated him.

"Yes, Noah. It's gone."

"How...how could you?" His voice choked out the question. "How could you abort our child? My child."

She turned away from him, facing out toward the lake, and breathed deeply.

The scent of blood filled her nostrils, the blood she'd shed the day her baby died. "It's done. So go. Go back to where ever it is you came from." She didn't bother to correct his misconception. What did it matter anyway?

"Don't you fucking dismiss me like that," he said. "Goddammit, turn around and face me." His voice came from over her shoulder. He must have moved closer to her. She took a step away before she turned to look at him. This close, she could see his eyes were red rimmed, his face thinner than when she'd seen him last, and he had about two days' growth of beard.

"Go, Noah." She shook her head, wrapping her arms around her flat stomach. "There's nothing for you here anymore."

He grabbed her, pulled her against him, and kissed her. But she didn't respond. She couldn't. She wanted to. She felt the press of his lips against hers and understood what her response should be, but she couldn't give him what he wanted. Something inside her died the day their baby did. After a moment, he raised his head and just gazed at her. She didn't know what he saw in her eyes. She no longer looked at herself too closely in the mirror. But whatever he saw there must've convinced him to lower his arms and step back.

"Is this really what you want?" he asked. His voice came out hoarse, almost unrecognizable.

She clutched her arms around herself tighter. The numbness had crept into her marrow. When they told her the baby was dead, the cold had only been skin deep. Noah would be gone too. Somehow it seemed fitting never to feel warm again.

"Yes." Turning around, she stared at the reflection of the sunlight out on the lake, so she didn't know how long he waited before he left. By the time she'd come back to her senses and turned around to tell him, no, she didn't know what the hell she was doing, he was gone.

She hurried back up to the house, expecting to find him there. "Mom," she called out. Her mother came out of the kitchen.

"Where's Noah?"

"Your dad took him back to the airport." That news almost made her double over in pain. Her mother must have seen something in her face because she came

over and put her arm around her, guiding her to a chair.

“Here, sit down,” her mother said. “Are you okay?”

Like a robot, she slumped in the chair. “Did he say anything before he left?”

“By he, I’m assuming you mean Noah. Well, he was in a rush, honey. He only came to see you to make sure you were all right.” Her mother sat on the arm of the chair and patted her hair. “He’d gotten a short pass and only has ten hours left to get back to his unit, but he said the flight out took him fourteen, so he’s cutting it close.”

Her parents hadn’t been very pleased with Noah, both for not taking precautions to prevent a pregnancy and her having to go through so much, so young without him. But her parents also knew how much they loved each other.

“What happened?” her mother asked. “Are things okay with you two?”

“No, Mom, it’s over.” She wrapped her arm around her mother’s waist and put her head on her chest. “We...we were never meant to be.”

She’d wept that night, and after a few weeks, when she hadn’t heard from him, she’d left for New York. At least she’d still had her music. But she’d cried for him, for sending him away, every night for a year. Until one day she stopped when she realized they’d turned their backs on each other. She might have pushed him away, but dammit, he’d left.

The sound of the screen door opening behind her had her peeking over her shoulder. She’d been sitting out on the deck on Noah’s lounge chair, enjoying the end of the night while Noah took a stroll around to make sure no one followed them.

“What are you doing out here?” he asked. “I thought you’d be in bed by now.”

She turned her head to glance up at him. Tall, broad shouldered, sculpted features, such a beautiful man. That squared chin kept his face from being too feminine, that and the muscles. Did he still care for her? Would he once he knew the truth? “I couldn’t sleep. Too many things on my mind.”

“Would you like some company?”

“Yes, please.” He placed his arms under her back and knees, picking her up, then lay down with her on top of him. Damn, a strong man too. Such a turn-on. The wide lounge chair held them both comfortably with half of her body draped across his. She put her head on his chest, and he wrapped his arms around her. The rhythm of his heartbeat meshed with the rhythm of the surf crashing to shore. Both sounds comforted her, soothing her into sleep.

A dog barking on the beach had her opening her eyes. She stared at a horizon awash in a day glow; dawn had long snuck up on them and silently drifted past. She shifted, and he sat up.

“Are you awake?” he asked, stretching his arms above his head.

“Yes, I’m sorry. I feel asleep.” She raised her head. “Why didn’t you wake me up?”

He flashed her favorite childhood grin and locked his fingers with hers. “I guess I fell asleep too. This chair’s pretty comfortable, but do you want to go in and go back to sleep? It’s still pretty early, and it’s been a long night.”

“Yeah, let’s go in.” Then she kissed him, but before he could take it deeper, she withdrew and stood. “But, I’m not that sleepy, anymore.”

She pulled him up and led the way to his bedroom. The call of the ocean and the sounds of a new day stirred her awareness of the man beside her even more. Turning, he backed her toward the bed and sat her on the edge of the soft comforter, slowly removing her clothes. Kissing every inch of flesh as he exposed it to his gaze.

When he finally removed her underwear and gave her a kiss on her bare mound, she almost forgot what she wanted to do first. Almost. Shaking off the pleasure of his touch, she placed her hands on his head to move him away from her body so she could stand up.

“You still have clothes on.” When he raised his hands to pull his shirt off, she stopped him. “Nah, ah. Sit.” She turned him around until he sat on the bed, and as he had done to her, she removed his clothes, kissing his skin as it was revealed, until finally, she got to her real goal. Dropping to her knees, she removed his underwear and his length sprang free, thick and long, almost touching the tip of her nose.

“Mmm.” She inhaled the musky scent of him. That jewelry of his called to her, beckoning her to touch, and the wetness slipping through the slit on his head had her licking her lips for a taste. She caught his gaze, loving the way his eyes sparkled with need. “I’m going to suck you until you come in my mouth and scream my name while you’re doing it.”

He held his shaft at the base, offering it to her. “Bet.”

The man had the nerve to grin. Keeping her eyes on his, she leaned forward and slowly licked his slit. He wound his fingers into her hair and moaned.

She always did enjoy a challenge.

Opening her mouth, she took him in. The silver balls rubbed over her tongue and added a new dimension to her pleasure and, judging from his sharp intake of breath, his, too. He moved to cup the back of her neck, nudging her to take him deeper. She did, working his shaft in and out of her mouth, while he thrust his hips in rhythm with her movements.

“Oh, God!” he cried.

She smiled. Almost there. She nudged his hand out of her way and placed hers on the base of his penis, holding him steady. She moved her other hand around to his sac and squeezed as she took him down into her throat. His entire body clenched, and he cried her name as he pumped hot cum into her waiting mouth.

“Damn, where the fuck is she?” The man slammed his fist against the dashboard before starting the car. He’d known they would move her from the first hotel, and that bitch he was seeing already told him as much. He’d been able to get onto the floor, but he hadn’t been able to get far. And hanging out in the lobby and garage near the limo had gotten him shit. He’d seen her people coming and going to and from the hospital, but never River. She was supposed to be at the new location, but he hadn’t seen her.

She was in hiding. The only other person he hadn’t seen was that tall, blond bodyguard. “You better not be fucking him. Goddammit! Goddammit!” He squeezed the steering wheel until his knuckles turned red. Forcing a deep breath,

he calmed down enough to think. She had a concert in about two weeks. He smiled. Plenty of time to scope things out and make new plans. Satisfied everything would still turn out fine, he turned his iPhone on and hummed along to the music.

Chapter Eight

Noah had always found the sound of the surf soothing, but that morning was different. River made it different. After the events of the night and their round of early morning lovemaking, he should be sound asleep next to her. He turned his gaze away from the window where he stood to watch the woman on the bed.

Sleeping beauty, curled on her side with her hands under her head. A woman well-loved. He still loved her. *Ah, hell.* He had no idea what she felt for him. Oh, she cared about him, but did she feel the same way about him? Had she ever? He didn't know if the past should be left alone or not. For years, what had happened haunted him. He couldn't understand ten years ago, and even less now, why she'd abort their child. *His* child. The ache in his heart reminded him he'd never gotten over what she had done and his part in it, nor the loss of River. Yet, she lay before him, and if they were to have any chance at a future together, they had to first take care of the past.

He moved back to the bed and slid a condom on before climbing under the covers. She turned toward him, eyes still closed, but holding her arms out to him as he reached for her. Rolling on top of her, he kissed her before he reached between their bodies to get her ready to take him into her. He smiled when he found her already wet, but entered her with two fingers first, anyway. She moaned and wrapped her arms around his shoulders, opening her legs and mouth wider. Accepting him fully inside her.

Removing his hand, he lifted his hips, centering himself on her. He found her opening, but only rested his tip at her entrance. He teased them both, rubbing his jewelry back and forth against her nether lips. Heightening his pleasure. She broke the kiss, panting for air, arching her body into his erotic caress, and erupted into a climax powerful enough for him to feel the tremors. As her first spasm clenched her stomach muscles, he pushed into her until he touched her womb. Her inner muscles clamped down like a vice around his shaft. When her quakes subsided, only then did he begin to move.

He grabbed her legs and raised them over his shoulders, so he could enter her more completely. Taking long and fast strokes in and out of her woman's heat, he guided them to the plateau of pleasure again. Her body moved with his, in perfect sync to a beat he was sure only they could hear. Each thrust and counterthrust taking them higher. Their harsh breathing providing the notes to a melody, building the finish until they clashed in an eruption of ecstasy.

At the end of their coupling, he was unable to do anything other than stay where he lay, so that's what he did. He had no independent mind, body, or life. Nothing. Only the feel of her body meshed and joined to his. Eventually, the blood returned to his brain, and it started functioning again, telling him he had to move, his body mass could crush her. He found strength he didn't know he possessed to ease out of her and roll onto his back, but he reached out and touched her thigh, still needing a physical connection to her.

She must have needed it too because she rested her hand on his arm.

"That was...that was amazing," she said.

He felt her turn her head on the pillow to stare at him, but he didn't have the energy to turn to face her. He'd used his last reserves to roll over.

"It's the jewelry," he managed to get out.

"Oh, it definitely adds a whole new facet."

"I'm glad you like it."

"But, it's not the only thing that's amazing."

Now *that* statement got him to turn his head. His thoughts of earlier rushed back to him, spilling out of his mouth before he could stop them. "What the hell happened to us, River?"

The sparkle immediately left her face, and tears pooled in her beautiful green eyes. He leaned forward and kissed her forehead. "I'm sorry, but I need to know. I think it's time we talked about it." He glanced down at himself. "Let me get rid of this condom and clean up. I'll be right back."

He returned to the bed and stretched out but pulled her into his arms until her head rested on his shoulder. "Why?"

She sighed. "The simple explanation is I was young, stupid." She shifted to rest her hand over his heart.

The ache in his chest eased. He'd thought she'd clam up like she'd done when he'd confronted her that last time. "Maybe, but so was I," he finally said. "I should never have walked away from you."

She raised her head off his shoulder to stare at him. "I didn't leave you much choice."

"But can you tell me why you had the abortion? I loved you then. I would have married you."

"Well, that would have been a disaster. We...we were too young."

"Maybe."

"I...I didn't have an abortion."

He sat up, jerking her off him. "What! But that's what you told me."

She shook her head sitting up and pulling the sheet up to cover her breasts, twisting to face him. "No. I told you, you didn't have anything to worry about anymore because there was no more baby."

"I don't understand. Were you or were you not pregnant?"

She nodded. "I was. I had a miscarriage."

The air rushed from his lungs. "Oh, baby. I'm so sorry." He gathered her in his arms, as much to hold her and comfort her as himself. He grieved for their child all over again. For the things that might have been between them. How horrible it must have been for her.

"But I don't understand. Why would you tell me you—okay, lead me to believe—you had an abortion?"

"I was so angry and hurt. I needed you, and you weren't there." She sobbed. The kind where it appeared no amount of air was enough to fill her lungs, and he shared some of her pain. "I needed you, Noah." She grabbed his arms.

"There...there was so much pain and blood, and you didn't come. I screamed your name, and you didn't come. By the time you got there, it was too late. I guess I was still grieving, too young and stupid to realize you would have been there for me, for us, if you could have. When you finally came home, I lashed out at you. I wanted to hurt you any way I could. I blamed you. So I sent you away and created another life for myself. My way of trying to deal with what happened."

"Wow, River. Wow!" He got up and put on a pair of jeans before coming to sit

down at the foot of the bed. His head and heart hurt again from what she'd revealed. "Did you hate me that much?"

"I'm sorry I hurt you," she cried. "But you went on with your life. You left me, never looking back. So I turned to my music, and I did the right thing for both of us. Maybe I just did it the wrong way."

The ringing of his smartphone stopped him from demanding a straight answer from her. He moved over to the side table and answered it.

"I think we might have something," Simon said on the other end.

"What?" he asked as he watched River get up. Naked, she walked into the bathroom. He went into the living room, needing to put a little distance between them, so he could focus on what Simon had to tell him.

"The security manager showed still pictures from the video to the staff," Simon said. "One of the maids remembered seeing this guy around the hotel for about a week before the attack. She thought he was new."

He sat on his couch and put his feet up on the coffee table. "Good. That confirms this bastard made his plans way in advance."

"Yeah, and I'm thinking he might have had something to do with River being driven out of her home."

"Certainly a possibility. The timing is way too convenient, and I don't believe in coincidences."

"I hear ya, my brother. By the way, Jefferson is being a real pain. He's an early riser and knows River is no longer at the hotel. He figures she's with you. He's insisting he needs to talk to her, something about their rehearsal time being moved up. So, would you please have her give him a call, or I might have to do something to shut him up."

Noah chuckled, knowing Simon's threats were never idle. Oh, he wouldn't physically harm Jefferson—much—but, God alone knew what he'd do to get the man to shut up. "Now, now. Let's not have another oil spill incident."

"Are you talking about the time we played supplemental detail for that oil executive who got death threats?"

Noah laughed. "Thought you'd remember. The head of the man's security, Len Bennis, decided to play 'my dick is bigger than yours' with you."

“All I tried to do was teach a very basic self-defense class for some of the executives.”

“Sure, but Len thought he’d show off by taking you down.” Simon suffered fools not at all.

“Hey, can I help it if he chose his poison?”

“Nope. But did you have to do it so the man landed in oil?” When Simon and Len fought in a parking lot—all in the name of a demonstration, of course—Len had fallen back onto a spot where a car had leaked oil.

“Hey, that was your bright idea,” Simon protested. “At least I didn’t hit him so he landed face-first. I could have done that, too.”

“True, but again, I’m not going to thank you for that. You pissed old Len off to no end.”

“You started it,” Simon said.

Noah laughed. “Good times.”

“Hell, his ass deserved to be fired anyway. He had a temper and wasn’t as good as he thought. Sloppy. But hey, at least the oil exec was happy when we found him a better replacement as chief of his security.”

“Yeah.” River, wearing his robe, came out of the bedroom. “Listen, gotta go. I’ll have River call Jefferson and check in later with our plans. I’ll let you know about Friday night.”

“Cool. I’ll keep you posted on what we find out about our stalker, and don’t forget to call the detective.”

“I have his card.”

He still couldn’t believe what she’d done. How could she lie to him like that? He didn’t know what to think. So he’d concentrate on the reason why they were back in each other’s lives. To keep her safe. But he couldn’t help wondering, if she didn’t need him, would she ever have contacted him again, told him the truth? Would they have ever made love again? *Damn.*

“Everything okay?” she asked, coming to stand beside the couch.

“Yeah, fine. That was Simon. One of the maids might have recognized the man who entered your suite, and Simon said you need to call Jefferson. Something about moving up your rehearsal time, and you still have to call the detective

assigned to the case and make a statement. When you're ready to call them, let me know, and I'll give you an untraceable phone to use."

"All right, I will. But...what about you?"

"Don't worry about me." He stood up. The scent of sex still surrounded her; he had to get out of there. "I'm going to take a shower. I'm not sure what's in the fridge—see what's there. If you find nothing appetizing, there's a number by the fridge for a grocery store that delivers. Give them a call and order whatever you want. I have an account."

"Don't you think we should talk more about this? What happened, and why I let you go."

He shrugged his shoulders, affecting a nonchalance he didn't feel. "Nothing more to talk about. You made decisions for us both, and like you said, we both moved on with our lives."

"And now?"

He allowed his gaze to slowly scan her body from top to bottom. "Now, we enjoy each other until it's time to move on." Because that's all it could be—they couldn't have forever. She didn't love him, and he didn't have the courage to find out if she ever had.

Their time together was just about great sex for her. He kept that in mind as he leaned over to kiss her, but before she could wrap her arms around his neck, he pulled back and moved around her toward the bedroom. "Go ahead and fix some coffee for me, too, would ya, babe?" Then he walked away, closing the bedroom door behind him, subtly letting her know he wanted privacy. Which he did. This was not just sex for him, but somehow that's what it would have to be.

Chapter Nine

He knew his patience would pay off. It always did. He smiled as he followed that Jefferson guy around for the morning. “Hmm, interesting,” he murmured to himself. “What’s he doing at the business offices for the Hollywood Bowl without River and the band?”

After Jefferson had left the building, he’d had a choice, either continue to follow him or find out what he’d been up to at the Bowl. The concert still wasn’t for another couple weeks or so. He grinned. An idea formed as he got out of his car and walked over to the entrance.

River started a pot of coffee then ventured out onto the deck to face the ocean, but she didn’t see it. The intense blue of Noah’s eyes filled her vision, and the hurt and anger reflected on his face when she confessed to him what she had done. Or rather, not done. After a night of the most satisfying sex of her life, her heart ached. She loved him. She wasn’t sure if she’d ever stopped, but could he love her again? Did he ever? If he had, he wouldn’t have walked away so easily. Oh, he wanted her body, but she wanted him to want her heart the way she still wanted his. It didn’t take more than seeing him again, when he showed up at the recording studio, for all the old feelings to come back tenfold. Thank God her mother had called her to warn her that she’d forced Jefferson to hire Noah. After those weird letters she’d been getting and when someone had tried to grab her from a parking lot, her mother wasn’t taking any more chances.

The way Noah had looked at her, she’d known then it would only be a matter of time before they were lovers, and that she’d have to tell him the truth. Well, she had. Now where did they stand?

The sight of people running in and out of the water snapped her back to her senses. She returned to the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. One egg, a

yogurt, a bottle of wine, two beers, and ice in the freezer greeted her. She shut the door and found the number for the local grocery store that delivered. It was close to lunchtime, so instead of breakfast items, she ordered a couple of sandwiches and juice. She didn't want to order anything else, not sure what he'd planned for dinner, or even food for the next day. She might find herself elsewhere. From his reaction, he'd already pulled away from her. She didn't blame him.

After she placed the order, she heard the bedroom door open and swung in that direction. Noah moved to stand in the entryway to the kitchen. A towel wrapped around his neck, he wore no shirt, and she wanted to lick her way down his chiseled abs. His jeans fit low on his hips, sexy as hell, but given the chance, she'd strip him in a second.

"Your turn in the bathroom," he said, heading for the cabinets next to her. Passing so close to her, the warmth from his skin brushed against her arm as he reached up to grab two cups. He filled one and offered it to her.

"You go ahead and take that. I'll hit the shower." She moved past him, but the fine hair rising on the back of her neck told her his gaze followed her until she crossed over the threshold of his bedroom. But unlike him, she left the door open, hoping he'd take her up on her silent invitation.

She took her time in the shower, even washing and conditioning her hair, leaving it in for an extra five minutes, hoping she'd glance up and see him, but he never came in. Okay, so be it. She wouldn't cry. Sex. That's all he wanted; that's all this could be. Yet, the ache in her heart told her she wanted more. Much more.

Chapter Ten

Noah had pulled back emotionally, and he suspected she knew it. But what the hell had she expected? She'd lied to him, and he still didn't understand why. She could have told him the truth in the first place or contacted him after he left. Maybe she was right, he thought, taking a sip of his second cup of coffee. Things had turned out better this way for both of them. She had a musical career beyond her wildest dreams, and he had a job he loved. The last thing either of them needed when they were younger was marriage or a baby. They'd both had a lot of growing up to do.

She came back into the room and sat down on the couch beside him. Her face scrubbed of makeup, her natural beauty radiated through. She looked like the girl he'd once known.

"Now what happens?" she asked.

He shrugged. "Now we wait for Simon to try to ID your stalker."

"No, I meant with us."

He kept his expression neutral. "Nothing has to change." He reached up to touch the ends of her damp hair. "We're attracted to each other. Maybe we never completely got each other out of our systems. This will give us a chance to do that. We've cleared the air, so, no reason we can't continue to enjoy each other."

"For now. And you're okay with that?"

Those words hurt more than he wanted them to. He steeled himself away from it and answered her in kind. It was what she wanted. "Yeah, it's fine. Nothing permanent. You're going to go on tour in a couple of months anyway. By then, we should have caught the stalker, and my job is here. So, eventually we go our own ways. This time, no harm, no hard feelings. Who knows, maybe if we're in the same city, we can even hook up again."

His stomach tightened, and not in pleasure, at the lies spewing out of his mouth. But necessary for his sanity because, God help him, he didn't know how he'd let her go. Not again. But when the time came, if she wanted to go, what

choice would he have? She'd broken his heart once, and he'd never quite gotten over it. He refused to allow her an opportunity to do it again, so he should walk away. That's what he should do, self-preservation demanded it. Fool that he still was, he'd take whatever time they had together rather than nothing more at all.

"Okay." She flipped her damp hair back over her shoulder. "If that's what you want."

"Yeah." He forced himself to lean forward and seal his stupid agreement with a kiss. He shifted and grabbed the phone he'd placed on the table while she was in the shower. "Here," he said, offering it to her. "This is a safe phone. The only ones calling you on it will be me, Simon, or Frank. No one else has the number, and our names will show up on the caller id. If anything else shows up, don't answer it. You can use it to call Jefferson later today. But right now, we need to call the detective assigned to the case. He wanted you to come into the precinct, but Simon talked him out of it. For now, he's satisfied to talk to you by phone."

"Okay. I don't know what else I can tell them that they don't already know."

"Which is why we insisted you shouldn't have to come in, and the less you're seen around town right now, the better." He took the business card out of his back pocket and gave it to her. "Call him."

River talked on the phone for about ten minutes then Noah spoke to the detective for another twenty. His people were still searching the hotel, but they'd found evidence the stalker had hidden out on the balcony.

After he hung up the phone, River said, "He was doing a lot more talking to you. What else has he found out?"

"The cops have video feed from the hotel's exits and from some of the buildings in the area. They're viewing them now to see if they can identify the guy leaving, or even a car."

"Is that possible?"

"There's a good chance he was caught on a camera. There are a lot of them around the area because there're two banks on that street."

"Thank God." She raised her hand and touched his. "This might soon be over."

The heat from her fingers had him thinking maybe he should have taken a shower with her after all. "Yep, with luck." The knock at the front door stopped

the thought.

"I ordered sandwiches," she said.

"Great. I'm starved." He got up and answered the door, signing for the delivery. Heading into the kitchen, he placed the bag on the counter. "What'd ya get?"

"Sliced turkey and cheddar cheese with spicy mustard and mayo on the side. Wasn't sure if you still like those."

"Yeah, yeah, I do."

"Can we go down to the beach and eat?" she asked, coming into the kitchen. "Sit on the sand?"

"I don't think that would be a good idea. This beach is pretty private, but this early in the day, there are still people around, and someone might recognize you. How about we set up outside on the deck."

"Okay, that'll work. Thanks." She stepped toward the cabinet in front of her, but paused. "Which cabinet has your glasses? I'll fill a couple with ice and the lemonade I ordered."

Using his chin, he pointed at the cabinet closer to the fridge and moved over to the one next to it to get out a couple of plates while she took care of the beverages. He grabbed a few paper towels, and they made their way out to the deck. They each took one of the two lounge chairs, sitting sideways, and placed the food on the little, round table between them.

She took a bite of her sandwich. "Mmm, good bread."

"Yeah, they make it daily for the sandwiches," he said, taking a sip from his glass.

"I didn't order anything for dinner. I wasn't sure what the plan was."

"I think it's best you not leave the house for a while, so we can either cook something or order in."

She raised a finely shaped eyebrow, her food halfway to her mouth. "You cook?"

"Yes." He grinned. "A little. As long as I keep it simple."

"This I've got to sample. But what about the wedding?"

"That's not for a couple of days, and the place will be crawling with security

personnel, so I know you'll be safe there."

"Okay."

"Do you have something in mind for dinner?" He couldn't believe they were having a normal conversation. Like two people in a relationship who cared about each other. Except, no real relationship beyond business and the bedroom existed. He forced himself to finish his lunch.

"Surprise me."

"Okay." After they were done, he gathered up their things. When she rose to help, he waved her back to sit down. "Relax. I've got this. If I fix dinner, you can clean up afterward."

"You got a deal."

While he put the plates in the dishwasher, she wandered back inside and headed straight for her instrument case. She'd only brought a few things with her. Her guitar, a large overnight bag, and her purse. She got the guitar out and moved over to the couch, strumming on the strings before she even sat down.

He moved closer to her and could hear her humming the song she'd sung at Ross's rehearsal. He had to get out of there. Maybe guarding her himself wasn't such a great idea after all. Maybe Simon or Alex should be the one watching her. But no, it had to be him.

Stepping away from her, he headed back to his bedroom to finish dressing. When he returned to the living room, River raised her head and stared at him. A note pad and pen sat on the table.

"I'm...I'm going out for awhile," he said.

"Huh?"

"I'll be back in an hour. If someone comes by, don't answer the door. No one comes by here. I'll let myself in." He pointed to the phone he'd given her, sitting on the coffee table. "I'll call you on that line if I'm going to be late. If you need to make a call, use that one and don't let anyone know where you are. Especially Jefferson. And if the house phone rings, don't answer it. No one I know uses it. Everyone uses my cell, and that number is already programmed into yours."

"Okay, okay, already. I'll be fine."

He leaned down, and she raised her head for his kiss. "Later," he said and left

the house. Pulling the door behind him, he got in his car and headed for The Guardian Agency.

The place was quiet. Most of the floors were empty, the staff either out on assignment or running errands for Ross's big day. Only a couple of interns and the receptionist were around. He went into his office and pulled up the update Simon had filed on what they had so far. He'd only gotten as far as the first sentence when he heard footsteps in the hall. Had to be Simon. Ross was out of commission for about a month, and his office was nearer to Simon's.

"Simon," he called out as the footsteps neared. Simon poked his head around the open door and stepped into the room.

"Didn't expect to see you here today," Simon said. "Why are you here?"

"Just needed to get out for a while. River's fine, and I won't be gone long. By the way, I gave her the phone you set up for me, so let Frank know she's got it."

"Cool. Did she ever call the detective?"

"Yeah, she spoke to him earlier this morning. So did I. She'll also talk to Jefferson about the rehearsals."

"She should cancel everything until we catch this guy."

Noah shook his head. "I agree but not happening. She's only willing to hold off rehearsal for a couple of days."

"Then, we'll have to get this guy by then. Did you have a chance to go over the updates?"

"Just started to read them."

"I can catch you up. The detective spoke to Linda this morning. Unfortunately, she never saw her attacker. He grabbed her from behind and knocked her out. The doc confirmed there were traces of chloroform in her system."

"Bastard. Too bad she didn't get a look at him."

"The good news is, the maid who identified our guy also provided an excellent description of him. She filled in the blanks on the video feed. And I was able to come up with an accurate picture of the suspect, at least according to the maid. It's in the file, and I shared it with the cops. But, not sure how reliable it really is. He could have been wearing a wig. He wore his hair on the long side, and it was almost always covering some part of his face, and he also sported a heavy beard."

Noah opened the attachment on the screen in front of him and took in the enhanced photographs. The guy they needed to find was six feet, maybe a little over, anywhere from two to three hundred pounds, depending on how much padding he had on, with dark hair.

"He could be anywhere from twenty-five to forty," Noah complained.

"That's what the maid said, too. She couldn't be sure. And so far, he's not showing up in any databases the cops or I have run the photos through."

"He's old enough for a driver's license or government-issued photo ID," Noah said.

"That's why I'm here. I thought I'd rerun a few programs and make some changes. Maybe he lost weight or something when he had ID photos done, and I'm going to assume he's disguised himself. The guy pays attention to detail."

"You're right. Let me know if you find anything."

"Yeah, I will." Simon stood up, but stopped at the door to ask him, "How long you staying here?"

He sighed. He probably shouldn't have left River alone and certainly not for long. Checking the time on his computer, he'd already been gone about an hour. He shut the laptop down. "I'm leaving now. I'll be at home. Let me know if you come up with anything. And if you get an address, I want to take a look at this guy and make sure we have the evidence against him before we turn anything over to the cops. I don't want him getting away."

"Will do."

"Oh, and I won't be able to make the bachelor party."

"Already figured that and told Ross. He's cool with it."

"But I'll be at the wedding on time, and I'll bring River with me. There's no personal connection between River and Ross and Shanna's wedding, so she should be relatively safe there."

"And the reception will be pretty secure, too. But once you guys get there, the press might not be too far behind."

"With a guest list of some three hundred people, I'm sure someone will have taken a picture of River singing at the wedding and spread it all over the internet by the time we get to the reception."

“Don’t worry. I’ll have an exit plan ready for you, so you won’t have to take her out through the front.”

Chapter Eleven

Noah opened the door to his condo almost two hours after he'd left it. The soft strumming sounds of a guitar greeted him. River was on the deck. He moved in that direction and found her sitting sideways on the lounge chair. Her back to him, she held the guitar and stopped to lean forward to write something down on the pad in front of her. Creativity at work. He smiled.

Until she'd told him about what really happened when they were kids, he'd thought they could still have something together. But he only fooled himself. Even back then, he'd always known the importance of River's music to her. And the real reason she'd sent him away. If they had married, she might never have become a superstar. He would have held her back. *Maybe*. Either way, she hadn't bothered to give him the chance. Nor did he give her one. He'd stayed away.

It's why he thought she'd aborted their child. That it would get in her way, but what she had done seemed almost as bad. She let him believe it, and he knew why. Her music. It had always been her music. First and last with her. There was no room for him in her life back then, and not much now. He moved through the open door, and when she turned around and saw him, the pleasure lighting up her face gave him reason enough to take whatever she could give him. How pathetic. And when the time came, he'd let her go.

"Hi," she said.

"Hi. What are you working on? It sounded great."

"Putting a little polish to the last song for the album."

"Did you talk to Jefferson?" he asked.

"Yes. He wanted to know where I was."

He sat in the other lounge chair. "I hope you didn't tell him."

She rolled her eyes. "Please. I told you I'd behave."

“Good.”

“But, he knows we’re together.”

“That’s fine.” He shrugged. “Then he knows he doesn’t need to worry about you.”

She gave the guitar a light tap. “But he didn’t think it was a good idea to change the rehearsal schedule more than we already have.” She held up her hand to stop him when she thought he would speak. “Hear me out. There’s no way I’m going to cancel my sold-out concert and disappoint my fans. Even if I can’t get into my studio at home for a couple of days, I still have to rehearse. *With* my band. So Jefferson’s gonna arrange some private studio time for us to rehearse and finish the album. There are only a couple more songs to lay down. But no one other than the owner and my tech guys will know we’re there. You can have your people check the place out, and you’ll be with me.”

“I don’t like it.”

“Sorry, dude. But I’m not going to let some maniac run my life. I get into enough trouble doing it all on my own.”

“Okay. Give me the address, and I’ll have Frank check it out. Make sure we can secure the premises.”

She grinned. “I love when you go all bodyguard on me. Oh, before I forget, Jefferson is also getting calls from this reporter we sometimes give lead stories to.”

“So?”

“I’d forgotten we were scheduled to meet with him later today. I already told Jefferson no. But he gave him a statement about what happened to Linda and told him I’m in seclusion right now.”

“Okay, that’s good.”

“Yeah, but this guy is like a rat with the scent of cheese up his nose. He’s the one that finally tracked me down at my parents’ farm after...well, you know.”

“Yes. But you don’t have to worry. He’s not going to be able to find you here.”

“Which is also why Jefferson threw him a bone and agreed to have him interview me by telephone. I’m supposed to call him later this evening to keep him from trying to track me down for a while.”

“That’s fine.”

An uncomfortable silence descended between them. She understood why but still didn’t like it. She didn’t know how to fix them. They’d begun to reconnect. She’d been a fool to tell him the truth. But she’d had to. He deserved to know. She’d made him pay long enough.

“I like the song you were just playing.” His words finally broke the tension between them. “Does it have any words?”

“Yep.” She adjusted the instrument on her lap and played and sang. Her music always soothed her. At the end of the day, it remained her only solace. Always there. Never letting her down.

“Do you mind if I accompany you on my violin?”

She smiled. “Just like old times.” But not exactly. “Go get it.”

She fixed a few notes while she waited for him, but he didn’t keep her waiting long. She spread the music sheets out on the table so he could see them, then played. He waited a few chords and joined in. Every so often, she’d pause and make another adjustment to the notes. Then she stopped. “Hang on a second,” she said. “Let me make a couple more changes, and we can start from the beginning again.” She leaned forward and changed some things. Listening to him play the violin gave her a few ideas. When she’d finished, she sat back and played again, this time she sang too. He waited for her to finish the first line of the song before joining in on the violin.

At the last chorus all the music stopped, and she sang a cappella. His voice joined in, blending perfectly with hers. She’d forgotten he also had a beautiful voice. Not until his high tenor melded with her soprano did she realize she’d rewritten the song for him. With him in mind, as a duet. Most of her songs were for him, always and only Noah.

His cell phone rang, breaking into the moment of perfect harmony. He straightened up and answered it. “What!” he barked, never taking his eyes off her. “Fine. Put him on.” He passed her the phone. “Here. It’s Jefferson. He wants to talk to you.”

She took the phone from him with a shaking hand. Their singing together had affected her in a way she didn’t want him to see, but was powerless to stop.

“Hello,” she said into the phone. She expected him to leave her alone, but instead he put his violin back in the case and leaned it against the railing. He crossed his arms over his chest. Jefferson’s voice droned in her ear, but she barely understood what he said. Something about a phone interview. “Jefferson. What time was that again?” She grabbed the pencil she’d been using and wrote down the number he gave her. “Okay, I’ll call him. I’ve got to go. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.” She shut the phone off and leaned forward to give it back to Noah. Their fingers brushed when he grabbed it, and sparks raced up her arm, straight into her core.

“It’s still there between us, isn’t it?” he said.

“Yes. Yes, it is.”

He sighed. “But it may not be enough.”

“I know that too.”

“You go ahead and finish. I stopped at the grocery on the way home and picked up a few things. I’ll get dinner started.”

Okay, if he wanted to change the subject, she’d let him. Either that or beg him to forgive her, to give them another chance. Instead, she asked, “What are you fixing?”

He pointed to the grill in the corner. “I thought I’d grill up a couple of steaks and make a few potato fries, along with a salad.”

“Sounds good.”

“Still like yours medium rare?”

“Yep. But let me know when you’re ready for the salad, and I’ll come in and make that for you.”

“Thanks, but I’m good. I got some stuff in the packets, and I’ll add a little balsamic and champagne vinegar to it.”

“Yum. You can whip up a dinner, can’t you? I’m impressed.”

He smiled. “Nothing fancy, but it’ll fill ya. And I picked up a couple of chocolate chip cookies from the bakery.”

“Are you trying to get me fat?”

“Hardly.” He picked up his violin case and moved toward her. Grabbing her shoulder, he squeezed. “A little meat on you won’t hurt.” Releasing her, he

opened the screen door and stepped inside.

She tried to be outraged, but she couldn't be. The pretense that he didn't mean everything to her saddened her. He meant as much as her music, maybe even more. But if he didn't want her the way she wanted him, if he rejected her, she wasn't sure even her music would be able to save her this time. She loved him still.

After a fantastic dinner, she helped him clean up. "I think I better call that journalist, or Jefferson will bug Simon or Frank again to try to reach me."

"Okay, you go ahead. I'll go sit on the deck and enjoy the view to give you some privacy."

"Thanks." She found the pad with the number Jefferson had given her and called the guy. He wasn't one of her favorite reporters, but as her mamma loved to say, better the snake you can kinda control than the ones you can't. He kept her on the phone for half an hour. Mostly he tried to link her attack to Linda's. The only problem with that was two different men did the attacking, but both were crazy. Finally, she got off the phone. Lord knew what he'd end up printing. Usually a combination of the truth and innuendo, but at least his spins were mostly positive or harmless, which got him granted the occasional interview. The one thing she wouldn't confirm for him was her whereabouts. He kept hinting he knew she wasn't at the hotel with Jefferson and her band. That no one had seen her for twenty-four hours because she was the one really attacked, not Linda. At least she managed to get him off that rumor.

By the time she joined Noah, the sun had gone down. She managed to find a couple of candles and hurricane lamps around the place and set them on the deck and on the little table. Noah went back inside and came out with two wine glasses and a bottle of wine and placed them on the table beside the candle. She returned to the kitchen and put a few of the cookies on a plate, microwaving them until they were warm, like they'd just come out of the oven. After they were ready, she grabbed the plate and shut off all the lights in the interior of the house to create a more intimate atmosphere before joining him at the railing. Taking a bite of one of the cookies, she closed her eyes and moaned. Firm lips covered her mouth, and she damned near dropped the plate.

“Mmm,” he said, licking her lips. “That does taste good.” He moved away, but only to pick up the other cookie and put it halfway in his mouth, leaving the other half hanging out.

She leaned forward and bit his offering, swallowing it before opening her mouth and exploring his with her tongue. Chocolate chip cookies never tasted better. “Mmm.”

He pulled back and rubbed his hands up and down her arms. “You can say that again.” He took the plate from her and rested it on the table beside the candle, returning to her with the filled wine glasses.

“Here.” He offered her one.

She took a sip. “This is good, too. Nice little kick in the back of the throat.”

He grinned. “I see you know your wine.”

“I’ve learned a thing or two.” They’d never had wine as kids, but he’d given her that first beer, and they’d gotten drunk on a six-pack, passing out down by the lake. When her mother found them, she didn’t punish them. She said the hangover would be punishment enough.

“Yeah,” he said, staring at her from the top of her head to her bare feet. “I can see that you’ve changed.”

Unable to stare at the intensity of his gaze, she turned toward the ocean. “It’s dark out here. How can you see anything?”

“You’re beautiful by candlelight, but then again, you’re beautiful, no matter what.” Her head snapped back. He took a sip of his wine then took the glass out of her hand. She didn’t move as he placed both glasses on the railing before pulling her into his arms. This kiss carried a hint of chocolate and the oaky fragrance of the wine they’d both had, but underneath it all was pure Noah. Nothing and no one ever had his flavor. The taste of summer nights and lazy days by their lake. She opened her mouth wider, wrapped her arms around his neck, and told him with everything she was what he really meant to her. Told him all without actually saying the words. Words she’d never be able to utter because of one stupid lie. *I love you.*

Chapter Twelve

“Oh, God!” Noah murmured into her mouth. Then he sucked on her tongue, letting her suck on his. He didn’t remember that particular wine, or any other, tasting so good. But then, he’d never tasted wine in River’s mouth. He opened up for her even more, needed so much from her, and wanted to give her the same. But he could neither ask for nor tell her how he really felt. It would crush him if she didn’t want him. Even as a grown man, he couldn’t take her rejection a second time, a denial of what they could be. He tried to tell her without words all she meant to him, but the past still stood between them. Knowing the truth didn’t set him free, didn’t make anything easier.

By some miracle, on some level, he thought she understood all he couldn’t say. At least, she seemed to open up and give more of herself to him, and he took it. Even if it was only wishful thinking on his part, he’d take all she had to give, and it would still never be enough. He would never tire of her. Picking her up, he carried her to the lounge chair. “I want to make love to you outside. Under the stars.”

“Done this before, have you?” she asked, twining her arms around his neck

“No. Never, but I want to share this with you.” He wanted to take her wrapped in the softness of the night, with the sound of the water lapping at the land. The way he planned on lapping at her core.

She twisted around. “Well, it appears to be private enough.”

“Don’t worry. There are no houses near enough to see my deck, and the elevation of the house, the high dunes, and the darkness ensure no one will be able to see us from the beach. Maybe in silhouette, but do we care?”

He took her silence for a no and kissed her forehead before putting her down to stand at the side of the chair. He raised her arms to remove her shirt and then her pants. She wore no underwear. His chest ached, and he dropped to his knees.

Grasping her hips, he brought her body closer to his face and rubbed his nose across her bare mound. Her fingers found their way into his hair. Her eyes were

open wide and stared directly at him, right into him. Unable to bear the sight of a future in them that would not include him, he turned his head to the side and concentrated on the present by rubbing his cheek against her.

Releasing his hair, she collapsed back onto the lounge chair. He spread her legs and sat back on his heels, staring into the glistening heart of her. “So ready for me.” He got up and grabbed one of the wine glasses before returning to his position on his knees before her.

“Always wanted to drink wine like this.” He grinned and passed her the glass. “Pour for me, baby.” She glanced at him, then the glass, understanding what he wanted, and poured it slowly down her bare mound, watching it drip straight to her center. He waited for it to reach her opening before he leaned forward and lapped it up. The combination of the wine and essence of his River had him hard as steel. Her body rose and pushed against his face. In response, he sucked hard on her clit. The more she pushed against him, the more he sucked, until she shuddered and climaxed into his hungry mouth.

He stood up and quickly pulled off his shirt and shoes, unzipping his jeans. “Oh, shit!” He had no condoms on him. Bending over, he took a deep breath and slowed his racing heart. *Think*. He had to think. “Be right back. Condom.” Stumbling away from her, he made it to his bedroom and grabbed packets of condoms from the bathroom. He also pulled his comforter off the bed before returning to her.

She lay as he’d left her—open, ready, and waiting for him. He took the cushion off the other lounge and placed it on the wooden deck floor. “Lay on that, babe.”

She got down, and stretched her arms over her head. “Mmm, nice,” she purred.

He took the other cushion off and laid it beside her. Balling the comforter up, he placed it under her head like a pillow. When he took his jeans off, his sex sprang forward, every inch aching for the relief of her heat. He placed the packets of condoms beside her, leaving one in his hand.

“Spread for me.” Slowly, she raised her knees and held them open for him. In a rush, he covered himself and lowered his body to the cushion.

His sex pulsed; soon, it would be inside her, where it belonged. Kneeling in

front of her, he raised her hips until she rested on his thighs. Then he grabbed his flesh and slowly fed its length into her. Inch by slow, agonizing inch, the pressure around his sex causing him to tremble in her arms.

“Dammit, Noah. More.” She twisted to try to get more of him into her. “Give me more. I want all of you.”

“All you had to do was ask.” He pulled her to sit up so she straddled his hips, her head fell back, but her hair hung over her shoulders. She looked like a woman being well loved. She pushed her hips down as he rose up; he slid so far into her, he hit the wall of her womb.

“Damn, those balls feel good.” Then she laughed. But not for long because he grabbed her sides and moved them both, and the only sounds she made were moans. They moved in tandem with the crash of the surf; his body slapped against hers like the waves to the shore. She shivered, and her inner grip on his sex tightened. Soon she would come again, and he’d be right behind her. But he didn’t want this to end. Not yet.

He quickly pulled out, but before she could voice a protest, he kissed her and turned her over. “Put your face down on the cushion for me, and lift that fine ass.”

Without a word, she did as he asked. Hiking her ass into the air for him. Taunting him. He surged into her heat, possessing her as she did him. His body moved without his control; he grabbed her hips and held on for the ride. For every motion he made, she made a countermove.

His balls twisted so tight, he thought he’d explode if he released, and he fought to hold it in. But she wouldn’t let him. Her body milked every molecule out of him, even his toes hurt, and still, his body continued to pump in and out of her. Climbing, taking them both to the summit. Until finally, blessedly, she fell forward onto the cushion. His body covered in sweat, he fell on top of her and groaned. The side of his face pressed onto her back, his mouth hung open, but he couldn’t say a word, because he couldn’t get enough air into his lungs for speech. If he’d had the energy, he’d have laughed. His River. The only woman able to take his breath away.

Using gravity, he rolled to his side, then onto his back. The cool breeze coming

off the ocean revived him a little. Enough for him to grab the comforter he'd brought out and cover them both with it. River remained on her stomach, but turned her head to look at him. He put his arm around her waist and watched as her eyes drifted shut, and he followed after her into the sleep of the sexually oh-so-very satisfied.

It took everything in him not to slit the bitch's throat as he climbed out of bed. Such a slut, giving herself to anyone willing to talk to her and buy her a few drinks, but she served a purpose. He needed to take a shower. "Mike," she moaned. "You leaving?"

"No, babe. Go back to sleep. Just going to the bathroom." She'd been so easy. He'd studied River's entourage. Patti was one of her three regular background singers, the least attractive of the group, and the only one unattached. He'd followed her into a bar a few months ago and hooked up with her every couple of weeks or so, pumping her for information. But he'd had to force himself with thoughts of River in order to get excited enough to screw her. And he'd have to continue with thoughts of River and making her his. Patti served a purpose—because of her, he knew River's schedule. But he'd allow their relationship to get closer, at least in her mind. He needed one more piece to bring it all together, and staying close to Patti was key. He turned on the shower and got in. He'd only been there for a few minutes before the shower door opened and the slug stepped in.

Shit! Couldn't he have five freaking minutes to himself! He turned the grimace forming on his face into a welcoming smile. He could have saved himself the trouble. She only had eyes for his uninterested dick. He glanced down. Damn, he couldn't fake that.

"Mmm, let's do something about that," she murmured, going down on her knees and taking him into her mouth. He leaned back against the shower stall and shut his eyes. Imagining those were River's long, slender fingers wrapped around his shaft, River's smooth tongue running up and down his sex. In seconds, he turned as hard as the tile at his back and rammed forward into her

Something Blue

waiting mouth.

Chapter Thirteen

No way could Noah attend his best friend's bachelor party. He couldn't leave her alone for that much time. Both because her life was in danger, and because he didn't want to leave her. They spent the day in a sensual feast, exploring every inch of each other's bodies. No one knew him like River; no other woman made his body do what she could. Make his heart beat only for her. He wanted to believe no other man would be able to get her to do what he could. And it still was not enough, but he didn't know how long he could pretend only sex pulled them together.

Since he'd missed the bachelor party, he had to make the wedding. Simon had emailed him an entrance and exit plan for the church. He'd placed a car in the parking lot of the church for River and Noah to leave in, but he'd arranged for the flower delivery van to pick them up a block away to take them to the church. One of their interns would drive his car back to the office.

He and River snuck into the church an hour before the service and hid in the pastor's office, watching television. When Shanna finally got there, Simon and her sister, Eboni, and her other bridesmaid were with her. The women grabbed River, and they all disappeared into the changing room.

Noah accompanied Simon to the room set aside for the men to get ready. "I've got your suit, man." Simon passed him one of the two garment bags he carried.

"Thanks, man, and thanks for bringing something for River to wear. I didn't even think about an outfit for her."

"Yeah, Jefferson gave it to me before I left the hotel. But River looks good in whatever she's in or, I bet, out of."

Noah stopped unzipping the bag to glare at his friend. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing, man. I don't know. A few days ago, she drove you nuts. But now, you still can't take your eyes off her, but I notice you two seem kinda closer. Maybe the way she kept touching you, or you sticking close to her."

Noah sat on the chair and sighed. "Shit. Am I that obvious?"

Simon grinned. "Only to those who know you well."

He leaned forward and put his head in his hands. "What the fuck am I going to do?" The door opened, and Ross walked in. He must have heard the last part of his reply.

"You're going to finish dressing then you're going to stand beside me while I get married."

Noah raised his head and rolled his eyes. "Lucky son of a bitch."

Ross grinned in return. "And I get on my knees and thank God each and every day."

Simon slapped Ross on the back. "Come on, we got us a wedding to get ready for."

"Sorry, you couldn't make it last night, buddy," Ross said, "but we raised a toast to you."

"I'm so sorry I couldn't be there."

"It's okay. I, of all people, understand. Hey, how's River? She driving you to drink yet?"

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," Simon answered.

Ross's gaze moved back and forth between the two men. "Something I should know about?"

Noah shot his friend a pointed look. "Nothing you need to worry about, man. Everything is under control." He got up and slapped Ross on the shoulder. "Let's get you married."

The ceremony was beautiful.

Holding back her tears, for the first time, River's voice choked. In his black tux and rust-colored tie, Noah never looked better to her. Ross and Simon were both gorgeous men. Simon especially would put any top ten list to shame, but she only had eyes for Noah. She sang for him. Her heart ached for the mistakes of her youth, and instead of fixing things between them, she'd only made it worse. They

were together, but they weren't, and it hurt. Knowing he'd leave her once they caught her stalker tore her apart.

She made it through the receiving line, and Noah stepped aside to escort her to her table. The rest of the evening became a colorful blur of people she would have gladly missed seeing, but Noah couldn't leave, so she stayed and pasted a smile on her face. When the time came for the bride to throw the bouquet, she didn't leave her seat. Shanna's bridesmaid, Christy, grabbed her arm and dragged her up toward the front of the room with the other unmarried women.

She groaned, glancing around for Shanna's sister, but she didn't see her. She'd left their table a while ago and never come back. She hadn't looked so good, and she remembered someone mentioning she had a cold.

"Oh, oh," she whispered to Christy. "Where's Eboni? Shouldn't she wait for her? I'm sure Shanna would want her sister to catch the flowers."

Christy turned to her. "Eboni went home. She wasn't feeling so good. She only lasted long enough to see her sister married."

"Ready," Shanna cried, turning around and raising her arms to toss the bouquet.

"Shoot." River took a step toward the back of the crowd, having no intention of catching the thing. But fate had other ideas. Like a heat-seeking missile, the bouquet headed directly at her. She either grabbed it or let it hit her in the face.

Everyone turned around and laughingly congratulated her. Her gaze immediately sought Noah, who stared at her with so much hunger in his gaze, she had to hide her face in the beautiful colors. Then it was the men's turn.

To a lot of hooting and hollowing, Ross took the garter off Shanna's thigh and tossed it to the crowd of men. Where the women had surged forward toward the bouquet in unison, the men took a noticeable step back. But Ross must have anticipated that, because the thing soared into the air and landed on Simon's head, to everyone's amusement.

After Simon put the garter on her thigh, they danced together, and while he was probably one of the most beautiful men she'd ever met, he did absolutely nothing physically for her. Not like the man whose stare pierced her back. The rising hairs at the nape of her neck told her he stood right behind her.

“Mind if I cut in?” Her heartbeat increased at the sound of his voice, and every cell in her body woke up.

“Sure, man. Thanks for the dance.” Simon kissed her fingers and walked off.

Noah took his place and her hand, wrapping his arm around her waist. She didn’t wait for him to pull her flush against his body. Like a magnet seeking metal, she stepped to him.

“You know, I don’t think we’ve ever danced together before,” he said.

“No, we haven’t.” She didn’t want to add, he’d missed her prom, and he’d taken Cynthia Belmar to his. Afterward, she didn’t talk to him for a week. Instead, she placed her head on his shoulder and hummed along to the song. The words were about loving someone, but sometimes love wasn’t always enough. The story of her life. They danced one more time before the bride and groom left.

“Where are they going?” River asked.

“A month-long cruise through the Caribbean.”

“Nice.”

“Yeah. You ready to go?”

“Yes.” She took his arm, and together they walked through the kitchen, but instead of heading for the back door in the kitchen, they headed to the maintenance room. They took the exit through there and found Noah’s car parked right in the alleyway next to the door.

“Let’s go home,” he said.

Once they reached his place, she changed into one of Noah’s T-shirts that reached her knees. She couldn’t sit still. A restlessness spread into her soul, and pacing the house didn’t help much. Since her records hit the charts and people recognized her on sight, she could no longer come and go as she pleased. She’d always found a way to sneak out to her favorite shops and restaurants or get her hair done, but she’d never been confined for so long. Going from one enclosed space to another wasn’t enough.

“Since it’s late, and there’s a beautiful moon out, do you think we could go for a walk on the beach?” she asked. “Other than sitting on your deck, I haven’t really been outside.”

“Sure. Let me put some Top-Siders on.” When he’d gotten home, he’d gotten

comfortable, putting on a pair of heavy fleece pants and a T-shirt, and walking around barefooted.

“Yeah, I’ll grab a pair of sweats.” Jefferson had sent another suitcase of her clothes with Simon to the wedding.

When she came out of the bedroom, she found him waiting for her on his deck. “How do we get down there?” She pointed in the direction of the beach.

“There’s a path next door. I didn’t want stairs added to my deck down to the beach. Plus, I wanted a higher elevation for more privacy. But, the path works fine.” He held out his hand.

She took it. “Lead the way.”

Late Saturday night, and surprisingly, not many people were out on the beach. They walked for about a half hour, close enough sometimes their arms brushed up against each other, but they no longer held hands. He kept his in his pockets, and she wore a light hoodie with a pouch. She’d brushed her unruly hair back into a ponytail and pulled the hood up over it to further obscure her features. But so far, they’d seen only one person jogging in the distance, and he’d already angled off away toward one of the houses.

“I spoke to Jefferson again,” she said, wanting to break the uncomfortable silence that existed between them. So much remained unsaid, so much she didn’t dare say.

“So, what’s the plan for next week?”

“I’ve got to go into the studio starting Monday and for the rest of next week to finish the album. And we’re going to need to do one rehearsal at the Hollywood Bowl. Jefferson’s already set up the time and talked to the security people there. He said he gave Simon all the information.”

“All right. But Simon or Frank will go over both locations to check them out before you set foot in either.”

“Okay. Ouch.” She hopped up and down on one foot, the other in pain. So much for leaving her flip flops near the path and walking barefoot.

“What is it?” Noah asked.

“Stepped on something.”

“Hold still; let me see.”

She leaned against him and raised her foot.

"I don't see any blood," he said. "I don't think the skin was broken."

She lowered her foot, glanced down, and spied a broken shell sticking up from the sand. Pulling it out, she put it in her pouch pocket. "I'm fine. I'll wash it off in the ocean as we head back."

"Okay."

When she realized she still rested her hand on his arm, she moved it, and they walked back to his house in tension-filled silence.

"Stupid, stupid," Mike whispered under his breath as he watched the bride and groom leave the reception from the safety of his car. Too bad Patti didn't get an invite—that would have been a good time to take River. But, no matter. Everything was coming along nicely. Good thing he hadn't killed Patti, although she annoyed the hell out of him. She'd been a font of information about River's whereabouts, and following Jefferson around had likewise proven to be helpful. Patience. Just a little while longer, and River Blu and that beautiful voice would belong only to him.

He drove back to the hotel and knocked on the door. Patti expected him, and he needed to keep her happy with his performance. But then, wasn't like anyone else was exactly knocking down her door. She should be grateful to him. When she opened the door wearing only a robe, he grinned and walked inside. He closed and locked the door. Time maybe for her to have a little taste of his more take-charge side. He'd been letting her think she ruled this relationship. Oh, how wrong she was.

"Take off the robe," he said.

Something about him must have given her pause. She grabbed the robe tighter around her. "Mike...is...is something wrong?"

He smiled. "We're going to play a little game. I promise you'll like it." He ripped the robe off her body. By the end of the night, she would be ready to do anything for him.

Chapter Fourteen

“How’s rehearsal coming, man?” Simon asked.

Noah adjusted the receiver at his ear to hear Simon better. “Fine, now that it’s the last one. I’ll be glad when all of this is over.”

“Will you? I’m kinda surprised to hear you say that.”

“Can’t take it, man, and not going to talk about it. The concert’s tomorrow night. My instincts say that’s when the bastard will try something.”

“But you’ll be there and ready for him.”

“I’ve got Frank, Alex, and Phil working with Bowl security and a few off-duty cops, so we should have everything under control. As much as you can control some eighteen thousand people. How are things with you?” In truth, he could have used Simon, but he was away on assignment, protecting Shanna’s sister. Eboni had seen something she shouldn’t have, and now certain dangerous people were after her so she couldn’t testify against them, which should be in another week. Simon was pretty badass himself and had her hidden. Only he and Ross knew their general location. If anyone could keep Eboni safe, it would be Simon.

“We’re fine. Reached our destination. Will check in again in twenty-four.”

“Stay safe, bro.”

“You, too.”

Noah hung up the phone and wandered back stage to check the exits, but his mind drifted. The last couple of weeks had been both hell and heaven on earth for him. More hell than heaven these last few days, since he and River no longer slept together. He shook his head to clear his thoughts and focus on his job. There’d been no sign of the bastard who had been terrorizing River. All the leads took them nowhere—even the bizarre notes and deliveries had stopped. The cops thought the guy had moved on, since River was no longer readily available. Not likely. The guy was a psycho, probably just lying in wait for them to drop their guard.

Still, he’d let River move back into her house, but he stayed in a guest room in

her wing now, and not the carriage house as he had before. But, more importantly, they were no longer sleeping together. He snorted. His thoughts always drifted back to her. As soon as she moved back home, it seemed awkward to remain in a relationship, or whatever it was, like whatever they shared had run its course. Not so for him. He just couldn't do it anymore, pretend he didn't love her.

When he'd suggested it would be best if he were in the main house, closer in case anything were to happen, she took him to the guest room and told him he could sleep there. Wished him good night and walked out. That second night when he'd finally gotten her alone and reached for her hand in the kitchen, she'd pulled away when the phone rang, but even before that, she'd put distance between them. The damn phone call was from her ass wipe ex. When she said the bastard's name, he tried to grab the phone from her, but she twisted it away from him and walked into another room. She still wouldn't tell him what the dick head had to say to her, or why she'd spoken to him at all.

She went from constantly touching him to keeping away from him and never being alone with him. Not once in the last few days had she come to his room or hinted he'd be welcome in hers. If she didn't want him, he wouldn't force her to give him more than she could. He couldn't when they were kids, and he sure as hell couldn't now. Her music. That's all she cared about. She'd always made that perfectly clear. And it hurt like hell. But still, he couldn't leave her side, knowing someone meant her real harm. So, he continued to watch over her. And suffered.

A commotion down at the entrance to the dressing rooms had him hitting the receiver in his ear. "Frank, what's going on?"

"Earl's here."

"No f'in way! I'm coming to you." The moment he heard the name, he headed in that direction. He arrived just as Jefferson did.

"What the hell are you doing out of jail, and why are you here?" Noah barked at the bald man, stepping between him and the doors. He and Earl were of similar height and built, but Noah had no doubt in his mind who'd win any fight.

"Step down, guard dog," Earl growled back. "River called me."

Noah got right up in the bastard's face. "Bullshit!"

“Easy, Noah.” Jefferson stepped beside him and tugging him away from the other man. “I called him.”

Noah swung to face Jefferson. “Why, and why isn’t his ass still sitting in jail?”

“He made bail,” Jefferson said, “and he’ll be performing tomorrow night with River.”

“Like hell!” He turned to face Frank. “He waits here until I get this straightened out.” He walked away. That, or he’d wipe the smug smile off the bastard’s face. If River was back with the piece of shit he would—. He found River in the waiting area; by then, he’d gotten his temper under control—a little. Patti sat on the couch next to her with her new boyfriend. He made a mental note to check the guy out. He’d seen him with Patti a time or two and never really paid him much attention, but something about him had his senses kicking into gear.

The way he treated Patti bugged him. Always pawing on her, or slapping her ass every time she moved past him. He swore the way the singer was behaving, if the man told her to jump, she’d ask him how high. This wasn’t the I-can’t-live-without-you kind of affection; it seemed off, like the guy had no real respect for her. Patti was a nice young woman, and he’d hate to see her involved with another asshole of the male species.

The other singers sat to the side, and Linda sat across from them on a chair. She’d been released from the hospital a few days before, but still wore a bandage on the side of her face, and from the way she frowned at Mike, Noah didn’t think she liked him much either.

“River.” He stopped beside the sofa she sat on. “Why is Earl here?” Good, he thought. The question sounded reasonable, and not the demand he’d almost made it. But, from her sigh, he already knew he wasn’t going to like whatever she had to say. If she told him they were back together, he’d kill the man and gladly do life for his actions. No way would he let that piece of shit near his River again.

Linda wore a puzzled expression on her face as she looked at River. “What? Earl’s here? Why?”

River frowned. “Listen, Narha was supposed to play the violin on the new piece, *A Matter of Time*, but he broke his finger playing basketball this morning. The only other person who can do this piece justice is Earl.” She stared defiantly

at him. "I don't like it any better than you do, but the show must go on. And Earl, at least, is somewhat familiar with the piece."

"Bullshit," he said. "This town is full of musicians. Find another one."

"Noah is right," Linda agreed. "How about Donnie or Washington?"

River shook her head. "Tried them. Neither is available on such short notice."

Jefferson joined them. "That's right. I've been making calls for the last two hours."

"How did you know to call Earl?" Noah asked, liking the guy a little better since he knew Jefferson only had a working relationship with River. He'd caught him and Linda in a serious embrace the other day.

"Well, he called me, wanting to know if River would ever forgive him. I told him not in this lifetime and hung up. But then, when Narha was injured, I remembered Earl knows this piece already, and he plays the violin." He shrugged. "So, I called him."

"But this arrangement, when he first heard it, didn't include a violin," Linda argued. "And his voice isn't that great. Regardless of what he thinks."

"Yes," River said. "I agree, while his singing is nothing special, he can play the violin, and he's good enough to pick this up." She glanced up at him. "I'm out of options here, Noah. So, unless someone else has a better solution, let Earl in so we can rehearse."

"Shit!" he exclaimed, pacing. "Goddamn it!"

"Noah..." River began.

He held up his hand and stopped. "Don't. Don't say a word. I'll do it."

"You!" Both Jefferson and Linda gasped. He didn't reply to them, but kept his gaze on River while he tapped the mic in his ear. "Frank, tell that piece of shit at the door he will not be needed, and if I see him within a hundred feet of River again, I'm going to kick his ass."

"I don't understand." Jefferson wore a shocked expression. "You play the violin?"

"Yes, beautifully," River confirmed.

"Can he sing, too?" Linda asked.

He gritted his teeth, but River responded to her question. "Yes."

Linda smiled. "That's good enough for me."

Jefferson rubbed his palms together grinning like a teenager let loose in an Apple Store with no spending limit. "Well, all right, let's get this party started."

"In a minute, Jefferson," River said. "I need to speak to Noah first. We'll meet you on stage and start with this song."

They all got up and left the room, leaving him alone with River. "You don't have to do this, Noah," she said, standing up and holding his arm.

He stared down at her hand on his bicep. She hadn't touched him voluntarily in days. A starving man finally getting served couldn't be more satisfied. He couldn't move. "But I do," he finally replied.

"Earl can do this. I know how private music is to you."

"Would you really rather him do this than me?"

"No," she said. "I never want to see Earl again if I can help it."

"Then why? Why agree in the first place?" But that's not really what he wanted to know. He wanted to ask why she'd shut him out. He wanted to know if it was over between them, for the last time.

She shrugged and moved away. He felt the loss of her touch down to his soul. "Jefferson called me and told me he had Earl on the phone, and he was willing to perform. Earl had called me a week earlier to tell me he was out of jail and getting counseling. I wished him luck and thought that would be that. He knows, but for this emergency, I don't want anything to do with him."

"Okay, then don't. I'll do this—for you."

"Noah..."

Chapter Fifteen

Noah's cell phone went off before she could try to talk him out of performing in front of an audience. She'd written the song about her relationship with Noah to begin with. Then, that evening, while she worked on some of the notes and he played the violin with her, she knew what had been bugging her about the piece. She really had written it for him. She'd written it to be accompanied by a violin. But she couldn't ask him to get up in front of thousands of people—and when the video was made, millions would see him—and perform. But, he played like an angel. Her angel. It had been so hard these last few days, keeping her distance, but she didn't know what to do. She didn't want to pretend anymore. She loved him still. Had never stopped.

When he got off the phone, she asked, "Everything okay?"

"Yes, that was Frank. Jefferson told him I'll be playing the violin during the final number. He thought it was a joke."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. It's my choice. Besides, I'll live."

But she might not survive without him in her life. "Then come on. Let's go." Word must have spread, because by the time they got up on stage, they had quite an audience. She could see Frank standing at the edge of the stage and Alex next to him. Both had their iPhones at the ready. She grinned, pretty sure they had them set on video.

"Hey, you guys," she yelled at them. "Email me a copy." She got the thumbs up from both men.

"Cut it out," Noah yelled.

"Sorry, buddy. When I texted Ross, he ordered it." Frank grinned. "He didn't believe me and wanted proof, and so will Simon."

Noah shook his head. "Wait. I don't have my violin."

"Not a problem." She glanced around until she found John, the equipment manager. When she caught his attention, he walked over, violin in hand. He gave

it to her, and she passed the instrument to Noah.

He sighed.

“Well, you insisted,” she said, grinning. She sat down at the piano and pointed to the spot where he should stand. “Do you need the music?”

“No. We’ve played it enough.”

And they had. She’d written it as a tribute to their youthful love for one another. Oh yeah, he loved her once, but she’d killed it. She had no one to blame for her mess but herself. She waited for him to tune the violin to his liking. When he was ready, he nodded at her, and she began.

The piano start built the intro for the violin, so once the strings were added, the sounds blended perfectly. Then, she sang.

I wait for that perfect moment.

I wait because I know it will come.

I wait until the world is ending.

I wait because it’s only a matter of time.

I let you out of my life once because I wasn’t ready.

It just wasn’t our time.

We had a perfect beginning. The ending I could have done without.

But time runs in a perfect circle.

So I wait because it’s only a matter of time.

Noah stopped, lowered the violin, and his voice joined with River’s for the chorus, blending, creating a flawless harmony. Then he raised the instrument and placed it under his chin, the bow striking the first cord as River sang the next line.

Now we’re back at our beginning.

This time I want a different ending.

I’m ready for you. You ready for me?

Now. Now this is our time.

So I wait because it’s still only a matter of time.

Noah lowered the violin and turned to her. She stopped playing and left the piano with the microphone in her grasp and joined him. They faced each other and sang the last chorus a cappella into a single mic. When they were done, everyone cheered, but she only had eyes for Noah. He leaned forward to kiss her, but she met him halfway.

He pulled back and rested his forehead against hers. "We've got to talk," he said.

"Yeah. Yeah, we do."

"After you finish rehearsal."

"Okay."

Jefferson joined them on stage, patted Noah on the back, and hugged River. "Oh my God!" he cried. "I had no idea." He stared at Noah, in awe. "Damn, man. I can sign you right now to our label."

"Jefferson," River said in a warning growl. "He's not interested."

"I'm going to get back to work."

"Okay, but don't go far," Jefferson said. "We're going to run through the rest of the songs in order, then have you do that again."

"I'll be around."

The rest of the band took their places on stage, and River turned her mind toward what she had to do. She got herself into her zone, as she always did when she worked, but this time, Noah occupied the space with her. She saw him moving around the place, as if he couldn't remain still for long, and even though she couldn't always see him, she knew he never took his eyes off her.

Shit! Finally, they took a break. He'd been waiting for this. At first, he thought he'd take River the night of the concert, but realized while the crowd would help him, it could also hamper his escape. It wouldn't be easy getting away from the area. But tonight was perfect. No crowds to get in the way. He already had the place mapped out, and he knew their habits.

River always took a couple of minutes for herself between sets. Everyone knew this and let her alone for a while. He counted on the fact that guard of hers would assume she'd be okay for a couple of minutes. Still, why take chances? He patted the gun he had strapped to his back. She came around the corner, but stopped when she saw him.

"Hey, Mike."

"Hi, River. That was a great rehearsal." When she continued walking, he fell in beside her. He'd made sure she'd gotten used to his presence these last few days, so she'd be comfortable around him. "Listen, I know you don't have a lot of time, but I got a present for Patti, and I wanted your opinion. I know you guys are close." They were. Patti was one of River's favorite background singers. She'd used her on the last four albums.

What kind of present, and how can I help?"

"It's hard to explain, but...well, it's better if I show you. I hid it in her dressing room. I want to give it to her after rehearsal today, if you think it's okay."

"Sure."

The dressing room was at the far end of the hall near an exit door. As soon as they reached the doorway, Mike glanced back to make sure no one was behind them. Depending on who was around, he had another exit plan, but this one should work. When she turned to enter the changing room, he pulled the cap off the needle he had palmed and stuck it in her neck.

"Wha..."

Her body went limp, and he grabbed her around the waist. The drug made her appear weak, as if she were drunk. Her motor skills worked, but she was incoherent. He wrapped her arm around his neck and kept his arm around her waist while he hurried her out of the exit door he'd unlocked earlier in the day. There was a short hallway, but he propped her against the door so he could lock it again. Making sure no one would immediately think to come that way and giving him more time to get out of there. The hallway led to a maintenance room with an exit that came out near the operations building. He had to be careful. There were facilities people around, but no one seemed to pay them any attention. No one expected River to be exiting. After all, they were leaving the building, not trying to

get in. Security was there to keep people out.

He forced her to place one foot after the other, to walk out to the car he'd parked in the lot earlier. It was a little tricky getting her in the back seat. She kept sliding to the ground, but he managed finally, and laid her down before running around to the driver's side. He started the car, one of his favorite songs came on the radio, and he hummed along.

Chapter Sixteen

“Have you seen River?” Linda asked.

The significance of the question caused Noah’s heart to pound. “I was heading to her dressing room.” He would have been back there sooner, but Jefferson had cornered him again. He wanted to talk to him about singing on the album with River and maybe doing a couple of songs together on the tour. The man was ready to have him sign on River’s record label. He shook his head. He didn’t mind helping River out when she needed him, but he preferred to remain backstage as opposed to center stage. He told Jefferson that, but the manager wasn’t done trying to convince him.

“I just came from there,” Linda said, “and she’s not in her changing room.”

That got his complete attention.

He quickened his pace. “Did you check in the singers’ room?”

“No. Patti came down to the dressing room with me, but Tracey and Sharon left a couple of minutes ahead of us. She could be with them.”

Noah didn’t bother to check River’s dressing room. She would have walked past them if she’d gone out. He continued down the hall to the singers’ dressing room. Only the three women were in there. “Have any of you seen River?”

All of the women shook their heads. He slapped the earpiece connecting him to all the security detail. “Anyone seen River?”

When the *nos* came back, his guts twisted. “Find her,” he barked into the mike.

“What’s going on?” Linda asked.

“Not sure. When was the last time any of you saw her?”

“On stage,” Linda told him.

“Yeah, same here,” Tracey said, and the others agreed.

“Try her cell,” Patti suggested. “She might be in the bathroom.”

“No,” Linda said. “I knocked on the door before I left her room.”

Noah pulled out his cell and dialed River’s number. It rang once then went straight into voicemail. He went back down the hall with Linda and the other

women trailing him. He redialed her number, but as he neared the door, he could hear her phone ringing. He went into the dressing room. Her phone poked out of her purse, on top of a table.

He tapped the headphone again. "Alex, take a few people and check the parking area. Frank, have your detail check the theater itself."

Jefferson came into the room, along with John. "What's going on?" Jefferson asked.

"River's missing."

"What?"

"You heard me."

"There must be some mistake. I'm sure she's around here somewhere."

Noah didn't bother to answer. "I need everyone on stage, all the band members and tech people. Everybody but the security detail."

He waited for them to leave, but instead of following them back toward the stage, he walked back down the hallway and checked the background singers' room, as well as the bathroom. Then he checked the door at their end of the hallway. It was locked. He turned around and headed back the way he'd come. When he got to the stage, everyone seemed to already be there.

He stood up on a box so he could address them. "River is missing. I've got the security details searching for her, but I need to know if anyone's seen her since she left the stage."

Sam, one of the gofers, spoke up. "She walked past me. I thought she was heading for her dressing room."

"Did you see anyone else? Was anyone with her?"

He shook his head. "No. I'd just come outta the bathroom and come right back to the stage."

"Anyone else?" Noah glanced around. He recognized the faces of the band members and the three tech guys she'd been using. He didn't know all the stagehands who were employed by the facility. Frank called out to him from the floor.

"So far nothing. But we'll keep searching."

"Go help Alex out in the parking lot. See if anyone saw anything. Have security

check their cameras.”

“You...you don’t think Earl is behind this?” Jefferson asked.

Frank must have heard him and turned back. “I escorted Earl to his car myself and watched him drive off.”

“Yeah, but he could have come back,” Noah said. “See if anyone saw his car again.”

“What can we do?” Linda asked.

“Right now, nothing,” Noah said. “I’m going to go to the security office myself and go over the video feed.”

Noah moved to exit the stage, but saw Jefferson put his arm around Linda and hug her. “He’s going to find her. Everything’s going to be okay,” Jefferson said.

Noah only prayed he was right. He should never have left her alone for a second. But damn it, after he’d sung with her, he needed some time to clear his head and think. That song. She’d written it about them. Why he’d never seen that before now remained a mystery. A light bulb went off in his head. She loved him. He needed a minute to absorb that. God, he hoped that’s what their kiss on stage meant. Shit, she was supposed to have been safe for two minutes in an area that should have been secure.

“Noah.” Someone grabbed his arm, and he turned around.

“Patti.” His voice came out gruffer than he’d intended. He took a deep breath. “What is it?”

“I...I can’t find Mike.”

“Was he planning on staying for the entire rehearsal?” he asked, frowning.

“Yes. He said he would. But I can’t find him.”

“When was the last time you saw him?”

“I haven’t seen him at all since we started rehearsing. He told me he was tired, that I wore him out, and he was going to take a nap in our dressing room. But when we got back from rehearsal, he wasn’t there, and I haven’t seen him.”

“You came with him, right?”

“Yes.”

“What kind of car does he drive, and where’s it parked?”

“It’s a black Audi, and he parked right next to the limo that brought the other

girls.”

“Okay, I know where that is. We’ll look for him too. I’ll have Alex check the parking lot.” But the veins in Noah’s temples pounded with tension.

“Oh...my throat...thirsty.”

“Here.”

A hand held her head up, and the cool taste of water brushed against her lips. She raised her hands to wrap around a plastic water bottle and gulped. Which made her choke and cough.

“Not so fast. Careful.”

That voice sounded kind of familiar, but she couldn’t quite place it. She tried to open her eyes, but books must be sitting on them, holding them shut. “What happened?” She rubbed her eyes, which helped because she was able to lift her lids and focus a little on the face hovering over her. “Mike? What...what’s going on?”

“Don’t you recognize me, River? I felt sure you would.”

“Huh? What are you talking about? What’s wrong with your eyes?” Her throat scratched like sandpaper when she spoke. “More water,” she rasped.

“Here.” He placed the bottle in her grasp, and she raised it back to her lips. This time she didn’t gulp it.

“Ah.”

“Better?” he asked.

She took a deep breath. “Getting there, but I don’t understand. What happened?” Her mind couldn’t grasp a thought. She turned her head and looked around the room. She recognized nothing.

“Where are we?” She tried to sit up, but fell back against a mattress.

“Easy, there,” Mike said. “Sorry about that. I must have given you a little too much. You’ll be all right after a while. The best thing for you right now is to sleep.”

“But—”

“No buts. I’ll explain everything later, when you’re able to understand. Sleep.”

Her eyes had already drifted shut, and the word sleep seemed to come to her from a long tunnel, so muffled she could barely make out what he said. But there was something...something she was supposed to ask him. Why were his eyes blue, when earlier they had been brown? She forgot that question and all the others as her consciousness shut down.

She never felt the hand brushing the hair away from her face or tracing the outline of her lips. “That’s it, my beautiful River. Sleep. When you wake again, we will begin. I want you wide-awake and aware. You’re mine now, as you were meant to be.” Mike got off the bed, humming in a clear voice. He took the bottle from her and snapped a soft, leather cuff around her wrist; he attached it to a chain fastened to the wall. She’d be able to move around on the bed, but wouldn’t be able to get far. He still had a few last-minute things to take care of before he disappeared with her. Crossing the room, he opened the door, glancing back one last time at the woman asleep on the bed. God, he felt good. He closed the door behind him and locked it. She’d sleep through the night. He’d let her alone, but tomorrow night—ah, tomorrow—he’d begin the round of drugs that would bind her to him. Then, they’ll be together forever. He walked away feeling better than he had in years.

Chapter Seventeen

“What the fuck!” Noah exclaimed.

“I see him.” Jefferson said. He and Linda had followed him to the security offices where they checked the video feed from the cameras at the entrances and the parking areas. And what they’d seen was unbelievable.

“That’s Mike.” Linda said. “But I don’t understand. Why would he take River away like that? She seemed like she could barely walk, like she was sick or something.”

“Or drugged,” Noah said. He turned to the security guy sitting in front of the monitor. “Can you focus in on the license plate for the car?”

“Yeah.” He leaned forward and hit a few keys; the camera zoomed in on the plate. “There ya go. It’s only a partial, though.” The plate had been tampered with.

“That should be enough.” Noah walked out of the room, already dialing the detective assigned to River’s case. “Jackson. River’s been kidnapped.” He didn’t waste time and gave him a description of Mike along with the model and partial license number for the car. He hung up the phone after telling the detective he’d call back.

“Now what?” Linda asked. “Do you think this is her stalker? The same guy who attacked me?” She grabbed his arm, stopping him from walking. “Oh my God, he’s been dating Patti.”

“Yeah, I’m going to have a little chat with Patti.”

Noah headed back to the dressing room and found Patti and the other two singers still there. “Patti, Mike’s last name, is it Fores?”

“Yes. Why? Did you find him? Did you find River?”

“No, Patti,” Jefferson spoke up before he could.

“That’s right.” Noah cut Jefferson off. “We haven’t found either of them.” He turned to stare at Jefferson, hoping the man would understand that he needed to shut the hell up and let him do the talking. Time was important. “Patti, how long

have you known Mike?"

"A couple of months. We met at a nightclub and sorta hit it off immediately."

"Where does Mike live?"

"What...what's going on?"

Linda sat down on the couch next to her. "Honey, we need to know his address."

She never took her gaze off Noah while she gave it to him. Noah pulled out his phone and called Jackson, giving him the information. "Hang on a sec. Patti, where does he work?"

"He...he doesn't. He said he used to be a stockbroker, but made a lot of money and now only handles his portfolio. He makes investments here and there, but he doesn't go to an office. He has business meetings from time to time, but he always seems to be available to hang out with me."

"Okay, thanks." He relayed the information to Jackson and got off the phone.

"What can we do?" Jefferson asked.

Noah turned back to Patti. "I think you know what I'm going to say."

"He...he took her, didn't he? But why?"

"We think he's the guy that's been sending her the notes, the flower on the car, and the one who attacked me," Linda said.

"What? There must be some mistake."

"Afraid not," Jefferson said. "We saw the security tape of him taking River out of the building and into his car."

"I can't believe that!" Patti cried.

"Can't or won't, doesn't matter," Noah said. "Fact is, he's the one who took her."

"You know, he was always a little quiet around us," Tracey, one of the backup singers, said.

"Yeah," Sharon, the other singer, agreed. "And he was always watching River when he thought no one was paying attention."

"Why didn't y'all say anything?" Patti asked her friends.

They both shrugged. "Because you seemed so happy," Tracey answered. "And as long as we didn't see him trying to hit on River, we let it go."

“But why?” Patti asked, glancing at Noah and her friends. “I still don’t understand. Why would he take her against her will, or do all the other things?”

“Who the hell knows,” Jefferson said.

“Patti, other than his address, was there any other place he talked about—anywhere else he’s ever taken you? A weekend home, something like that?”

She shook her head. “No. We’ve only ever hung out around town, mostly at my place or at the hotel.”

“You’ve never been to his house?”

“Oh, yeah. I’ve been there a couple of times. It’s a nice condo. Not much furniture, but what there was seemed pretty expensive.”

“Think, Patti,” Linda said. “If the cops don’t find her with him at his place, where else might he have taken her?”

Patti shook her head and softly cried. “I’ve been a damn fool, haven’t I.” It wasn’t really a question. She wiped her eyes, and Tracey hugged her. “I’m not going to cry over some damn psycho. He’s never mentioned any other place to me. Everywhere we’ve gone has usually been with our group. Now that I think about it, I’ve never met any of his friends. When I asked him if he wanted to invite any of his peeps to hang with us, he said he didn’t really know a lot of folks in town. He’d recently moved here from back East. Most of the people he knew were business acquaintances.”

“He ever name any of those people?” Noah asked.

“Not really. I only know the names of two people he might know. Roger King, because he just mentioned him the other day, said he was going into business with him, and Bert Sheves, because he was with him when we met, and he had a meeting with him last week. I saw a text on his phone when I glanced at it to check the time.”

“Bert Sheves is in real estate,” Jefferson said. “My brother used him to buy property in the Valley last year.”

“Thank you, Patti. It’s a start.” He turned to Jefferson. “You have this guy’s number?”

“No.” Jefferson glanced at his watch. “And it’s kinda late, so his business office would be closed. Let me call my brother. He might have his home or cell

number.” Jefferson made his call and got the information they needed.

“Let me call him and talk to him,” Jefferson said. “He knows me. He might not be as forthcoming with you.” He raised his eyebrows at Noah.

“Okay, go ahead,” Noah said as Frank came into the room. “Let’s step outside. It’s getting crowded in here.”

He followed Frank back to the hallway. “What’s up?” Frank asked. “Security said you saw someone on the tape taking River outta here.”

“Yeah, Mike.”

“Mike!”

“Yeah, he took River out of the building and put her in his car. Looked like she was drugged.”

Frank frowned. “You think he could be our stalker?”

“That’s the assumption I’m working under.”

“Okay, seems like the right one. Do we know where this guy lives?”

“Yeah, Patti gave us some information, and I passed it along to the police. But we’re checking out another hunch. Mike apparently has a friend or business associate in real estate. Maybe this guy can tell us if he showed Mike any properties, or better yet, if he sold him one.”

Jefferson stepped out of the room, and Noah glanced at him. “Anything?”

“Yes. Sheves texted me the addresses of the three places he took Mike. One of them he put a contract on a couple of days ago.”

“Jackpot,” Frank said.

“Means he’s got access to at least one.”

“Here they are,” Jefferson said, holding up his phone so both Noah and Frank could see the addresses.

“They’re basically in three different directions, but all relatively close to the Bowl,” Noah said. “Okay, which one has the contract?”

“The last one.”

“I’ll take that one. Frank, you take the first one and have Alex check the second address. If you find anything, call the cops, then call me. Jefferson, can you forward this text to our phones?” In only a few seconds the addresses appeared on both Frank and Noah’s phones.

"I'll forward it to Alex," Noah said.

"Fine, I'm on this." Frank turned around and walked down the hall, carrying his phone. "Alex," he said into the receiver, then Noah couldn't hear him anymore.

"I'm coming with you," Jefferson told him.

"I don't think so."

"I have the address. How are you going to stop me?"

"Fine." Noah raked his fingers through his hair. "But you will do what I tell you to do, understand?"

"Yes."

"I want to come too," Linda said.

Jefferson put his arm across her shoulder. "No. It's too dangerous. You all go back to the hotel. We'll call you there."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely," Jefferson replied.

"Well, if you're coming, let's go." Every minute counted. He didn't want to think about River being alone with that maniac.

"What about calling the police?" Jefferson asked.

"We'll call them when we have something to tell them. Right now, this is only a hunch. Best bet is for them to search this Mike's house. There might be some leads there."

When they were a few blocks away from the business address, his phone rang. Noah stayed on the phone with Detective Jackson for a few minutes, and in that time, his guts twisted into knots he wasn't sure would ever untangle. He told Jackson about what they'd discovered, and that they were already on the way to the locations.

After he hung up, Jefferson asked, "What'd he find?"

"They were able to get into Mike's condo. The place was clean—no clothes, nothing. Like the guy moved out. Jackson's going to meet us at the address under contract. The detective thought to check the trash receptacles outside for the building. There were a few pictures of River there, along with receipts for certain purchases, and empty boxes. They were for drugs that inhibit motor skills. He's

still sifting through what they found. But they also found some real estate brochures from your friend and blue dye.”

“Shit!”

“Shit, yeah!” Noah agreed, and stepped on the gas.

“Did any of those brochures have the address we’re going to?” Jefferson asked.

“Jackson didn’t say when I gave the addresses to him, but he did say he’s getting a warrant. And to wait for him.”

“What does that mean?”

“Don’t know, but we’re here. That’s the address—the building on the end.” They pulled into an office parking area. There were a few cars but not many. Noah parked around the side, near a different building, so his car wouldn’t be spotted by anyone coming into the complex and heading in the direction of the address they wanted. He and Jefferson made their way around the corner, sticking close to the building. Most of the windows were dark, and they snuck past the few with lights on, but he didn’t see anyone inside those ground-floor businesses. Finally, they made their way to number 51A—the address they were watching for. The windows on these offices were covered over with white paint, so he couldn’t see anything inside. He tried the handle of the metal frame door.

“Locked.” Unlike most of the other units, this one had no signs over the door or windows.

“Now what?” Jefferson asked, behind him. “Do we just wait for the police?”

“First, let’s try knocking and see what happens.” He banged on the door. After a minute, when no one answered, he did it again, with the same response.

“No one’s there.”

He glanced up when he saw lights coming down the road leading to the business park. At this hour, no one would be heading in this direction unless he was coming here. “Move back around the corner, out of sight,” he said to Jefferson, turning the other man around as he spoke. “Someone’s coming. Let’s see where they go.”

“Could be the cops.”

“Maybe.”

Chapter Eighteen

River opened her eyes to a dark room. She could make out shadows cast by some sort of muted lighting. A night light, her fuzzy brain supplied. But she didn't have one in her room. She sat up, and something pulled against her wrist. She looked down and saw the handcuff and the chain attached to a metal hook in the wall.

"What the hell?" And it all came rushing back to her. Mike. Mike was the bastard who'd taken her and been stalking her for months. Mike was the psycho.

She tugged against her restraint, but all that got her was a sore wrist. She got off the bed, but couldn't move far and couldn't see anything likely to help her get out of there. A noise in the other room had her holding still. There it was again, the sound of footsteps. She stayed still and kept her gaze riveted on the door.

The door pushed open, and a figure clad in dark clothing stepped in. "Ah, I see you're awake," Mike said.

Except it was and it wasn't Mike. He turned the light on, and she saw that he'd changed. The glasses were gone, and she hadn't been imagining things, his eyes were now blue instead of dark brown, and he appeared clean-shaven. The scruffy two-day beard look was gone. His face appeared fuller and vaguely familiar. She frowned. She'd seen him somewhere before, and not on the video.

"It was you. You're the guy from the hotel. You attacked Linda."

He shrugged. "A mistake. I was a little angry. I'd planned everything out for so long, and then she showed up. I had to teach her a lesson, at least, for old time's sakes."

"Huh? Old times? What has she ever done to you?"

"Ah, I see you still don't remember me."

"Should I?"

"My name, when you knew me, was Michael Osbourn."

She frowned again. She still didn't recognize the name. Thankfully, she didn't have to say anything because he kept talking when she was silent a little too long.

“I was there the night the talent agent discovered you. I was the one cleaning up the tables after you and that bitch friend of yours served.”

A light bulb popped on in her head, illuminating an image of an overweight man named Michael Osbourn. She tried to merge that image with the man in front of her, but couldn't. The Michael she remembered wasn't merely overweight, he was downright obese. Shy and a little strange. Linda and everyone at the club gave him a hard time. On his break, he'd sit at a table in the back and watch everyone. Used to creep people out. There were rumors that he'd been in a mental institution.

He must have been about twenty-one back then, and he didn't drive. He used to ride the bus to and from work. He never talked much, usually only to her, and then he really only answered her questions, but she'd always been kind to him. She remembered him telling her he lived with his mom. Other than the owner of the place, she was the only one he'd occasionally speak to. He'd changed.

“Michael. Michael Osbourn. Yeah, I remember him. But the Michael I knew was a nice guy. He'd never hurt Linda or treat me this way.”

He shrugged. “People change; things change. I lost two hundred pounds.” He wore a short-sleeved tight T-shirt and raised his arm, flexing his muscles while doing a full circle, so she could check him out. “I know, unbelievable.” He grinned, facing her.

This Michael had the same ice-blue eyes, but lighter colored hair, and was slender but muscled. Maybe along with the fat he'd lost a few brain cells. “No,” she said. “What's unbelievable is that I'm chained to this wall.”

He had the nerve to frown at her. “Yeah, sorry about that, but I needed to make sure you'd stay put and listen to me.”

“Tell you what—unlock this thing, take me back to my place, and we'll sit down and talk all you want.”

He laughed. “I'm not an idiot, River. In spite of what the others used to say about me.”

“I never thought you were, but I'm fast changing my mind.”

“I'm sorry about that. You were the only one who never had an unkind thing to say about me or to me. The others, well, they weren't shy to say things to my

face.”

“Then why am I chained to this bed? Why did you attack Linda? I think you meant that to be me.”

Mike sat on the bed and patted it for her to sit down beside him. Instead, she crossed her arms in front of her chest and stayed right where she was.

He sighed. “I would never hurt you like that. I...I meant to take you that night. I had it all planned out. I had something to give you that would have knocked you out. They wouldn’t have been able to wake you. When the ambulance came, I’d leave in the confusion and take you away from the emergency personnel.” He shrugged. “Instead, Linda showed up. Imagine my surprise and frustration. Well, I had to take it out on someone.”

Oh boy, he was a certified nut job. “But I still don’t understand. Why the letters, the flowers?”

“Don’t you even remember?”

She drew in a breath to respond, no, but then a memory tugged at her. He’d given her a rose, dyed blue, the night she’d won the singing contest. Later, when they wanted to come up with a logo for her, the idea of a blue flower popped into her head. Blue was her favorite color, and like her name.

She nodded. “Yeah, yeah, I do. So because you came up with my logo for my band you want, what, money?”

He shook his head. “No, sweetheart. It’s not your money that I want. I actually have a lot of my own. I’ve done rather well, I might add. So no, I don’t need or want your money.”

Her stomach churned with fear, but she dared not show it. “Then what the hell do you want?” But she knew, from the glint of lust she saw in his eyes to the way his gaze roamed up and down her body. She knew. And if he was her stalker, she remembered the letters he signed with the stamp of a blue rose. He thought of her as his.

“When I first heard you on the radio, it was right after my mother died, and your voice saved me. I joined a gym and lost weight. I even stopped taking the meds that made me so fat. Then, when I saw your album, saw the logo—it was a sign I was doing the right thing.” He reached toward her, but she wasn’t budging.

“Michael, maybe going off those meds might not have been such a good idea.”

He lowered his arms and placed his hands on his thighs. “It was the best idea. It took years to lose all the weight and change my eating habits so I can keep it off, but the women I was with...” He shook his head. “They never felt right. The only time I could get off with them was when I had your music, your voice singing to me, in the background. Like you were singing for me alone. At first, I just wrote to you, and that made me feel better. But soon it wasn’t enough for either one of us. You were using your music to call me to you. So, here I am. I want what I’ve always wanted. You.”

She trembled. She couldn’t help it. Fear snaked up her spine. *Noah*. She silently screamed in her head. Noah would find her and get her away from this mad man.

He must have noticed he’d frightened her, because he smiled and stood up. She backed against the wall. “Sweet River. You have nothing to fear. I will always be good to you. I’m going to take you away from here tonight to a place we can be together forever. I understand you’re a little nervous. You liked me once. In time, you’ll come to love the new me, as I love you.” He reached to touch her face. She twisted her head, but he stroked the side of her chin. She raised her fist and punched his arm. He stepped back and grinned.

“Mmm, you know I love feisty. Just ask Patti.”

“Patti?”

“Oh, yes. Did you know Patti is a natural submissive? She wasn’t at first, but I was able to pull out her natural inclinations. And I promise I’ll do the same with you. You need a real man, someone who can dominate you completely. But don’t worry. We’ll have all the time in the world for me to train you. I’m a very patient man. I promise you will come to love me.”

“You are living in a fantasy world, so I’ll say this once. Wake the fuck up.”

He stopped grinning. His nose flared, and his lips flattened out. “We’ll see, sweetheart. We shall see.” He checked his watch. “It’s getting late. And although I was very careful, by now they’re sure to know I took you and will be searching for me. But I plan on staying ahead of them. I’ve got a flight chartered for us, and it leaves in about half an hour, so it’s time for us to get out of here.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you.”

“This is your first lesson. You don’t have a choice.” Before she could understand what he meant to do, he stepped forward and tugged her arm, and she fell on the bed. He landed on top of her, pinning her down. She tried to buck him off, but his legs lay over hers, and the chain hindered her arm. He’d pinned her other arm to her side. He took a needle out of his back pocket and pulled the top off with his teeth.

“No!” she screamed, twisting and turning. “No!” The needle pricked the side of her neck. “Noah,” she whispered, and her world went dark.

Chapter Nineteen

Noah and Jonathan watched as a black SUV pulled up in front of the building. A man got out, swiped his keycard in the lock, and went in. By the time Noah realized it was Mike and ran up to the door, it had already closed and locked behind him.

“Dammit!”

“What should we do?”

He could kick himself because they’d ducked around the corner to get out of sight and had been too far away. “At least we know he’s in there. Maybe River is too.”

“Again, what should we do? Should we call Detective Jackson and let him know?”

“Yes, go ahead and call him. We already know there’s no other way into this building, so I’m going to do what I did earlier. You stay here.” He stepped forward, but Jefferson held his arm.

“Wait; what?”

“I’m going to go knock on the door.”

“Then what?”

“I need him to open it then I’ll beat the shit out of the prick until he tells me where River is.”

Jefferson nodded. “Okay, I can live with that.” He pulled out his phone and called the detective. Noah approached the door, then changed direction and headed for the SUV instead. He peered through the darkened windows, but didn’t see anything inside. He needed to find a way to incapacitate the car. Too bad he didn’t have a knife with him. He could have ripped holes into the tires. He didn’t want to shoot at them, because gunshots tended to draw attention. He tried the door. Well, well. Unlocked. He popped the hood and sabotaged the engine. Then he walked back to the door and banged on it a few times. Like before, no one answered. Okay, but he knew the bastard was in there. He returned to the side of

the building to wait.

"The detective is almost here," Jefferson told him. "He said to sit tight."

"He's got five minutes then I'm going to shot the damn lock off the door."

A few minutes later the door opened, and Mike exited with his arms around someone. The sound of sirens could be heard in the distance. Noah sprinted toward Mike and River. The man swung in his direction, a gun in his grasp.

"Hold it right there," Mike said.

Noah held up his hands, but kept walking toward Mike and his burden.

"I said, stop!" Mike screamed. "I'll shoot!" He swung the gun away from Noah and put it against River's chest. "I swear I'll kill her if you don't stop."

"Okay, man. It's cool; everything is cool. Put the gun down." Noah could see two police cars coming down the business road, and he knew Mike could hear the siren getting closer. "The cops are coming. Why don't you let River go and get in your car and leave before they get here." He took another step closer to them, his palms out. "Here, give her to me."

Mike glanced over his shoulder. The cars were turning into the center and heading straight for them. River groaned; her body slumped even more. Mike had to adjust his arm around her and keep hold of the gun. When the cops pulled up a few yards from them, Mike shifted in that direction. Noah saw his chance and sprinted, jumping on Mike and knocking River out of his grasp. But Mike stumbled back against the car and managed to maintain his hold on the gun. Noah had to use both arms to keep the gun away from his face.

"Get River," he yelled to Jefferson. He released one hand and belted Mike across the jaw. The man slid down onto the ground. Before he touched bottom Noah had already turned his back on him to make sure River was all right.

Jefferson knelt on the ground, holding her head up on his thigh. Noah moved to her side and picked her up, cradling her to his chest. The limpness of her body as she lay against him had his heart racing in fear. Holding her tighter, he curled her against his heart and kissed her hair. "River."

"Stop!" Someone yelled. He looked up in time to see Mike in his car and Jackson and a uniformed police officer with their guns drawn, pointed at him.

"Don't worry," Noah shouted. "He's not going anywhere."

“I called an ambulance,” Jefferson said.

Noah could hear another siren in the distance. He prayed the woman in his arms would be okay.

This time when she opened her eyes, her vision was a little fuzzy. But she still didn't recognize her surroundings. Her head hurt. She raised her arm; no handcuff was attached to it. Turning her head, she saw a familiar man sitting on the chair at her bedside. Tears slid down her face. “Noah.”

Even though she'd spoken his name in barely a whisper, he opened his eyes and got off the chair to sit on the bed beside her.

“Welcome back.” His voice choked.

Noah, all choked up. Didn't seem possible. Maybe she was dreaming. She'd wanted him to find her, to come for her, so much. He wrapped his arms around her and laid his head on her chest. She must be dreaming. She touched his hair. He was real. She cried even more, and he tried to comfort her.

“Oh, baby, please don't cry. It's okay, I'm here.”

It took a while, but she finally stopped and leaned her head back onto the pillow. She kept one hand on his arm and the other on his thigh. He likewise kept touching her. She never wanted him to stop. “What happened? How did you find me?”

“We finally figured out that Mike took you. I had a talk with Patti. She had no idea what he was really about, but we figured out he'd been checking out real estate in the area. Then it was only a matter of checking out those places.”

“Noah, he's crazy.”

“Shhh. Yeah, I know. But you don't have to worry about him ever again. His ass is going to be locked up for a good, long time.”

“He knew me, Noah. He knew me years ago when Linda and I used to be waitresses together. He was a busboy at the restaurant bar where we worked.”

“What?”

“Yes. He's been fixated on me since then. But I still don't understand why he'd

do this to me. He claims I was the only one who was nice to him, yet this is how he pays me back.” She couldn’t help it; she cried again.

“Oh, baby, don’t try to understand it. He was probably nutty then, and it just got worse over the years. The fact you became famous allowed him to create a fantasy, but he wasn’t satisfied with it just being in his head. But, it’s over now.”

“Thank you. Thank you for finding me.”

“I will always, always come for you.”

“I know. I’m sorry, Noah. I should never have sent you away when we were younger, and I don’t want you to go now.”

“Baby, I’m not going anywhere, not this time.”

“What about who I am?”

“Music is who you are. I’ve always known that. But you’re also the woman I love.”

The tears leaked unheeded from her eyes. “I love you too. I never stopped.” No, she couldn’t give up her music for Noah. He understood it defined who she was, and he accepted her completely, fully—music and all. No, she wouldn’t have to give up who she was for Noah, but with him, she could share it and be more.

“I understand why you didn’t tell me before what had happened, but can you forgive me for giving up on us?”

She smiled. “Only if you forgive me.”

“How about we forgive each other.”

“Done.” She raised her head to meet his kiss. When she pulled back, she asked, “When can I get out of here?”

“The doctor wants to keep you a bit longer. Mike dosed you with some form of benzodiazepine.”

“What?”

“Like the date rape drug, but the effect isn’t quite as severe, and it was a low dosage, so the doctors believe it should be out of your system soon. Just no alcohol for a day.”

“Well, that’s good. Oh, my God! What about my concert? Did I miss that?”

“No. But Jefferson and I both agree that we should cancel it.”

“No, no. Call him; tell him not to. How much time do we have left?” She sat up.

“What time is it?”

“It’s nine in the morning.”

“Okay, so there’s still time. Call Jefferson. Tell him not to cancel my concert. I’ll be there.” She stood up and moved past him. She glanced around. “Where the hell are my clothes?”

A nurse came into the room. “Ms. Blu, I have to ask you to get back in bed.”

“Where are my clothes?”

Noah stood up. “I think you better find her doctor, while I get her clothes.” The nurse turned around and left the room. Noah walked over to the standing closet and opened it, giving River her things. “I’ll wait outside while you change.”

She turned and grabbed his arm, stopping him. She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled his face to hers. The door opened, and Jefferson and Linda came in, holding hands.

“What are you doing up?” Linda asked.

“Getting out of here. We have a show to put on. Jefferson, do not cancel the concert. I’ll meet everyone there at the usual time.”

“Darlin’, are you sure about this?” He glanced at Noah, but Noah didn’t say a word. He only smiled at her.

“Yeah, I’m sure.” She grinned back at Noah. Her heart was lighter than it had been in a long, long time.

“Okay. Let me make some calls,” Jefferson said.

“I’ll bring your clothing changes to the dressing room for you.”

“Thanks.” She hugged her friend. “Now, outside. I’m going to change.” Linda led Jefferson back out of her room, but Noah stayed behind.

“Are you really sure you can do this?”

“You’re not getting out of playing with me that easily.”

“Baby, I’ll play with you anytime.” Then he kissed her, and her heart swelled with her need for him.

She pulled away. “And when I’m done, I want you to take me home.”

Chapter Twenty

Noah took River out of the hospital over the protest of her doctor, although Jefferson did help smooth things over. But she had to rest until the show, and absolutely no alcohol. He'd make damn sure she rested until concert time. At the hospital, she'd asked him to take her home, and he didn't ask her which one. He pulled up in his driveway, and she looked over at him with a smile on her face before getting out of the car.

He opened the front door for her. "Are you hungry?" he asked, shutting the door behind him. "I'm not sure what's in the fridge, but I can order something."

She moved over to the couch and sat down. "I'm starving, actually." She lay back on the couch, and he knelt at her head.

"Are you sure you're okay?" He suddenly realized he could have lost her. The tightness gripping his heart disappeared the moment she'd opened her eyes earlier that morning. He pushed her curly hair away from her face, so he could lean forward to press his lips to hers. He meant it to be a soft kiss, one to soothe them both, but he should have known better.

"I'm more than good."

Her fingers twisted in his hair and he needed no further encouragement. They helped each other remove their clothes, and he took a foil packet from his pants. Naked, he had her stand up, then he sat down. She took the packet away from him and opened it. Rolling the condom down his length, she straddled his aching sex. Slowly, she sank deeper into him until her heat fully surrounded him. He grabbed her hips to keep her there, up close against him. She held onto his biceps and arched her head back so her hair cascaded behind her. As she moved, he used his hands to guide her, watching her take pleasure from him, but give him hers in return. He pulsed inside his little piece of heaven. At first, the pace he set provided sufficient stimulation, but soon, he wanted more.

Placing his hands under her butt, he said, "Hold onto me." He stood up, and she wrapped her legs around his waist. He walked them to his bedroom, still

joined together. She clung to him as he laid her on the bed, but he moved her legs from around his waist to rest against his shoulders. He thrust into the very heart of her and moaned.

River watched the expression on Noah's face, her beloved. "Noah," she whispered, knowing he would hear her.

"I love you," he said.

Her heart sang because he spoke the truth. His voice told her so. Love was there in his eyes for her to see and in his arms wrapped around her. She flexed her inner muscles and made him groan. "I love you," she said. "I always want us to be together. Never leave me again."

"I won't. Not even if you try to send me away."

Then they couldn't talk anymore. Noah filled her body. Every time he moved, he pulsed inside her. The sound of their bodies joining made music more beautiful than she'd ever be able to create, but they seemed to have no trouble generating it when they made love. Together they moved in perfect unison, each lifting the other up into the high notes. Reaching the crest together. "I'm coming, Noah. I'm coming."

"Then let's come together."

Her climax rose from the depths of her very existence, deeper even than the place her music lay, and she exploded around him. His body tensed above her. The muscles around his neck stood out in stark relief as he erupted inside of her. Their bodies continued to shudder in sync, and aftershocks passed back and forth between them. Until, breathing hard, Noah fell to his side and wrapped her in his arms.

"Go to sleep. I'll always be here when you get up."

He woke her up in time to eat something and get to the concert. They met everyone in the waiting area. Linda saw them first and rushed to River's side, hugging them both. "I put your things in the dressing room," she said.

Patti got up and stood before them. "I'm so sorry, River. So sorry. I swear I

didn't know. That bastard...are you okay?"

River stepped forward and hugged Patti. "You have nothing to be sorry for. He fooled everyone." Noah had already spoken to Jefferson and told him who Michael really was, so that meant Linda probably knew too. River didn't know if Patti was aware of her history with Michael, but after the concert, she'd sit down with her and tell her.

She glanced over her shoulder at the man she loved, and who loved her in return. "I'm fine. Thanks to Noah."

Noah grinned at them both. Then Jefferson walked in. "Come on, people, enough of the messy stuff. We've got quite a few people arriving shortly. Let's get this party started."

"Okay, let's go get ready," River agreed. "Noah, you come with me."

"Wait, you're not wearing that?" Jefferson looked aghast at the outfit Noah had on.

Noah glanced down at himself. "What's wrong with what I'm wearing?"

He had on brown cargo pants and a long-sleeved T-shirt. He carried his violin case in his hand, preferring to use his own.

"Well, if you were going to play military tag, nothing. At least I like the boots."

"He's teasing." River held up the garment bag. "Don't worry. Frank picked something up. He's got a change of clothes totally appropriate for a rock star."

Jefferson stepped over to the bag and unzipped it. "Perfect."

"What's not to like?" Linda peeped over Jefferson's shoulder. "Black leather pants and a leather vest, and the dude plays violin."

"Hey," Jefferson said. Linda hugged his waist.

"Oh, I find guys in silk suits pretty hot too," Linda said.

"Okay, then. In that case, people, let's do this show. And Noah, tomorrow you and I are sitting down for a serious talk."

"Not in this life, Jefferson." He took River's hand, and they headed to her dressing room.

"Never say never," Jefferson shouted after him.

The damn messenger had finally gotten there. About damn time. Frank came running up to him as he waited in the wings to go on for his duet with River. He raised his hand, and Frank placed the package in it. Opening it, what was inside dropped into his palm. Linda, standing beside him, gasped. He winked. His cue was coming up. He quickly opened the box, dropped the contents into his pocket, and offered her the empty box. "Hold this for me." Linda hugged him and gave him his violin and bow.

"Good luck!" Frank and Jefferson slapped him on the back and gave him a little shove. But Noah didn't need it. He walked toward his future, out on that stage with the woman who owned it. The lights were dimmed, and he took his place. The light first came on over River, seated alone at the piano. She played the first chorus, and then he began the first few notes before the light fell on him. He shut his eyes and let the music take him. There were thousands watching and listening, but he only played for one woman. His music, his soul, belonged to her. Only and always to her. And for the night, he'd let the world know it.

After they finished the song, the audience went wild with applause. River hugged him, and they kissed.

"You were wonderful," she said. She'd never seen anything more beautiful in her life as when the light came on over Noah. He was so stunning. And hers. She had to fight not to cry. But when he dropped to his knees on the stage in front of God and fans, she did begin to cry. The noise receded into the background. The man in front of her the only thing she could see or hear. Then she realized she couldn't hear the crowd because they really were silent. Jefferson had a mic to his lips, asking for quiet. And everyone hushed, perhaps because they didn't want to miss a word. Neither did she.

Noah pulled something out of his pocket and held it up to her. It caught the light and glittered with the facets of a diamond. She recognized the ring. The tears poured faster. That ring had been worn by her mother and grandmother. In her family, the engagement ring was passed to the first-born child, male or female, to use as an engagement ring. Noah had known her family legacy, and he'd remembered. But more importantly, her mother had given it to him. She

wouldn't have done that if she didn't believe in Noah's love.

"River Blu, you and I have come full circle—almost. We need one final act to close it. I've loved you for most of my life. I want to love you for the rest of it, and, God willing, He'll take me two seconds after He takes you, so I can love you in heaven too. Share a life with me, share a lifetime of love with me. Be my wife."

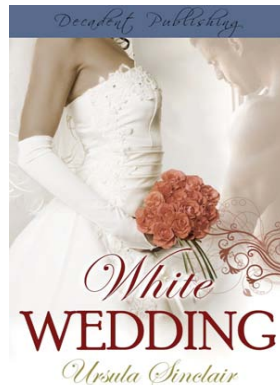
River dropped to her knees and clasped his hand, touching his face with her other one. "Yes. Now, tomorrow, always. I love you. Yes." With shaking hands, he put the ring on her finger, and they both leaned forward to seal their pledge of a lifetime with a kiss. The roar of approval from the crowd could be heard for miles.

~ABOUT THE AUTHOR~

Ursula Sinclair is the pseudonym for LaVerne Thompson, a multi-published, award winning bestselling author, an avid reader and writer of contemporary, fantasy, and sci-fi romance featuring interracial relationships where race is not a factor. Ursula is LaVerne's alter ego who likes to push the envelope of relationships just a little more.

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Book One of the Guardian Agency Series



White Wedding

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Shanna Stiles hasn't been a virgin for years, but it's still her dream to have a white wedding. Her dream becomes a nightmare when, just before she walks down the aisle, her fiancé is seen kissing his best man.

She runs away from her life, and a chance encounter with the gorgeous, successful Ross Marshall leads to a week of passion and a connection neither of them expected. Ross seems determined to have a future with Shanna, but someone out there won't let it happen. Shanna returns home and soon discovers disturbing secrets about the people she trusts.

With so much stacked against her, she looks to Ross for protection and comfort, and it turns out he may be exactly what she needs - except the man she left at the altar isn't giving her up without a fight.

~Excerpt~

The day had gotten away from him. After checking his watch, Ross Marshall decided to walk back to his office anyway. It was only a few blocks; besides, a little fresh air -- at least, as fresh as it could get in Los Angeles -- never hurt anyone.

His meeting that evening had been successful, and he'd agreed to take the job. There would have been a time his security firm, The Guardian Agency, would have taken any job that walked through the door. Not anymore -- now he could afford to pick and choose. He employed fifteen men he hired out as bodyguards to Hollywood's elite, and another five whose specialty was commercial security. It was his area of expertise, but he wouldn't be able to start the new job for another week. He had to follow up on some previous work. One requiring him to travel to a sunny, less smog-filled location, and the building he had to evaluate happened to overlook the Caribbean Sea.

Yeah, at times his life was hard. He grinned.

As he neared the church on the corner, his footsteps slowed. A white Hummer limousine was parked at the curb in front of the church. Curious, he slowed down even more as he approached the car. He wasn't alone. A handful of people had stopped on the sidewalk to watch the partially open door of the church.

"I think it's a wedding?" he heard the woman in front of him say. She might have been correct because right beside him, the words 'JUST MARRIED' were spray-painted across the back window of the limousine.

"No one famous," someone else said. "I don't see any paparazzi."

A man chuckled. "Probably hiding behind a bush."

Ross grinned at the man, but a sound from the doorway had him swinging his head back in that direction.

“Oh, I hope we get to see the bride,” another woman said.

“Wait, I think that’s her.”

The door opened wider, and a woman in a wedding dress ran out of the church. The lights flanking the walkway illuminated the garment, causing it to sparkle against her warm brown skin; a trail of white floated like a cloud behind her over the stone steps.

His lungs stopped working for a second at the picture she created. It took another second for his brain to register what he had seen.

She ran out of the church alone.

“Wait!” The shout came from a woman in a long emerald dress clutching a small suitcase in her hands. She made her way quickly down the steps. The would-be bride had reached the sidewalk, but stopped and turned to wait for the woman to catch up to her.

Ross heard her say, “Here, you’ll need this.” Then she shoved the suitcase and a purse toward the bride.

“I...I’ll call you in a few days.” Her voice was soft, shaky. They hugged; the bride’s back was to him, but he could see tears in the other woman’s eyes. Whatever had happened, he was sure no wedding had taken place. He felt something stir in his chest for the woman in white. She turned around and, for an instant, their gazes collided.

Her lush mouth trembled in an oval face. Large, dark eyes were red from crying, but her makeup remained intact. She was close enough he could reach

out and rub the tear tracks from her face. His hand rose to do just that, but instead of touching her he turned his arm and opened the rear door of the limo.

“Thank you,” she whispered, still watching him.

“You’re welcome.”

She glanced away before climbing in, pulling her dress and train up and out of the way. He shut the door and stepped back. A woman near him on the sidewalk said to no one in particular, “I wonder what happened to the groom?”

To his surprise, an angry voice behind them answered. “The bastard was kissing the best man in the damn dressing room.”

He turned toward the voice. It was the woman who had come out of the church bringing the suitcase, and who closely resembled the would-be bride.

She snorted before continuing. “Thank God, before the ceremony.” After making that announcement, she turned and ran back up the stairs. By then, other people drifted out of the church.

“Show’s over,” Ross said, and continued on his way back to the office to retrieve his car.

But even after he’d arrived home and packed his bags for his early-morning flight, he wasn’t concentrating on work. Instead, he couldn’t get the image of the sad, soulful eyes of the beautiful almost-bride out of his head.

The cab pulled up in front of his hotel on the island of Margarita, but he wasn’t tired after his long flight. It had been a few years since he’d last visited the island, and it hadn’t changed much. The sun was hot and the water looked

inviting. He took a deep breath; now this was fresh air. The myriad and flavorful scents of the island filled his lungs.

The office building requiring his services was located just a few blocks down the street from his hotel, but he didn't have to be there until tomorrow. After checking in and putting his suitcase in his room, he took off his jacket, changed into Keen sandals, and headed for the elevators. His destination—a closer look at all that blue water from the beachside bar, and the babes in barely-there clothing. He had to walk through the pool area to get to the beach access, and he did it slowly.

There were a few bodies worthy of a second -- okay, maybe a third -- look. Movement in his peripheral vision had him turning his head to see a body poised on the diving board -- a body he'd like to more than look at. Her skin, a natural, honey brown, glowed with health against the bright orange strips of cloth covering strategic areas on a beautifully sculpted body. A body curving in perfectly where it needed to and out again, without an ounce of unnecessary flesh. The woman raised her hands above her head, bringing his attention to her taunt stomach, and pulled her full breasts—which were neither too small, nor so large they had to be fake—up and almost out of her top. She took one hop off the diving board and executed a perfect dive into the pool, barely causing a splash.

She swam underwater for half the length of the pool before surfacing and swimming above to the other end. Walking up the inlayed steps, she got out and headed over to a lounge chair. Drawn to her, he retraced his steps. As she towed off her hair, he observed her. Her back seemed to be a study in curves, and he grinned at the two dimples peeking at him above her bikini line. They sat

in the middle of the handles of a scissors tattoo. Ross wanted to dip his tongue into each indentation and trace the tattoo lines. His grin widened in appreciation of a rear as perfectly proportioned and enticing as the front.

She turned and, glancing up, spotted him staring at her. Her eyes widened an instant before he recognized her.

“Do I know you?” Her voice was husky, sexy and sweet at the same time. His balls tightened just thinking about her whispering his name like that into his ear. Her lips were wet from the pool, cranberry-colored and puckered like she was already preparing for his kiss. He stifled a groan.

“We met last night,” he said, holding out his hand. “But weren’t introduced. My name’s Ross Marshall.”

“Oh, yes.” Her dark chocolate-colored eyes closed briefly and then reopened to look right at him. “Yes, I remember. Are you following me?”

“I could be, but I’m not—not yet.”

She smiled, showing no fear of him, and took his hand. The neurons in every cell of his body fired on contact, right down to the ones in his toes. Her beautiful eyes widened, and the touch of sadness he’d read in them disappeared for a moment. Meanwhile, his heart thudded against his ribcage in a bid for release. God, she was lovely. He silently swore to himself he’d do whatever he could to continue to banish that look of sadness from her eyes. She pulled at emotions in him no other woman ever had. Hell, his heart never beat like this for a woman, and he would find out why her.

He took the end of the towel she held in front of her. “May I?” he asked.

She released it and sat down on the side of the lounge chair, turning her back to him so he could finish drying her hair. He sat beside her and rubbed the towel from her scalp to the ends of her hair until it was as dry as he could get it. When he finished, he ran his fingers through her tresses to get the tangles out. Her hair was soft and curled around his thumb. He gathered it all together and pulled it back to make a short ponytail resting at her nape.

He lifted the wet tip to his nose. "I can smell the chorine in your hair." And it turned him on. Damn. Chorine, of all things. Hell, everything about her led him to one thought. Staking a claim, one without an expiration date. Her ex-fiancé was a fool.

He wasn't.

"I know," she said, unaware of his thoughts. "I think they dump the stuff in there by the boat-load."

She twisted around and he reluctantly released her hair, dropping his hand to rest on the lounge chair near her waist. Her thigh brushed up against his, but he didn't move or stand up to give her room. They were so close -- if he leaned forward, even a little, his shirt-covered chest would rub against her bare arm.

He captured her gaze instead, silently wanting her to give him a chance. At what, he wasn't sure. But he had to try.

"You still haven't told me your name."

"Shanna Stiles."

"Would you like me to help you wash it off, Shanna?"

Her eyes flickered wider in surprise. Not giving her an opportunity to respond, he stood up and offered his hand. Without taking her gaze from his, she

wrapped the damp towel around her waist and raised her small hand to his. He liked the color of the nail polish painted on the tips of her nails. Instead of the white he'd seen before, it was frosted orange to match her bathing suit.

With a smile on his face, he closed his hand around hers and expelled the breath caught in his lungs, and realized she did the same. Whatever was going on between them, she must have felt something, too. He tugged her hand gently to pull her up. She bent down and stood up with a matching beach bag. The top of her head reached his chin.

“Come on, let's go,” Shanna said.