

# **Mind Games**

**Kristin York**

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Published by Newsite Web Services, LLC  
P.O. Box 1286, Loganville, Georgia 30052 USA  
[disciplineanddesire@hotmail.com](mailto:disciplineanddesire@hotmail.com)  
[disciplineanddesire.com](http://disciplineanddesire.com)

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ISBN 978-1-60850-080-2

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# Chapter One

Julia Marshall hung face down over her husband's lap, whimpering in between steel-handed slaps to the part of her anatomy most highly elevated by the awkward position. The flat of his palm connected once again with her exposed bottom and, no longer able to contain her distress, she cried out.

"Stop... *please*. I've said I'm sorry..."

The next spank—a sharp, glancing blow—left her right thigh smarting. "And I've told *you* that you're going to be a great deal sorrier before I let you up. Since I've not heard any true contrition yet, I'd have to say we're a long way from done with this spanking."

Gasping as several stinging smacks peppered her burning skin, she began to squirm and cry out. "Damn it, I said I'm sorry! What more do you want from me?"

"Excuse me?" His hand connected rapidly with her left thigh for emphasis. "What did you just say to me?"

Julia closed her eyes, already regretting her hasty words. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to curse."

"Perhaps not, but you did, none the less." He was leaning over her body, retrieving something from the floor. Then the paddle, the wood incongruously smooth and cool, was held against her smarting bottom. "It looks like a hand spanking isn't going to do the trick tonight. I guess you're going to have to learn the hard way."

"No! Please honey," she said as she struggled to move the legs he held pinned between his own. "Please, not the paddle. I'm already so sore!"

"I know, sugar." His tone gentled and he let go of her hip long enough to rub her back in soothing circles. "I know you are and I wish this wasn't necessary. But you remember what I said would happen the next time you got reckless behind the wheel? Right?"

Julia nodded miserably. "Yes sir."

"And we both know that if I don't keep my word, you'll lose your respect for me. Yes?"

There was no good answer to that question, a fact Julia was well aware of. After all, they both knew that every time she was let off the hook, it caused resentment to fester until she found herself in the middle of a full-blown "brat attack." Then she'd be over his knee for an even harder spanking than the one she'd talked her way out of, a fact which made any leniency on his part useless.

The paddle was tapped against her naked backside. "I'm waiting."

"I'm sorry, sir." Julia took a deep breath and steadied herself. "Please spank me. I know I deserve it."

The paddling was long and hard and, despite her best intentions, Julia could not help but kick and squirm against the pain. Time and again, the oval of hard wood was brought down against rough, reddened skin until words abandoned her. Even when Steve pushed her farther forward over his left knee and went to work on the base of each cheek, she did not beg, but simply cried out the pain and humiliation. It was then, with her entire bottom on fire, that she was helped up to sit in her husband's lap and weep against his neck. She was still crying when she woke up, a pillow clutched tightly to her chest.

For long moments she lay quite still, willing sleep to return, begging her mind to take her back to her husband's strong arms. The dream, however, eluded her and she eventually rolled over to look at the clock. It was just after five, but she

knew that she wouldn't get back to sleep again. Wearily, she rolled out of bed, the remembered warmth of his embrace fading in the chill of a late fall morning. Over the course of the last two years, she'd seen and felt a million horrors in her sleep, but she almost preferred the nightmares to this. At least when she awoke to vomit away the memory of a decimated body, she had her fury to fight the loneliness and pain. But on mornings like this—after he'd come to her in the night, his face, his touch so vivid in her mind—it was like losing him all over again. Exhausted, she stripped off her clothes, stepped into the shower, and gave vent to her tears.

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Sloan Roberts worked his way briskly through the paperwork stacked on his desk, one eye always on the clock. It was nearly 10:00 now, and Julia seldom ever arrived late. He'd left a message on her office phone early this morning and had expected her to show up shortly after nine. Perhaps he should ring her desk, just in case there were voice mail problems again. He reached for the phone, intent on doing just that, but a knock at the door brought him up short.

"Come in."

She eased through the door awkwardly, barely able to see over the stack of files in her arms. "I'm sorry I wasn't here sooner, but there was a back-up on the freeway. I just got in a few minutes ago."

He cleared off a corner of his desk, indicating where she could set down what he surmised was a fairly heavy caseload. She was obviously busy, a fact which eased his mind. That would make his news easier—*he hoped*.

"How's it going?" Sloan browsed through the top folder, absorbing the details of a crime spree that had left seventeen homeless and four people dead. "Has there been anything new on these arsons? How many outside of Albuquerque now?"

Julia dropped into the chair opposite her supervisor and friend. "Just the one. And no, there's not been a trace since the grocery store went up, back in August. At least I've not heard from the guys in the field with any new info."

Sloan, the Director of the FBI's Behavioral Sciences Unit, slid the first folder aside and reached for a second. "You're keeping up with them, though? Making calls?"

"Mmm-hmm." He glanced up when she nodded and surreptitiously took stock of the remnants of recent grief. Her cheeks were splotchy and the concealer stick had done little to minimize the puffiness around her eyes. "I've offered to fly out, too, but Brannigan doesn't seem to think it's necessary."

"I'll make a note to call him. I'm sure they're doing a thorough job, but sometimes a profiler can provide a fresh perspective. How soon could you be ready to go?"

"A couple of hours, tops." She shrugged, straightened the stack of folders self-consciously. "It's not like there's anything at home that really requires looking after."

Sloan sat back in his chair and gazed at his long-time friend over steepled fingers. "I know tomorrow's going to be a rough day for you. You could take it off, you know. You've got more sick time accumulated than anybody in the department."

She shook her head, tucked a stray lock of hair back into her simple, functional ponytail. "It's easier if I work."

"Okay. I'll see what Brannigan says."

The rest of the conversation was uneventful. Once an active profiler, Sloan now spent most of his time supervising the work of others rather than carrying his own case load, but there had been one recent exception. Julia wasn't just a staff member, though, and this meeting—though perfectly legitimate in its own right—had a dual purpose. He intended to tell her about yesterday's conversation with the Deputy Director, wanted to explain to her about his decision to pick this one up personally. Unfortunately, an important phone call delayed him, and she started to gather up her things.



"Just a sec," he said as he punched the hold button. Then, to Julia, "I'm afraid this is going to be a long one, but I do want to get with you later today. Can we have lunch together?"

Having collected her files, she stopped at the door. "Sure. How about Rumors, 1:00?"

"It's a done deal." He held the receiver in one hand, the index finger of the other poised over a blinking red light. "See you there."

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By a quarter past one, Rumors was wall-to-wall crowded and Sloan was beginning to get anxious. From a table near the back, he watched customers come and go. For Julia to be late once was unusual—twice in one day was a reason for concern. He would have breathed a sigh of relief when he saw her push through the crowd, had it not been for the look on her face. He watched her slice through the lunch hour rush, her features set in a look of grim purpose. When she slapped her hands down on the table in front of him, he realized exactly what that purpose was.

"You knew." She leaned down, eyes blazing. "Damn it, Sloan, you *knew* and you didn't tell me."

It took all his control to tell her, in a quiet tone, "Sit down, Julia. You're attracting attention and I don't think that's what you want just now."

She dropped down into the chair opposite him, pushed hair the color of brown sugar and honey back from her face. "Is it him? Has Lennox resurfaced?"

In lieu of an answer, he motioned for a waiter. "Can we get a couple of menus?"

"Of course, sir. And could I get you something to drink?"

"Whiskey, neat," Julia ordered.

"Water," Sloan corrected, his eyes on her face. "Two."

The waiter shifted from foot to foot, obviously uncertain as to what to do next. For a moment, Julia merely stared at Sloan,

her cheeks flushed. Finally, with a reluctant nod to the waiter, she muttered, "Fine. Make it water."

It was not until the waiter had left them that Sloan spoke again. "I wanted to tell you this morning, but then I got that call from the Chief of Police in Harbortown. And yes, it looks like Randall Lennox is back."

Julia's face was pale; her lips set in a thin, uncompromising line. "All right then, I want in. I want to be there when they take the bastard down."

"No."

"No? What do you *mean*, no? Sloan, he killed my husband!"

"Which is exactly why you're not working the case. You're too close. You lack objectivity."

"And you don't? You were Steve's best friend! How can you be any better prepared for this than I am? I profiled Lennox before. I know more about him than anyone—including you. You can't shut me out on this one. You just can't."

Sloan rubbed at a throbbing place above one eye. "I'm sorry, Julia, but the decision's been made. This is my case. Please, just trust me to bring the bastard in. Okay?"

"Sure, whatever." She was on her feet before he could react. "Tell the little lady to relax, *Agent* Roberts, while you big strong men go after the bad guy." Heads were turning, but she didn't seem to notice as sarcasm crept into her tone. "I'll just go on home now, like a good little girl, and wait there for you to call me with any information. And in the meantime—" She picked up her purse and slung it over shoulder, "You and your boy's club cronies can *fuck off*."

With that, Julia turned and fled the restaurant, leaving Roberts to eat alone.

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She did not return to the office that day, but rather called to let the secretary know that she'd be out for the rest of the

afternoon. Two hours later, she arrived home with a bottle of amaretto and a white chocolate and almond cheesecake. For nine years, she'd had the same treats ready for her husband's birthday. She would simply start a day early this year.

The phone rang several times during the course of the afternoon, but she did not attempt to answer it. By the time Sloan had given up calling and actually knocked on her door, she was thoroughly drunk.

"Go away." Her words were slurred but there was no mistaking her fury when she attempted to slam the door in his face. The drink in her hand tipped and splashed onto the hardwood floor. "Can't you see I'm having a party?"

He shouldered his way into the room and snatched the glass away from her. Then, with a tenderness neither of them had expected, he pulled his best friend's widow into his arms. "Shhh, honey," he said as he stroked her hair. "I know it hurts, Jules... I *know* it does... but it won't always be this way. I promise."

Wrapped in the solid embrace, her face pressed against his raincoat, Julia nearly collapsed from the weight of her grief. "It was my fault." Her knees buckled and the room began to spin, but he caught her up in sure arms before she could hit the floor. "It was all my fault. Mine! Do you hear me?"

Darkness swirled and she ceased to hear or to think, but not to feel. No, the grief was always there, heavy as a mantle of lead that she wore draped over her shoulders, her head. Lennox had pulled the trigger, but Julia Marshall knew that she, alone, had killed her husband. It was this thought that followed her into the bedroom, where Sloan tucked her under the covers; and this thought that trailed her into the dark oblivion of sleep.

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"Stop it, sugar." He came to her much later, lithe and powerful, his golden hair a bit too long, as usual. "You have to

stop blaming yourself. And if telling you doesn't get that message across, I'll just have to find another way."

With that, Julia found herself draped, once again, over her husband's thighs. "I knew you would come," she whispered. "I love you, Steve."

"I know," he said as he peeled down her panties and caressed the tender flesh of her bottom. "I love you, too."

## Chapter Two

Julia was crying, her face bathed in salty tears, but her sobs did little to dissuade her husband from his task. His hand pressed into the small of her back, exerting enough pressure so that she could not rise from her position. The back of the chair was hard against her belly, his narrow leather belt leaving welt after burning welt across her bare bottom and thighs. She hated that belt — despised it — yet the fiery stripes were as comforting as they were painful. He was here. He loved her. Nothing else mattered.

"Don't you *ever*," he ground out, bringing the leather strap down in a wide arc, "speak to Sloan like that again, young lady." The impact of the stroke, falling across the spot where bottom meets thighs, drove her up onto her toes. "Fuck off, indeed! Julia, you *know* better."

"I know. I *know*," she sobbed, knuckles turning white as she clung to the seat of the chair. "I was just —"

The thwacking sound of the belt rang around the room as it fell high across the crown of both cheeks. "You were just *what*, young lady? Just completely out of control, perhaps?"

This time, the fire burned low and she danced away, though not quickly enough to prevent the tip of the belt from biting viciously into her right thigh. "I was angry, and hurt, Steve.

He should have told me about Lennox! I should have been in on it!"

"Why?" Something in him had stilled, and he allowed the belt to hang, limp, at his side. "What can you do that Sloan can't?"

She was crying, tears of anger and frustration as much of pain. "I don't know!"

*Thwack!* The belt curled around her left thigh, stinging the skin in between her widely spread legs. "Not good enough, babe. I want an answer, and I'm not going to stop spanking until I get one. Now, let's try it again. What can you do that Sloan Robert's can't?"

Her shoulders slumped, then shook with anguished sobs. "I can make it right. I can finish this, once and for all."

He rubbed her back, his hand moving in soothing circles just above the swollen flesh of her bottom. "How are you going to finish it, little girl? Tell me... *please.*"

"I'm going to kill him." The thought was not new, but the sound of it, the act of putting it into words, made her shiver. "I'm going to kill Lennox. I'll blow that smile through the back of his head, or so help me, I'll die trying."

She heard the belt fall from his hand, then he was helping her up, pulling her in to cry against his chest. For long moments they stood, pressed together, her nakedness a sharp contrast to his fully clothed state. Then he led her to the bed, helped her to lie on her stomach while his touch soothed her blazing bottom. "No," he said, firm voice filled with an undeniably sadness. "No, baby, you're not going to do that. I don't want you to die, Jules. I won't let you."

"Why not? You don't know what it's like, Steve. You have no idea what it is to be the one who's left alone." She turned toward him, her eyes fluttering open. "I can't stand it anymore."

Sunlight poured in the window, formed a glowing nimbus around his head. She blinked, attempted to focus on his face, but it was too late. Morning had come and Steve was gone.

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"You look like hell."

Julia brushed past Sloan, reached into the cupboard for some aspirin. "I don't doubt it. I'm pretty sure I couldn't look any worse than I feel." She ran water into a glass, then quickly downed four extra-strength tablets. "You didn't have to stay."

"Somebody had to keep an eye on you. Besides, it was the only way I could be sure you'd take the day off. I've already called the office. You want coffee now, or are you going back to bed?"

Snatches of dreams flashed across her mind. "Coffee, black... and then I'll get ready." She sat down at the table, her finger following a long scratch that ran across the oak table. "We can ride into work together."

"You know, for somebody who took eight years of psych, you sure don't know when to shut up and listen." He put the coffee down within reach, then took the seat opposite hers. "I said *no work* today, and I meant it. Don't make me pull rank on you, Marshall. I'm still your boss, you know."

"Sloan." She glanced at him, her argument little more than a whisper. "I can't stay here. Not today. I'll be better if I'm doing something."

"I know. That's why I'm taking the day off, too. We'll leave as soon as you get dressed."

He stood and she looked up again, this time taking in his appearance with a more observant eye. Last night, he'd come from work, still dressed in conservative gray pin stripe and a muted red tie. This morning, his long legs were encased in jeans, broad shoulders hidden beneath a block-patterned sweater in shades of brown and gold, and hiking boots warned her that they'd be doing some walking. He'd obviously planned this little outing before coming to check up on her last night. For some reason, the thought irritated her.

"Where are we going?"

He rinsed out his coffee cup and placed it neatly in the bottom of the sink. "You'll see soon enough. Now, either drink that coffee or dump it. We're wasting daylight."

She sniffed cautiously at the black liquid, then pushed the cup away. "I'm going to get a shower."

He took the cup, quickly disposing of the contents. "Good. The sooner we get on the road, the sooner we'll be there."

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They took Hwy. 3 out of Fredericksburg, but soon traded four lanes of traffic for the quiet of less populated back roads. The first frost had come late, and a few brilliantly colored leaves still clung to parental trees, the last of timid babies about to be pushed from the nest. On the ground, their rain-soaked brothers and sisters whispered beneath the tires, making conversation in the car unnecessary. For this, Sloan was intensely grateful. One look at Julia's rigid profile was enough to warn him away from any attempts at small talk.

It was a calculated risk, he knew. Forcing her to face the past might be a push in the right direction; but it could just as easily backfire, possibly even destroying their friendship in the process. For both their sakes, he hoped that wouldn't happen. She needed him, and in those moments when he was most honest with himself, he acknowledged that he needed her as well. She and Steve had helped him through his own loss — more than five years ago now — but this wasn't simply about returning a favor. This was about finding out what the future held — not just for her, but for both of them.

They'd been on the road more than two hours when a blinking red stoplight brought them to a halt. Glancing down at his hands, Sloan saw the white in his knuckles and consciously forced himself to ease his grip on the steering wheel. A surreptitious glance to his left revealed a silent Julia, her gaze fixed straight ahead, yet he wondered if she'd noticed his tension. He drove on, questioning everything he could not see or hear, taste or feel for himself. Did she understand *why*



they were making this trip? And if she did, would she hate him for his ulterior motives or would she allow herself to accept what he offered?

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They crossed into Albamarle County, winding their way nearer their destination with every passing mile. Julia wasn't quite sure what had made her agree to the car trip in the first place and, once she'd realized where they were headed, she was certain she would never speak to him again. He was her boss and had been Steve's best friend, but that still didn't give him the right to drag her to the one place she'd avoided like the plague. Not today... when the hurt was so close to the surface.

The "Private Property" sign came into view, and she closed her eyes against the surge of memories as Sloan turned onto what was, essentially, little more than a dirt road. They followed the winding road up into the silent foothills near the Appalachian Trail, the forest gradually closing in about them. Here, oak and maple trees grew so close together that their branches — although mostly leafless — blocked out quite a bit of what had seemed a bright sun. In minutes, the trail narrowed to a footpath and he stopped the car, parking near the familiar, half-rotted trunk of what had once been a massive oak.

"Come on." He had the passenger side door open and stood, looking down at her with a steady, soul-searching gaze. "You need to do this."

"No." Anger was the only weapon she could use to fight back the tears. "You had no right to do this, to bring me here. You don't get to make this decision for me."

He took hold of her arm, gently but firmly pulling her from her seat. "I'm not going to force you to do anything. All I'm asking is for you to take a walk with me, and to consider honoring Steve's wishes."

She could have fought him, of course, though it would have done little good in the long run. She had youth on her side, but his superior size and constant attention to health and fitness made the twelve years between them a moot point. She watched him slide a backpack onto his shoulders and knew with certainty that he could just as easily carry her up these hills, if he had a mind to. A glimpse at his expression told her he was likely to do just that if she didn't cooperate.

"Here, put this on." He helped her into a smaller pack and deftly adjusted the straps to a comfortable fit. "That's our lunch, so don't drop it. Otherwise we'll be hunting for nuts and berries."

"Fine."

She felt his disapproving gaze, but did nothing to erase her defiant expression. He sighed, then inclined his head toward the narrow footpath. "Ladies first."

Hefting the backpack to a more comfortable position, she brushed past him without a word. He might be able to force her into this trip, but he couldn't force her to talk. And she would not *allow* him to make her open the finely crafted wooden box she knew he carried in his pack. That was her decision — solely hers — and she wasn't ready to take that step. It represented too much, was too final — and this was far from over.

She moved without speaking, deigning to show nothing but her back to the man who'd brought her to this place. Silently, carefully, she maneuvered her way around large rocks and tree trunks, slipping more than once on wet leaves that hid treacherous patches of deep green moss. How many times had she walked this trail with Steve, awe-struck by the beauty of the Marshall family land? How many hikes had taken them to the clearing where a grandfather, several generations removed, had first settled his family. Most of the time, they'd chatted happily, each grateful for the solitude that would ease their hearts and minds out of the city and away from the business of capturing the country's most frightening criminals. How many

times had she traveled this path with her husband, looking forward to the site of the cabin and the rope bed that would soon rock with the force of their lovemaking? Tears blurred her vision and she reached out, grateful for the feel of rough bark beneath her hand. How could Sloan do this to her, on today of all days? Couldn't he see how he was hurting her?

"You okay?"

He was no more than three paces behind her, so she pushed on, refusing to let him see her tears. "I'm fine. Just catching my breath." She picked up her pace, moving faster ahead. If she started crying now, she'd never stop.

Another twenty minutes of climbing steadily upward, and she felt as though her lungs might burst. The terrain here was increasingly familiar, and the path grew wider as the clearing came into view. She braced herself against a sturdy walnut and peered instinctively between its two main upward reaching branches. The cabin was located just beyond the next row of trees. From here, she could see the chimney, rising in silent welcome. At least, she'd always been able to see it from here. But this time, no chimney of carefully hewn stone peeked through the forked branches. It wasn't there.

Perhaps she was thinking of the wrong tree, she told herself, but her hand slipped down the trunk and found the initials S.M. recklessly carved into the wood. Her heart thudded painfully against her chest and she pulled her hand away to stare at a small boy's uneven lettering. "*Grandpa gave me a darn good lickin' for taking his knife that day.*" She remembered her husband's words on their first hike together and another ripple of shock and denial fisted in her stomach. Something wasn't right. She searched again for the sight of the chimney, a shiver of dread dancing up and down her spine when she failed to find it. Something was most definitely wrong.

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Sloan had allowed Julia to walk well ahead, content to give her some privacy with her thoughts, but the sight of her standing so still, staring in the direction of the clearing, had him hurrying to catch up with her. Maybe this hadn't been such a good idea after all. Several more long strides and he was close enough to see that her hand shook and the color had drained from her face.

"Jules?" He spoke quietly, desiring not to intrude too much on this moment, yet wanting to lend her his strength as she struggled with her emotions. "Are you okay?"

Her gaze remained steadily focused on the clearing. "Something's wrong, Sloan. It's not there."

"Huh?" He looked around, unsure as to the meaning of her words. "What's not there? What are you talking about?"

"The cabin." She jerked suddenly away and darted through the trees, calling over her shoulder, "The cabin's gone!"

He'd not expected her to dart off like a panicked rabbit, but was hard on her heels when she broke through the row of evergreens, only to stop in her tracks. He nearly plowed her over as his own mind registered the sight before them. What had once been a sturdily built one-room cabin was now a pile of rubble and wet ash. It had burned to the ground.

---

She stood at the edge of the clearing, dismayed. She'd not been up here since before Steve's death, but she paid a local man to look after the place, just the same. How long had it been since the cabin had burned then? The groundskeeper supposedly made the trip up near the first of every month, so either this had happened within the last couple of weeks, or he'd neglected to visit since October. She took a steadying breath and forced herself to move past shock to get a better look at what remained of the stone and log edifice.

"Wait a minute." Sloan's hand closed around her upper arm, and she looked back at him in surprise. He edged past her and she noticed with some alarm that he'd drawn his gun. She

automatically reached for her own weapon, but not finding it, realized that she'd left it at home.

"What is it?" she whispered. "What did you see?"

"Nothing... yet."

They circled the charred remains deliberately, carefully walking the perimeter of the scorched earth before he lowered his weapon and asked, "Who would have been up here, Julia?"

She shook her head. "Just the caretaker that I pay, but even he doesn't stay in the cabin. All he does is trek up here to check on it once a month." With effort, she shook off the sense of unease that had gripped her, and crouched where the doorframe had been. She reached out a tentative hand but, feeling no heat, brushed aside black soot and crumbling wood to retrieve the horseshoe that had always hung above the door. "*For luck*," Steve had told her once, a long time ago. "Not so lucky now," she murmured, her vision blurred by tears.

"What?"

"Nothing." She shrugged and looked over her shoulder. "It was probably just a lightning strike during the last big storm. It's a good thing Steve's ancestors found such a large clearing, or it would probably have taken up half the forest with it."

"I'll put a call in to the fire marshall, just the same," Sloan replied, fishing his cell phone out of a jacket pocket.

"You won't get a connection up here." She stood, brushed her hands off on her jeans. "We might as well head back."

"Julia." There was a new tension in his voice, one that had nothing to do with the cabin. "You know why I brought you up here. Maybe you should just get it over with."

She turned away, started back down the path with a determined stride. "No. I'm not ready... especially not now."

---

The ride home was silent, each of the car's occupants lost in his or her own thoughts. Despite Julia's arguments, Sloan had called to report the fire and the county fire marshall had

promised he'd send out a team to investigate first thing in the morning. Julia stared out the passenger side window, more upset than she was willing to let on. The cabin had been their special place... and now it, too, was gone. Unshed tears burned the back of her throat as one memory after another began to resurface.

*Steve fingered the crudely etched initials, a smile playing about his lips. "Grandpa gave me a darn good lickin' for taking his knife," he related good-naturedly.*

*"He spanked you? Your grandfather?" Julia was incredulous. "How old were you then?"*

*"Oh, not more than nine, I guess. Why so surprised?"*

*She could feel his steady gaze and wished she could control the heat that suffused her cheeks with color. "I just... well, I can't imagine a grandparent doing the spanking, that's all. I mean, isn't that the sort of thing a mom or dad would do?"*

*He shrugged, the subtle rise and fall of his well-defined shoulders sending a sharp thrill through her. "Grandpa and I were the only ones up here, and I guess he figured it wouldn't be fair to make me wait. To be honest, I always appreciated that about him. Waiting an hour for what I knew was coming was bad enough. It would have killed me to have to wait two days, knowing I'd be on the receiving end of my dad's belt as soon as I got home."*

*Julia traced the clumsy S.M., uncertain what to say. It often seemed that she and Steve were from two different worlds, especially when he spoke of his family. "Did your grandpa..." She faltered, drew a breath. "What did he use to spank you?"*

*He chuckled. "Well, he figured since I'd used his knife on this tree once, that I could do the same a second time."*

*"What? I don't get it."*

*She met his gaze this time, found bemused surprise in his eyes. "He made me cut a switch so he could use it on my backside. And believe you me, after that, I never again took something that didn't belong to me."*

*She'd changed the subject then, unwilling that the discussion should go further lest he notice the way his words affected her. Raised by a widowed aunt from the time she was four, Julia had never once been spanked. Of course that hadn't prevented her from watching, with more than mild curiosity, every sitcom or western serial that offered even a remote possibility of a spanking scene. Even now, as an adult, just the thought of cutting a switch made her stomach go all hollow and set nerves to tingling in a way that she found embarrassing.*

She'd avoided humiliating herself that time, but the subject of spanking didn't stay buried for long. In fact, it was on their very next trip to the cabin that Julia had come face to face with a choice she'd never expected.

*"Young lady, I believe I've made myself clear on the matter. I will not allow the woman I love to put herself in danger. That was a reckless stunt you pulled today, and you're damn lucky it didn't backfire on you. But just because you managed to come out of that hostage situation alive doesn't mean there'll be no consequences for your actions." He pulled a straight-backed chair away from the kitchen table and crooked a finger at her. "Come here, Julia Marie. I told you what you could expect if you came up here with me today, and you agreed to it. Now, it's time for you to learn why an old-fashioned, bare-bottomed spanking is such an effective teaching aid."*

*Her stomach was in knots, but she left the corner anyway, inexplicably drawn to him despite the fearful anticipation that pounded at her every pulse point. "I'm sorry, Steve," she said when she stood before him. "I know I didn't follow the book, but there were kids involved. What other choice did I have?"*

*He took her hands in his and drew her to stand between his legs. "Honey, we do these drills for a reason. You have to learn to follow procedure now, because some day you'll be facing real bullets and getting splattered with a little bit of paint will be the least of your worries. Got it?"*

*She chewed on her lower lip. "I guess. But if it turned out all right, then maybe the procedures are wrong."*

*"Julia Marie Anderson! Waiting for back-up is never wrong, and we both know it." His look was one of stern authority and her gaze slid to the floor. "Now, would you like to continue to argue this point, or are you going to get over my knee for the spanking you deserve?"*

*One more moment of indecision, then she took a deep breath and carefully lowered herself over his left knee. "I'm sorry, sir," she whispered. "I'm ready for my spanking now."*

*"That's a good girl," he said as he lifted her shirttail up and out of the way. Then his voice softened as he added, "Jules, honey, this is going to hurt your bottom, but I promise that I will never harm you. Okay?"*

*She nodded, grasped his ankle with a trusting hand. "Okay."*

He'd been right about the spanking hurting her bottom, but also true to his promise to never harm her. He'd treated her with such respect, showed such concern when he'd lifted her up to sit in his lap, that she'd never again questioned whether or not to submit to his discipline. They'd married less than four months later, and spanking had always been a part of their lives. Whether he was warming her bottom in order to teach a lesson or to arouse her passionate nature, she'd always felt safe in her husband's care.

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Sloan pulled into the driveway and glanced at his passenger. She'd sat, turned toward the side window for so long that he thought she might be asleep. The moment he reached out a tentative hand to wake her, though, she shoved open her door and jerked away from his touch.

"Pop the trunk, please. I want the box."

He closed his eyes briefly and willed himself to calm down. *"This is not the time to lose your temper, Roberts,"* he murmured. Still, he wasn't going to allow her to just snatch up



the box and run, so rather than pushing a button, he took the keys from the ignition and got out of the car.

"I'll walk you up," he said as he opened the trunk and slung the heavy pack over one shoulder.

She looked up sharply, and he could almost *see* the retort forming in her mind, but he only turned and strode to the door. She had to go in some time, and he wasn't leaving until he had one more opportunity to talk to her.

At the door, she shouldered past him and stabbed the key in the lock. She did not seem surprised when he followed her in, but stood near the door, as though to make it clear that she did not want his company. Carefully, he removed the heavy wooden box from his pack and placed it back on the mantle, where she'd kept it for almost two years now. He turned to find her staring at him, the door held open, but shook his head in quiet refusal.

"We need to talk, Jules." Deliberately, he took a seat on the end of the sofa. "I'm not leaving until you listen to what I have to say."

## Chapter Three

Julia closed the front door slowly, Sloan's words hanging in the air. "*I'm not leaving*," he'd said, "*until you hear what I have to say*." Wearily, she let her head fall forward against the smooth wooden door. Couldn't he see that she was living on the edge of a complete breakdown? One little push ... that was all it would take... and she'd go plummeting over the edge.

"Come and sit down with me." She started when he touched her shoulder, wondered when he'd left his seat. "Maybe you'd like some hot tea?"

"Hot tea?" She turned slowly to face him, eyes bright with unshed tears. "You think *hot tea* is going to make me feel better? My husband is dead and the only thing I have left of him—the *only* thing—is ash, and you think *hot tea* is going to solve the problem." Fury swept through her and she shoved hard at his chest in an effort to get away. "Maybe that's all it took for *you* to forget what that monster did to Steve, but it's not that easy for me."

She tried to brush past him, but steel fingers closed around her upper arm in a vice like grip. In the next instant, she was hauled up on her toes to face a tight-lipped Sloan. His voice was soft, but he spoke with such clipped precision that a finger of ice walked up her spine.

"Don't you *ever—not for one minute*—think that I've forgotten Steve."

There was an intensity in his eyes that she'd never before encountered, and she was fighting the urge to back away when the shrill tone of the cordless phone made them both jump. One ring, then two, and slowly he relaxed his grip on her arms. "Answer the phone."

He turned away and she felt him draw a deep breath even as she forced air into her own lungs. She picked up the receiver on the fourth ring, her hand remarkably steady despite an inner trembling. Sloan would never hurt her—she knew that—but she'd seen something in his eyes that made her uncomfortable. It was that all too familiar look—part determination, part regret—that she'd learned to identify and carefully avoid. Whenever Steve had worn that particular expression, she'd ended up on the wrong end of a paddle. Seeing it in Sloan's eyes left her stunned and hardly aware of her actions, even as she answered with a wooden,

"Hello?"

Unexpected, a snake lashed and struck, fangs hidden beneath three simple words.

"Hello, *little girl*."

"Steve?" It wasn't him, her mind insisted—*couldn't be*—and yet her heart lurched at the sound of the endearment. Only Steve had called her little girl. No one else had ever heard the pet name, so far as she knew. It couldn't be him, yet it *had* to be. "Steve? Oh my god, where are you? I'll come—" There was a click, barely audible, then silence as she clung to the phone, speechless.

Sloan's initial gratitude for the well-timed call died away the moment he saw Julia's face. In the time it took him to cross the room, the caller had done his damage and gone. He took the phone from her hand.

"Who is this? Hello?"

He thumbed the "talk" button, disconnecting the call, then punched in \*69. A tin voice told him, "*We're sorry, but your last call was either marked private or came from outside the service area.*" He nearly slammed down the phone out of sheer frustration, but a surreptitious glance in Julia's direction had him leading her gently to the nearest chair instead.

"Who was it, Jules? What did he say?"

"I—I don't know. For a moment I thought—"

"You thought it was Steve?"

"He called me—" She stumbled over the words as though she spoke around a mouthful of ground glass. "Only Steve called me that. No one else."

Crouching in front of her chair, he took her hands in his own. They were cold as ice and he realized suddenly that she might be in shock. Still, he had to ask one last question.

"The man on the phone... he called you by a nickname of some sort? Is that what you're saying?"

"Yes. He called me *little girl*." She formed the words, but he sensed that she was only half-aware of what she was saying. "Steve used to call me that, but only when I was in trouble." That said, she pushed to her feet. "I'm going to be sick," she said, and fled to the bathroom.

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She swam up from the murky depths of half-remembered dreams, broke through the surface to breathe reality and found Sloan at her side. He leaned in to brush wisps of honey-colored hair from her forehead and cheek, and she fought the disorientation his presence caused. She was in her bedroom—the muted floral wallpaper and glass topped bedside stand were too familiar to be someone else's—but what was he doing here?

"How'd you sleep?" He spoke calmly, but concern lurked behind his eyes. "Feeling any better?"

"I—I'm not sure. She pushed up onto one elbow and grasped at recent memories as elusive as drifting smoke. "What day is it?"

"Same as it was when I sent you in here. And *you* said you weren't tired." He chuckled, but the sound was all tension and false bravado. "The guys are gone now. Do you think you can eat something?"

*The guys.* They'd come to set up a phone tap, appearing a scant half hour after Sloan's call, and just before he'd commanded her to lie down. She didn't want a phone tap—didn't *need* one—but he'd insisted and the director of criminal investigations had agreed. One thought followed another and the day's activities—the trip, the cabin, the phone call—came into sharp focus. It was November 17<sup>th</sup>, a Wednesday. Steve should have been celebrating his forty-fourth birthday, but that wasn't going to happen, because Steve was dead.

With effort, she forced down the sorrow that washed over her. "You cooked?"

"I ordered in. The delivery guy should be here soon."

"Pizza?"

The doorbell rang. "Nope... gyros from that little Greek place around the corner. I'll get the door. You get us something to drink." He headed for the hallway, then popped his head back in the open door "And no alcohol, Jules. We still need to talk."

In the bathroom, she brushed her teeth and redid her ponytail, all the while staring at her reflection in the mirror. She was pale as death and no amount of makeup could hide the sleepless nights smudged black beneath her eyes. "You look like hell," she told her mirror self. The image stared back, unperturbed.

"Hey," Sloan called from the kitchen. "You want chicken or beef?"

"I don't care." *It'll all taste the same anyway.* "You choose."

He was in the kitchen, pouring soda into glasses, despite the fact that she was supposed to fix the drinks. "Regular or caffeine free?" he asked without looking up.

"Make it the low test or I'll never sleep tonight. What time is it anyway?"

"6:30." He motioned her to a chair, then took the seat opposite hers. "You sure chicken's okay?"

"Yeah." She plopped down and pulled the wrapper back to reveal one of Steve's favorite foods. "I hope you ordered dessert."

"Of course. It's on the counter. Baklava."

They were dancing around the issue, making small talk instead of getting down to the business at hand, but neither was willing to broach the subject of the phone call. What did it mean and, more importantly, who would have known Steve's private nickname for his wife? Julia chewed slowly while her mind retrieved and discarded the possibilities. By the time she'd finished eating, she'd narrowed it down to two. Either someone was playing a very sick prank, or Steve was out there somewhere, alive and fighting to get home to her. In her mind, she knew the answer to the puzzle; but in her heart, hope sparked into an ember.

"It wasn't him." Sloan balled up his foil wrapper and tossed it into the trashcan. "You know that, don't you?"

"Yeah." She threw away half her sandwich and brought the baklava back to the table. "Sure. It just surprised me." *How did he know about the nickname?*

"We saw Steve's body, remember?"

"Mmm-hmm." *At least they'd thought it was him.*

"I know how hard this must be, Julia. I wish it could have been Steve on the phone, but we both know it's just not possible."

"Right." She nibbled half-heartedly at the buttery pastry. *The dental records might have been switched.*

"We need to decide where to go from here. How do you feel about a little vacation, courtesy of the FBI?"

She looked up sharply. "You mean witness protection? Why?"

Sloan sighed, leaned back in his chair and folded his arms over his chest. "It wouldn't be witness protection, exactly... just some time off, and a couple of agents to keep an eye out for any sign of trouble. You could go to the Bahamas... or somewhere in Europe. Consider it an adventure. You've always wanted to see the UK, right?"

She looked up, met his warm brown gaze with an intense green one. "I'm not going to run away from this Sloan. I don't care who this bastard is, I won't let him run me out of my home."

"There's a good chance it was Lennox. He's dangerous, Julia."

"Yeah?" She pushed away from the table. "Well, so am I."

He followed her to the living room, half-afraid she'd fall down before she could get to the sofa. She had on the mask—the expression of professional calm that she'd worn in the days and weeks immediately following her husband's death—but she couldn't keep that resolve in place forever. And for his part, he wasn't about to let her hide away this time.

"I've made you an appointment with Janine Baker. Eleven o'clock, tomorrow morning."

She dropped down onto the sofa. "Then you had just better call and cancel it. I'm not going to the department shrink."

"Oh yes, you are." He walked to the window, pushed aside the curtain to check the status of the alert team. "You're going if I have to haul you in there, kicking and screaming."

"Sloan, I don't need a shrink because I'm *not* crazy. I know it was just another prank call. It took me by surprise, is all."

"Another? What do you mean, *another* prank call?"

She realized her mistake the moment he looked at her. No wonder he was so good at questioning suspects. His gaze made her feel like an insect pinned to styrofoam for closer inspection. She swallowed hard and played at nonchalance.

"I've had a few lately."

He took a deep breath, let it out slowly. "Why didn't you report it? You should've had a tap on your phone right away."

She tried to shrug off his words, but the gesture turned into a disconcerting shiver. "Look... I didn't think a few harmless hang-ups were worth reporting. It's really no big deal. Anyway, the tap's there now and I'm too tired to talk about this." It was time to change the subject. "So, how many agents do you have out there anyway?"

There had been other calls. He set his glass down quietly, stood with his hands clenching and unclenching at his sides. "Of all the stupid, irresponsible—" He trailed off, then took a deliberate step towards her. "Julia Marshall, if your husband was here, he'd be paddling your tail end right about now. In fact, I'm tempted to do the job myself."

She felt the words physically, like a slap in the face. The next instant she was on her feet, all her turbulent emotions focused into a laser of fury.

"*Get out of my house.*"

He took another deliberate step in her direction. "Who do you think advised him to try spanking when your recklessness was out of control?"

She blanched, then felt her face go red clear to the roots of her hair. "You bastard! How *dare* you talk to me like this? You have *no right*—"

He shouldn't do it. He knew that, yet he couldn't seem to stop himself. She'd been wallowing in guilt for too long, and taking chances with her own safety, to boot. He strode towards her, shoving his right sleeve up on the way. If spanking her was the only way to get through, then he'd take his chances.

She took an instinctive step back. "Don't you even think about it," she hissed as she reached out and grasped a vase full of fall flowers. "I swear to high heaven, Roberts, I'll crack your skull open."

He grasped her wrist, deftly wrestled the vase from her hand. "I will *not* allow you to put yourself in danger, Julia.



You know damn well that you should've reported this... and from the very first call. But since you seem to have run out of common sense—" He overcame her struggles and tucked her under his left arm. "I guess I'm going to have to take matters into my own hands."

"Stop it!" She was kicking furiously and clawing at the strong arm wrapped around her waist. "You touch me and I swear, I'll never forgive you. Do you understand me, Sloan?" Her voice was shrill, near hysteria. "Never, never, *never!*" He lifted her feet right off the ground and a sudden sob shuddered through her. "Let me go!"

"Agent Roberts... Matthews?" The sudden pounding at the door stopped him before the first SWAT. "Are you okay in there?"

Julia wriggled out of Sloan's grip and vaulted for the bathroom, leaving him to deal with the undercover agent he'd posted outside. "Yeah, we're fine," he called out. He went to the door slowly, taking care to roll down his sleeve and take a few deep breaths. A young man in a power company uniform stepped inside the moment he opened the door.

"Everything's fine, Paul. Agent Matthew's is just understandably upset."

Paul nodded crisply, and let his hand drop away from the weapon he wore holstered beneath his jacket. "Sorry, sir. I heard yelling and—"

"That's fine. You did the right thing." Sloan glanced over his shoulder, then turned back to the man on duty. "I'm glad to know you're on the ball. I'll probably be leaving soon."

"You don't have to worry, sir. Jenkins and I'll keep a good eye on Agent Marshall. Just let us know when you're going."

"Will do."

Sloan dismissed the man with a nod and shut the door, then ran a hand through graying hair. Dear God, what had he done? More importantly, what *might* he have done if they hadn't been interrupted? He hadn't spanked a woman... hadn't even

been tempted to... since his wife. And even then, he'd always taken the time to calm down, to make sure he was doing it for the right reasons. His hands shook as he opened the liquor cabinet and splashed scotch into a clean glass. In all the years they were together, he'd never once spanked Alice in anger. He gulped the smooth liquid, drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. What had happened to his iron control, to his ability to remain rational when others weren't? Julia wasn't his wife; hell, they weren't even dating. He'd had no right to threaten to warm her bottom, let alone to actually do it. He could only hope his lapse in decorum hadn't done irreparable harm to their relationship.

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In the bathroom, Julia started the water and stepped into the shower. Hot jets pounded at the tension in neck and shoulders as she willed the unexpected nausea to subside. She was shaken, but not just because Sloan had nearly spanked her. No, it was what she'd seen in his eyes, heard in his voice that most disturbed her. It was what she *felt* deep inside that truly scared her. She'd sworn—at Steve's *grave*, she'd sworn that she'd never let anyone make her hurt that much again. But here she was, two years down the road feeling something that she had no business feeling.

"Julia?" She jumped at the sound of his voice. "Julia, I'm sorry."

"Go away," she croaked.

He stood outside the bathroom door, waited for her to say something—*anything*—but all he could hear was the steady beat of water against tile. "Jules, please come out. I'm worried about you."

She pitched her voice louder and called out, "I'm okay. Please go home, Sloan. I can't talk about this any more tonight."

He put his hand on the knob, then thought better of it. She was right—he *should* go. He'd done enough damage for one

day. "Okay, I'm going," he said to the door. "There are two agents in power company uniforms, and another in an unmarked car down the street. Their names and pictures are on the counter, so you'll know who you're dealing with. I'll lock up on my way out."

She let out the breath she'd been holding. "I'll be fine. Bye."

He turned away from the door. "Take the rest of the week off, Marshall. That's an order." A moment later, he was gone.

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She took the phone to bed with her that night, but there were no more calls. *It wasn't him*. She repeated the words over and over again, but her heart refused the mantra. With eyes closed, she waded through memories of watery sunlight intruding through winter bare branches; forced the image of a decaying body onto an internal movie screen, but even that didn't snuff out the ember of hope. The hills in and around Old Man's Cave were filled with wild animals—large and small—whose teeth and claws had hurried the natural process of decay. All they'd had to go on was Dental records, and those *could* be switched. The FBI specialized in making people disappear. That's what witness protection was all about.

All her reasoning, however, could not answer one important question. Would Steve have left her—alone and broken-hearted—of his own free will? No... surely not. He'd *loved* her—he'd said so a million times—and he'd have fought tooth and nail to stay with her. She rolled over, pounded her pillow into shape as tremors of doubt and self-loathing raced through her. People had been leaving her all her life, so why *not* Steve? Maybe he'd grown tired of her, of dealing with her insecurities and childish behavior. Maybe it had been *his* idea to stage his death. Maybe—. She took deep breaths and willed her heart to slow, the trembling to subside. If he'd wanted to

leave her, he wouldn't have called tonight. *If* it was Steve on the phone, which was highly unlikely. And if not him, then who?

It was nearly three when the mental battle ceased, and she relaxed into sleep. Outside, storm clouds gathered, drifted across the face of the moon. On the ground, shadows danced in perfect rhythm with the ever-changing sky, performed flawlessly until one particular patch of black moved against the chorus. A long shadow loomed closer to the window and, covered by darkness, viewed a strip of bedroom between outside wall and window shade.

She slept now, and he cursed once again the darkness that had become his world. He ached for the chance to touch her—to feel soft skin gliding over the top of blood and bone and muscle, to taste both her sorrow and her joy. For two years, he'd lived as a shadow, carefully avoiding the warmth of sunlight on his face. Now, with the end so near, he dwelt increasingly on the reunion ahead. Would she remember? Would she understand the reasons, the necessity of his silence? Could he breathe life into her empty heart, make her feel again?

Down the street, a spark flared against the black tinted window of an inconspicuous mini-van. He pressed back against the wall, every muscle tensed and ready. *They* had made him a creature of darkness; he would use that darkness against them, if necessary. The spark died and, after another minute of quiet watchfulness, he once again eased forward to watch her. She'd rolled over, moved restlessly beneath the comforter, and he wondered if she dreamed of him.

*Guilty. Tried and convicted in a matter of minutes, she had no recourse left but to wait for her sentence to be carried out. Waiting was a torment all unto itself, but worse was yet to come. Oh yes... things were going to get a whole lot worse before they got better.*

*Any minute now, she'd be ordered to the bedroom to prepare for her punishment. There, she would carefully lay out*

*the implements he wanted, wondering all the while how she was going to make it through the spanking to come. Then, with strap and hairbrush laid neatly out on the dresser top, she would take off her clothes—all of them—and take her place in the corner. There she would wait, hands at her sides, nose pressed tightly to the wallpaper, until he instructed her to move.*

*"Alright, young lady," he'd call to her from the straight-backed chair she'd placed in the center of the room. "Let's get down to business."*

*Then the real torment would begin. He'd take her over his knee or, worse yet, order her to bend over and place her elbows on the seat of the chair. Once she was arranged to his satisfaction, he'd make her recount the misdeeds that had led up to this moment, and then he'd wait. The room would go silent as she gathered her courage, as she convinced herself she could do what he wanted. If the silence went on too long, he'd lecture and give her what he called "encouragement," in the form of sharp, stinging swats to her naked bottom. And finally, when she could bear it no longer, she'd give him the words he was waiting for.*

*"I'm sorry, sir, and I know I deserve this punishment. Please spank me."*

*Sometimes, when she'd committed some exceptionally reckless or defiant offense, he would ask for more. "Yes, young lady, you do deserve a spanking. In fact, with the way you've acted, I think you're in need of more than the customary punishment. So, tell me exactly what kind of a spanking you need tonight, little girl. I want to hear you say it."*

*The words were difficult to get out, but she knew what was expected. "A hard one, sir. I need a hard spanking."*

*"Yes... a very hard one, indeed. And should this be a long spanking do you think, sweetheart?"*

*Would he never get on with it? "Yes sir." She could hardly make her voice loud enough to be heard. "Please give me a*

*long, hard spanking, sir... on my bare bottom. I deserve it and... and I need it."*

*"Yes, you do." He'd reach out, pick up one of the implements ready for use, and hold it against her quivering flesh. "You've earned a long, hard spanking young lady, and you have my word that I'll give you everything you have coming. And when I'm through, I'm sure you'll be one very sorry little girl. Agreed?"*

*Oh yes, they were in complete agreement on that. In fact, she was usually sorry before he landed the first swat, and only became more repentant as the spanking went on. By the time she was standing in the corner sobbing, her very red and throbbing bottom on display, she'd feel like the sorriest, most contrite woman in the world.*

*"Alright, young lady." The sound of his voice jerked her from her morbid imaginings. "Go to the bedroom please. I'll join you shortly."*

*She stood and, on jello legs, walked to the bedroom. Her heart was pounding, her stomach alive with nervous butterflies, and the rush of adrenaline made her hands shake as she took off her clothes. She was going to be spanked, long and hard. It would hurt a great deal and she'd be begging for the end long before he was finished teaching the lesson she dreaded. She knew that, and yet... and yet her hands lingered on stiff-peaked nipples as she removed her bra. Her panties came off, warm and damp with the evidence of her desire. She stood in the corner, aching, until one disobedient hand found and began to massage that special place, slick with desire. It would be a painful spanking—long and hard and nearly unbearable. She dreaded it, yet the thought did something to her insides—something confusing and embarrassing and utterly wonderful.*

*She shifted position and slid one finger up inside, gasping at the pleasure that simple touch provided. He'd be mad if he found her here, saw her behaving like this when she was supposed to be reflecting on her misdeeds, but it didn't matter.*

*She wanted it—all of it—his undivided attention, his dominance over her body. She even welcomed the pain, for with it came forgiveness and healing and—afterwards—unconditional love. Her movements became more urgent, her breathing more erratic. Lord, how she loved this man—how she wanted him. And any moment now...*

*"Julia!" Startled, she turned to find him watching her. "I sent you in here to think about your behavior, and what do I find? He crooked his finger, beckoning her forward. "Since you seem unable to take this seriously, I think we'll forgo the lap time and get right down to business. Bend over, elbows on the chair, little girl."*

*Tears clung to her lashes as she took the position, filled with dread yet still aching with unsatisfied arousal. It wasn't hard to ask this time, though. The sooner she got through this, the sooner he would make love to her. She swallowed hard and said the words he expected. "Please spank me, Sloan."*

She jerked awake, heart pounding loud in the darkened room. She couldn't do this, couldn't let him into her heart. Everyone she'd ever loved had died. She wouldn't let that happen to Sloan.

Outside, the shadow watched, smiled to himself. Oh yes, she'd dreamt of him. And soon—very soon—he would make her dreams a reality.

## Chapter Four

The sun, when it crept in between the mini blind slats, found Julia stuffing clothes into a duffel bag. "You want me to take time off, Roberts?" she muttered. "Fine. I'll take a vacation—an enforced vacation—but I'll be damned if I'll stay here, under a bureau microscope." She threw her toothbrush on top of jeans and t-shirts and zipped the bag with an impatient hand. "Oh no. I'm getting out of here, and there's nothing you can do to stop me."

Technically, of course, there was something he could do. He could have her guarded 24/7 if he wanted, or even order her to stay in town, which was precisely why she wasn't going to ask his permission to leave. She hefted her bag to test its weight. Good. It wasn't any heavier than normal, and didn't look too full, either. She had to look like she was on her way to the gym, rather than the airport. It was the only way she could get away by herself, her only chance at finding some space so she could think. And besides, she'd be perfectly safe. Just because she worked as a profiler didn't mean she'd had less training than the field agents. She knew self-defense. She'd be fine.

She made coffee in the darkened kitchen, sipped the hot liquid as she penned a "to do" list. She couldn't very well go into the office to pick up Lennox's records, but hopefully the



Los Angeles library would still have the newspaper articles on file. The trial of Randall Lennox would hardly be front-page stuff today; but back in '81, a kid killing his own father had been big news. Especially when that father was a decorated cop accused, after his death, of abusing his children. Papers all over the country had followed the trial, with opinions ranging from pity for the 17-year-old killer to absolute denial of his claims. Surely there would still be records somewhere. First, Julia would learn everything she could about Lennox—and then she'd find the bastard, and make him pay.

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Sloan shuffled papers on his desk in a weary attempt to focus on his work. Weekly reports, case reviews, requests for profiles and inquiries from his higher ups—all these things vied for his attention, and all suffered neglect. He simply could not concentrate on paperwork when he'd left things with Julia so unsettled.

He resisted the impulse to call her until early afternoon, then shrugged off the prick of concern when she didn't pick up the phone. She was under bureau protection—he'd seen to that himself—so there was nothing to worry about. She was probably just out for a run or maybe in the shower. However, when two hours had passed and she'd neither returned his message nor picked up the phone, he began to fume. She was being childish, avoiding him because of what had happened the night before. And while he could understand her feelings, they were both adults and would have to get past the awkwardness sooner or later. He shut down his computer and informed his secretary that he'd be out for the rest of the afternoon.

"Forward anything of dire importance to my cell," he called over his shoulder as he left the office.

"Yes sir." Mrs. Baker nodded without looking up. "Have a good afternoon."

The flight was only half full, so Julia had a row of three seats to herself. She requested a pillow from a perky-looking flight attendant, but last night's dream made sleep impossible. Every time she closed her eyes, the images came—a disturbing jumble of Steve's touch and Sloan's voice that made her heart pound wildly and her head ache with frustration.

In the years since Steve's death, she'd dreamt of him often; and a good deal of those dreams had centered on the dual sensations of apprehension and arousal that came with a spanking. She'd been embarrassed, yet oddly turned on, from the very first time he'd held her over his knee, one rock-hard thigh beneath her pelvis while the other kept her churning legs at bay. His hand had been so hard, the open-palmed slaps painful—and oh, the humiliation of that moment when he'd slid his hand down along the crevice between her smarting cheeks and skimmed her panties to her knees. Even that first time, uncertain as she was about submitting to his discipline, there'd been no hiding her body's reaction. Her face had flamed and she'd waited, half-afraid that he would find her behavior unacceptable; but somehow, he'd made it all right. Oh, the spanking had continued, of course—and one hot and throbbing bottom later, she'd been ready to accept his guidance on the matter of waiting for backup in every situation—but he'd also kept her close throughout that evening, every small gesture and gentle touch a reassurance. He understood, not simply that she'd needed a spanking, but that she had to have the love, too, that went with it. Later that night, when they'd both been calm and the spanking was behind them, he'd made love to her. It had been their first time, and it had been all she'd hoped for, and more.

But that had been Steve... her husband, the man she'd loved with all her heart. And while dreams of him were common, she resented Sloan's intrusion upon her

subconscious. Confusion, fear, longing—there was a war going on inside Julia and no matter what emotion won, she feared she would ultimately lose something important. She didn't want to let go of Steve—wouldn't let go of him. Not yet. Not if there was even the slightest possibility that he might be out there, fighting to get back to her. And if he really was dead, it was her duty to keep his memory alive and to bring his killer to justice. There simply wasn't room in her heart for two men, and she wasn't about to let anyone replace Steve. He deserved better. He deserved to live forever, a cherished memory that she would honor with her last breath. She owed him that much, and she would not abandon her commitment now.

LAX was teeming with people when she disembarked, and one look at the line for rental cars had her stopping in her tracks. She'd catch a cab first, then call to have a rental delivered once she was settled in. But first, there was someone she had to see. She handed the address to the taxi driver, then sat back, hoping he wouldn't get her killed on the way to Tony's place.

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The freeway was backed up, so Sloan opted for the less-traveled country roads. Besides, it was a beautiful day and a change of scenery would do him good. The last thing he wanted to do was show up at Julia's door, already tense and impatient due to rush hour traffic. No, he'd have to be very careful. He couldn't afford to lose his temper with her again, didn't want to repeat last night's mistake. Still, he was worried about her, so he decided to make a quick phone call. At least if he knew she was home, safe and sound, he could let go of one concern. He hit the speed dial on his cell phone and got the office switchboard on the line.

"This is Penny. How may I help you?"

"Hi, Penny." He was calm, professional. "This is Agent Roberts. I'm on the road without a radio, and I need to get in touch with the guys on the Marshall case. Could you put me through?"

"Certainly, sir. One moment, please."

Canned music blared in his ear and, wincing, he switched to speaker mode. Hopefully this wouldn't take too long. He was already halfway there.

"Hi, Agent Roberts." The voice was unfamiliar, but that was to be expected. After all, he didn't have time to keep up with all the new kids in the other departments. "What can I do for you?"

"I've been trying to get a hold of Agent Marshall, but she's not answering her phone. Are you there at her house now, or is she out somewhere?"

There was an awkward pause. "She hasn't returned yet, sir. We thought she was with you."

Sloan felt the words like a punch in the stomach. "What do you mean, she's with me? I haven't seen her all day."

"Shit." The reaction of the field agent was less than comforting. "She told one of the guys this morning that she was heading to the gym and then would be joining you for lunch. And since your orders were to watch the house..."

"Who is this?" Sloan demanded tersely. "And what on earth gave you the impression I only wanted you to watch the house?"

"This is Mike Young, sir. And Ms. Marshall told us we were to keep the house under tight surveillance, so that's what we've been doing."

Anger slammed into Sloan, followed by a sudden, sickening fear. "Young, get your men in that house now. Look for any clues as to where she might have gone. Also, get somebody to scout the exterior of the house. If you see anything unusual—anything at all—you call me back."

"Yes sir."

"And Young... tell me, did she take her own car, or call a cab?"

"She took her car, sir."

"What time?"

There was a shuffling of papers. "Ummm... says here she left at 9:39 this morning. My shift didn't start until noon, but—"

Sloan blew out a deep breath and forced a note of calm into his voice. "It's okay... not your fault. Just get your guys on it right away. Julia Marshall may be in danger, so it's important we locate her as quickly as possible. Do you have her license plate number?"

"Yes sir."

"Okay. Get it on the radio. I want every agent and law enforcement officer on duty keeping an eye out for her. I'm on my way there now."

"Will do," the agent said, then added, "I'm sorry about this, sir. I don't know how it happened."

"It's okay. It's probably just a misunderstanding, but we have to take all the precautions we can. Randall Lennox killed two of our finest, and nobody wants a repeat of that. So, let's get things tightened up there and find Julia Marshall. Then we'll worry about what happened. Okay?"

He could almost hear the junior agent nod. "Yes sir. Young out."

Sloan disconnected the call, then dialed Julia's cell phone. "When I get a hold of you, young lady..." he muttered as the phone rang. By the time the call rolled over to her voice mail, he was doing 90 miles an hour and cursing all the way.

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"Hey, buddy," Julia sat up a bit in the back seat, and tried to get the driver's attention. "Hey! I didn't ask for the scenic route. You want to tell me why we're driving half way around the world? If you'd taken that last exit, we'd be there by now."

The drivers gaze flicked to the rear view mirror. "Sorry, lady," he said in a heavy Spanish accent. "Construction on that road. Have to go up three exits, then cut back. But you don't worry. I get you there quick." With that, he stepped on the gas.

The sudden acceleration threw Julia back against the seat and she gave a little groan. "I better be seeing some orange barrels," she murmured, "or you're going to be one sorry cab driver."

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Sloan pulled into Julia's driveway and was instantly greeted by the head agent on duty. "Young, what've you got for me?"

"Two things." The haggard-looking man gestured Sloan toward the open front door. "First of all, her car was found in long-term parking at Dulles. One of the uniforms cruising the area just happened to remember seeing a dark blue VW and, sure enough, it was hers."

Sloan took a deep breath, uncertain if he should be glad to hear this, or even more worried. "Is somebody checking outgoing flights? We need to know if she bought a ticket, where to, and if she was alone."

"I've already got a man on it. But there's something else." Sloan followed Agent Young into the kitchen, where a single evidence bag lay on the counter, carefully labeled and sealed. "We found this on the window sill outside the master bedroom. Someone obviously left it there, though we're not sure of the significance."

Sloan held up the clear plastic bag, turned it slowly around to better view the contents. "You're sure there was nothing else? No note? And what about fingerprints or shoe imprints?"

"We got a few partials prints, but so far, they've come back as Ms. Marshall's. And yeah, there were shoe imprints... man's sneaker, probably a size 10 ½, though the lab will have to give us the specifics. So what about the rose? Does it mean anything special, do you think?"

Sloan studied the flower grimly. It was a tea rose, long stemmed, and of a light purple hue. "Yeah, it's significant," he told the agent, though his eyes never left the bag. "It means our guy knows that purple roses are Julia's favorite. And that's pretty damn bad news."

Young flipped open his cell phone and started barking orders, and Sloan wandered into the bedroom. The blinds were still down, so she hadn't seen the rose. At least it was reasonable to assume she hadn't noticed it—and that was good. Somebody—most likely Lennox—was playing head games with Julia. Under normal circumstances, he wouldn't have been concerned for Julia. She was smart—one of the best in the department—and she could handle herself in just about every situation. But this was different. He'd seen the look in her eyes when she took that prank call. She'd put on a brave face afterward, but he'd seen the look of hope in her eyes. Some small part of her had believed it was Steve, even if only for a moment. That belief was dangerous. That belief, he feared, could get her killed.

A sudden thought hit him, and he called out to Young. "Did anyone check the computer. Maybe she got an e-mail that shook her up."

"We tried, but it's passworded. I can get an expert down here, though, if you want. I didn't know how much you wanted us to disturb the place, what with not having a search warrant."

Sloan made his way down the hall and into the den. He turned on the computer, then waited for the password screen to come up. When it did, he took a stab at it and typed in "5790." She'd once confided in him that Steve couldn't forget their wedding anniversary, because she used the date for all their credit card and bank passwords. Sure enough, Windows opened. A quick search proved it to be a dead end, though. She hadn't logged onto the computer in two days, and there

were no suspicious messages to be found. He was just logging off when he heard someone coming down the hall.

Young stuck his head around the doorframe. "We've got her, sir. She used her credit card to buy a one-way ticket to Los Angeles, and we have confirmation she boarded alone. The plane landed at LAX at 1:19."

Sloan took a deep, calming breath. She'd most likely gone to do her own investigating, and while he wasn't the least bit thrilled over that fact, at least there was no reason to believe she'd encountered Lennox.

"Okay, make sure someone checks every rental car desk at the airport, just in case."

"Yes sir. I'm on it. And what about the computer? Should we get an expert in here?"

"Not necessary. I already checked it out. Nothing suspicious, and since she bought her own plane ticket and boarded alone, I'm guessing she just wanted to get away from here for a while. Make sure your guys leave everything exactly as they found it, and get that rose to the lab. Oh, and make sure someone's watching the place round the clock. Whoever left that calling card may be back tonight. And if he is, I want somebody here, waiting for him."

Young nodded. "Yes sir."

Sloan waited until the man was gone, then pulled out his cell phone. He wasn't keen on the idea of involving field agents in California, but there was someone he could call for help. Hopefully, Julia had been thinking the same thing.

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The cab came to an abrupt halt, and Julia made short work of paying the fee and clearing out of the backseat. She'd forgotten how bad LA cab drivers were and counted herself lucky to have arrived in one piece. Hopefully, Tony would be as glad to see her as she was to be standing on solid ground, with nothing more than a bad headache.



The parking lot was full, but all was quiet when she knocked on the door to Tony's gym.

"Come in."

She stepped inside to find Tony lifting weights. He glanced up at her and said, without preamble, "Julia... I'm glad you're here." He nodded in the direction of his office. "There's a phone in there. Go call your boss, and then we'll get caught up."

"Shit." She let her bag drop to the floor. "When did he call?"

Tony continued to pump the weights, alternating one arm and then the other. "Almost an hour ago. He sounded pretty upset."

Julia stepped closer to Tony, and risked a glance up at his face. She knew him well enough to see that he was not far from angry, himself. "I had to get away from there," she offered by way of explanation. "I couldn't stand sitting there, waiting for the next phone call. I needed a change of scenery."

Tony nodded, then thoughtfully set the barbells down. "Roberts told me what happened." He stepped around the bench and Julia found herself enveloped in a warm, comforting hug. "I'm sorry for what you're going through, Jules. But you know better than to pull a stunt like this."

Her eyes filled with tears at the gentle scolding, and when he kissed the top of her head, those tears spilled over and slipped down her cheeks. "I can't talk to him right now, Tony. There's just too much going on." She stepped back and began to fish in her purse for a tissue. "I'm just—I'm confused. I don't know what to think or how to feel."

Tony pulled a couple of tissues from a box conveniently located near the largest of the weight benches, and pressed them into Julia's hand. "Okay, hon. I tell you what. If you'll agree to stay at my place while you're here, I'll call him for you. Have we got a deal?"

She nodded her head miserably. "Deal."

He nodded once, then jogged into his office. As he was dialing the phone, he called to her, "Why don't you take your stuff on into my apartment. And hey, you remember where the kitchen is?"

She picked up her bag. "Yeah, sure."

"Good. Go make yourself a sandwich ... and get some orange juice, too. You look like you're about to fall over."

The tears continued to fall, but something relaxed inside of Julia. This was what she needed—a place where she could relax, where there were no expectations or pressures. She had work to do, of course; and she'd get to that, too. But for now, it was just good to see Tony again.

---

Sloan was on his way back to the office when the call came in. He punched the speaker button, answering on the first ring.

"Roberts here."

"Hey, Sloan. It's Tony DeMarco. Julia just got here."

Behind the wheel of his Mercedes, Sloan let out a sigh of relief. "Thank God. Can you put her on the line?"

There was an awkward pause. "I'm sorry, but she wouldn't make the call. She said something about there being a lot going on that she couldn't talk about right now?"

Sloan turned onto a side road and pulled over onto the shoulder. "We both said some things, Tony. And I acted like a fool. She has a right to be mad."

He heard Tony sigh. "Well, I'm not exactly sure she's angry. Confused might be more like it. But she's agreed to stay with me rather than getting a hotel room, so I'll keep an eye on her for you. Okay?"

"Yeah." Sloan tipped his head back and rubbed at his aching eyes. "I'd appreciate that. And call me when she's headed back this way. Okay?"

"Will do. Talk to you later."

Sloan remained there, parked half in gravel and half on tall grass, for quite some time after the call. He'd had no right to

threaten to spank Julia, so he could hardly fault her for being angry. Still, she'd caused a lot of trouble for a lot of people, and he wasn't at all certain he could—or should—overlook that. Finally, he sat up and put the car in gear. He'd decide what to do about her escape later. For now, she was safe, and that was all that really mattered.

---

By the time Tony joined her in the kitchen, Julia had managed to get her emotions under some sort of control. At least she wasn't crying. She watched as her host turned a straight-backed chair around and took a seat, resting his arms on the back of the chair. His hazel gaze found and held hers.

"Talk to me, hon."

She looked away briefly, then lifted her juice with an unsteady hand. "Lennox is back."

He sighed sympathetically. "I know. Sloan filled me in on that part. But that's not what I'm talking about."

She sipped at the juice and avoided the penetrating gaze. "Then what?"

"You're running away, Julia, and I don't think it's from Randall Lennox. Now why don't you tell me what this is really all about."

Her chin quivered and she fought the sudden urge to cry. "I can't talk about it, Tony." Tears clung to her lashes. "It just hurts too much. I can't go through that again. I can't love him."

She could feel his eyes on her, but it didn't matter any more. She'd held her emotions so tightly in check for so long that it was almost like a rubber band snapping when she let go. She pushed aside the small plate in front of her and, laying her head down on the table, began to cry.

She didn't hear him move, but his hands were gentle on her shaking shoulders. "It's okay, Jules. You don't have to be tough here, or make any decisions, or explain yourself. Why

don't we go sit down in the living room? I've got big shoulders, you know. Just right for crying on."

Julia got up slowly, head throbbing, and let Tony lead her into the next room, not bothering to protest when he gathered her into his lap. All pretenses forgotten, she curled up against him and sobbed. "I don't know what to do, Tony." She could hardly get the words out for the way the sobs wracked her body. "I just want to die."

Tony didn't argue or scold—just wrapped his arms around her and acted as anchor as the sobs shook her. She'd never really allowed herself to grieve after Steve's death, and now all pain she'd held in welled up and burst through the walls she'd erected. Her chest heaved until she was sure she'd cry herself inside out, and through it all, he never let her go. And finally, physically exhausted and emotionally spent, she fell asleep in his arms.

## Chapter Five

*The forest was cold, the light eerie as it poured through winter bare branches. She walked behind a broad-shouldered detective, praying with every step that the call had been nothing more than a prank. "A stupid kid," she told herself. "Just some dumb kid who has no real idea how serious this is. He probably read the news reports about the missing FBI agent and thought it'd be fun to send us all out on a wild goose chase. But that's all it is." Twigs and dead leaves snapped under foot, and the crackling reminded her of Steve's bad knee, and the way it would make a popping sound when he ran. She swallowed sudden nausea and berated herself for being so morbid. "It's a prank. Just a sick, stupid joke."*

*The detective at the head of the search party stopped suddenly, and motioned for the uniformed officers to spread out. She would have moved with them, but a gentle hand restrained her. "Stay here, Julia," Sloan said in low tone. "Let these guys do their jobs."*

*She turned to look up into the face of her husband's best friend. There was something in his eyes, a look of resignation in the green depths that made her want to rage against the conclusion he'd already come to. Instead, she looked past him, at the path they'd forged through the woods. "You're wrong,*

*Sloan. It's not Steve. You'll see. It's a prank, nothing more." The words tumbled out of her mouth, sharp and edged with panic. "I'd know if he was dead, wouldn't I? I would, but he's not here. He's out there somewhere, alive. And we're going to find him before—"*

*The wind shifted and the scent that she'd been vaguely aware of coalesced into a sickening, sharp odor. Something rotten and decaying was nearby. An animal—perhaps a deer—had died, maybe even been killed by a predator. That's what the anonymous caller had seen. It had to be an animal. No human would smell like that.*

*She looked back to Sloan, only to find him gazing over her head. The crackle of a police radio startled her and she whirled around to see half a dozen officers standing in a semi-circle around the base of the tree. One man turned quickly away, managing to separate himself from the group before he doubled over and vomited. Another, sporting a sheriff's badge, had stepped back and was talking into his handheld radio.*

*"We've found him," the sheriff told whoever was listening on the other end of the two-way. "About a half-mile west of our point of origin. You're going to have to send the coroner in, though. It looks like something big got to the body. The doc'll want to view the scene and make sure we get everything."*

*"Oh, God." Not Steve. It couldn't be Steve.*

*The officer glanced up sharply, as if he'd forgotten about the two FBI profilers who'd been helping with the search. His tone was at once business like and apologetic as he said to Sloan, "Maybe you folks should go on back to the car. This is going to take some time."*

*Just then, another officer moved away from the scene, and the object of everyone's attention came into view. Later, Julia would wonder where the cry had come from, would ask what animal had made the horrible, chilling sound that rent the very air around them. And Sloan would take her hand and tell*

*her, tears in his eyes, "There was no animal, Julia. That was you."*

---

She woke up gradually, the intense sorrow of her dream invaded by the sound of hammering. What the hell was Tony doing pounding nails at this time of the morning? She rolled over, tried to focus on the bedside clock, but her head was pounding and the numbers were too blurry to read. It took her several moments to acclimate to her surroundings, even longer for her to realize that the hammering was really someone knocking at the bedroom door. She pushed herself up against the headboard, pulled the quilt up over her legs and called out, "Come in."

Tony stuck his head in the door. "Room service!" He brought in a tray laden with French toast, fruit and coffee, his easy smile turning into a look of concern. "Bad dreams?"

She nodded, wincing when the slight movement set her head to throbbing. "I feel awful. Did I have something to drink last night? I can hardly see straight."

"Nope. Not a sip. But your eyes are pretty swollen. I'm guessing that's why you can't see."

"Oh." Her face flamed, and she refused to meet his gaze. "I'm sorry<sup>3/4</sup> about the way I fell apart, I mean. I guess that's been coming on for a while now."

Tony stroked hair away from her eyes, his touch like that of a big brother. Then, with gentle fingers, he tipped her chin up and looked her in the eyes. "We've been friends for a long time, Jules. You don't have to hide anything from me. Understand?"

She took a deep breath, let it out slowly. "Thank you...for everything. I didn't know where else to go."

He took her hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze. "You're *always* welcome here. All I ask is that you pretend to like my cooking. Okay?" He lifted the tray and maneuvered it into

place over her outstretched legs. "I don't make breakfast in bed for just anyone, you know."

Julia looked at the plate before her and, much to her surprise, her stomach rumbled in anticipation. Her cheeks colored, but Tony only laughed good-naturedly.

"Well now, I'll take *that* as a compliment, young lady. *And* I expect you to clean this plate. You've lost weight since the last time I was in D.C.—way too much, in fact. Something tells me you haven't been taking care of yourself."

She shrugged. "I eat when I'm hungry. It's just that, being alone, I'd rather skip dinner than cook."

"Well, there'll be none of that here," he replied, his look stern and uncompromising. "You *know* how I handle ladies who don't take care of themselves."

That made her stiffen and she looked down at her plate, uncomfortable. Why was it that all of Steve's friends shared his methods of dealing with women? And what made them think they had the right to threaten *her*? "Please don't talk like that, Tony," she managed to mumble. "I don't like it."

"I don't expect you to *like* it, young lady. That's why it works so well."

Anger began to bubble within Julia. Memories of her stint in Tony's self-defense class at Quantico invaded her mind and she turned a bright shade of red. Back in the days before corporal punishment was declared taboo, Tony's methods of discipline had been very much like Steve's. In fact, one time when she'd given him hell during class, he'd actually called her groom-to-be in and *asked* permission to spank her. She'd stared at Steve, open-mouthed, and nearly hit the roof when he agreed. Much to her horror, Steve had not only watched Tony paddle her backside; but had then taken a hairbrush to her bare bottom, right there in the office, with Tony looking on. Suddenly, all the humiliation of that moment roared back to life.



"Damn it, DeMarco," she hissed. "What is it about you men that you think you can just take any woman over your knee, any time you want? You can be such barbarians!"

One eyebrow arched upward, and Tony sat back, his gaze level and unwavering. "*You men* is kind of a broad category, don't you think?" She felt as though he could read her mind, and his next comment only confirmed her suspicions. "Is that why you ran away from Sloan? Did *he* spank you?"

She sat back against the pillows, sullen and defiant. "He *tried*, damn the man. And he had *no* right. He's not my husband."

"I see." A pregnant pause was followed by another question. "So, when it was Steve, that was okay?"

"Steve *loved* me," she declared. "And even when I hated it, I always knew he spanked me because he cared and wanted what was best for me."

Tony nodded. "Okay, I can understand that. But what about Sloan? What about me? We're your friends, Julia. We care about you and we want what's best for you, too. Do you have any idea how hard it is on us to watch you self-destruct?"

"I—I'm sorry. I didn't mean to—" She trailed off, not knowing what to say.

"What kind of a friend would I be—or would Sloan be—if we just let you rush head long into situations that could get you hurt, or even killed? And how do you suppose we'd live with ourselves if we did nothing to stop that, when maybe a good spanking would have forced you to *think* first and act later?"

Julia closed her eyes. The last of her anger had slipped away, and she couldn't think of a good answer to Tony's questions. "I'm sorry," she whispered at last. "I didn't think about it from that point of view."

She looked up at him, half-afraid that he'd pull her over his lap then and there, but he only squeezed her hand again. "It's okay, hon. You've been through hell lately, and I can't fault

you for being upset. *But—*" he added, his expression serious, "I can't speak for Roberts. I don't know what he *almost* spanked you for, but escaping protective custody sounds like a pretty serious offense to me. If I was your boss, blistering your tail end would be looking pretty good to me right about now."

Julia nodded glumly. "I guess... but Tony, it's not the spanking that scares me. Not really. It's Sloan, himself. It's the way he looks at me, the feeling I'm getting from him." She picked up a fork and pretended interest in chunks of cantaloupe and French toast with strawberry topping. When she spoke again, it was hardly more than a whisper. "I think he wants more than friendship and I can't... I can't go through that again."

"What do you mean, hon? You can't go through what?"

She didn't look up, but she could feel him watching her. "Losing someone I love." The words came from somewhere deep inside, and she willed him to understand. "I couldn't *survive* that again. Another funeral—putting someone I love in the ground—it would *kill* me. I can't let that happen again."

Tony was thoughtful for a bit, then began to probe, ever so gently, at that statement. "Jules, we're all afraid of losing people we love. But if we let that fear paralyze us, we've already lost. That's not what I want for you, hon, and I don't think it's what you want either."

"You don't understand." A wave of despair came crashing down and Julia felt as though she might drown. Her voice trembled as she told him, "I'm poison! Everyone that I love *dies*, and I can't let that happen to Sloan."

"Awww, sweetheart." Tony moved the breakfast tray out the way and gathered her into his arms. "Don't say that. You're *not* poison." He forced her eyes to meet his and said it again, more forcefully. "*You are not poison*, Julia Marshall. Do you understand me?"

She would have cried, but there simply were no tears left. Instead, she leaned into Tony's embrace. "I'm scared."

"I know, honey." He stroked her hair gently. "I know. But we're going to get you through this. I promise."

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"A cigarette?" Sloan was at his desk, trying to get through a stack of paperwork, when the phone call came in. "Are you sure about that?"

Chief Maxwell, the Albamarle County Fire Marshall had called from somewhere near the Marshall family cabin. "Yeah. Apparently, somebody was up there when the place caught fire. Now it was probably just kids out hiking, but  $\frac{3}{4}$  "

Sloan swore softly, his concern for Julia escalating. The man on the other end of the line picked up on the comment and continued on.

"Yeah, it's a hell of a shame... pretty old place like that just goes up in smoke and whoever caused the fire slinks off without even calling it in. The ladies from the historical society'll be up in arms over this, I can tell ya that. Not that there's anything to do about it now." The man paused long enough to draw a breath. "Anyway, I just wanted to give ya a heads up, since the Sheriff'll probably need to take statements from you and Ms. Marshall. I couldn't reach her, by the way. Any idea where she's at?"

"She's on vacation." Sloan was preoccupied, his mind racing ahead to what his next step should be. He'd have to send someone out there, good agents who knew what to look for. "I'll call her right away. And Chief? I'm going to be sending some field agents out your way. They'll need to visit the scene, so have your guys back off for now. The less that's disturbed, the better."

"FBI?" The chief sounded perplexed and not a little insulted. "What do you need to do that for? I told ya, it's a simple case of somebody not puttin' out their cigarette. I've been in this business a lot of years, Mr. Roberts. I know what to look for in the case of a suspicious fire, but there just wasn't

anything to be found up there. No accelerants... nothing. We even had the dogs up there, but<sup>3/4</sup> "

Sloan interrupted intent on soothing the chief's ruffled feathers. "I'm sure your men did a great job. Nobody's questioning the cause of the fire, Chief. But Julia Marshall's been getting some weird phone calls, so we've got to consider the possibility that the fire at the cabin is linked, somehow, to everything else that's been going on. Now, you say you didn't find anything suspicious up there? Nothing that seemed out of place?"

"No, nothing really, except that bouquet of flowers. Never seen one that color myself, but<sup>3/4</sup> "

"Flowers?" Sloan leaned forward in his chair, a warning alarm shouting in his brain. "You didn't say anything before about flowers. What kind were they?"

"Oh, sorry about that. I just figured the lady left them there, kind of like leaving flowers on a grave, ya know? You'd be surprised how many people do that kind of stuff after a fire. It's like their house was part of the family, or something... though in a way, I reckon—"

"The *flowers*?" Sloan was quickly losing patience with the man's incessant chattering. "*What kind of flowers did you find?*"

"Oh, gee... I'm not for sure what kind they were, but I know they were purple." Papers rustled, then the man's voice grew more confident. "Yeah, purple roses, if you can believe that. Ain't never seen anything like 'em myself, but that's science for ya. Always breedin' new things. Anyhow—"

The head of the BSU had to fight to keep his voice calm. "Chief, I need to know where those flowers are now. Did you bag them? Have they been sent to the lab?"

Finally, the Fire Marshall seemed to realize something important had happened. "No. We left them right where they were, on the pile of rocks that used to be the fireplace. Since they were fresh, we just figured the owner had brought them up. They obviously had nothing to do with the fire. But I can

radio one of the guys and ask 'em to bag the roses, if you want."

"No!" His voice was too sharp, but there was no help for it now. "No, tell your men not to touch *anything*. I'll have agents out there shortly, but for now, I'm going to call the state police to guard the place. You'll need to station somebody at the main road, to guide them in."

"Wow, this must be serious stuff, eh?" The man's voice held a new kind of awe. "Ya mind my askin' what this's all about?"

"I'll explain it later. For now, just tell your men to be careful. The person who left those flowers could be a killer."

"Okay," the Marshall said, his tone nervous. "I'd best get on the horn to my guys. We'll be watchin' for the police, and your agents." Without waiting for a reply, he hung up.

Sloan grabbed his cell phone and coat, stopping at his secretary's desk just long enough to tell her, "I need you to make a call to the state police. Tell them to get back up to the Marshall cabin, pronto. If you need them, you'll find the directions to the place in my Rolodex. And tell them to be on high alert. Randall Lennox is back, and it's possible he's in the vicinity. I just want them to guard the place until I can get up there with some field agents." The secretary was already talking on the phone as he hurried from the office.

"Okay." Tony sat down at the microfilm terminal in the library basement, years worth of newspapers crammed into narrow boxes of what looked like photo negatives. "Give me the details one more time, so I know if I find something out of the norm."

Julia rehearsed the information, as certain as if the case file was open on her desk. "Randall Lennox, age 17, shot and killed his father, the sheriff of Mason County, California. His lawyer claimed self-defense. Apparently Lennox had been

abused all of his life. He had cigarette burns to the back of one ear¾ a distinctive pattern¾ one of many scars." She pictured the young man in a photo taken outside the courthouse on the day of his sentencing¾ blonde, 5'6" and painfully thin, his bone structure and facial features almost feminine. "He shouldn't have been tried as an adult."

"Opinion or fact?" Tony interrupted.

"Sorry¾ my opinion." She flushed red, angry with herself for the sympathy she'd once felt for her husband's killer. "I don't think a jury with a little distance would have convicted him, but the people from Mason County thought highly of his father. They wanted to put someone away, and Lennox was it."

"So, he went to prison when?"

"Convicted and sentenced¾ 20 to life¾ in 1981. He spent his first month in the prison infirmary, thanks to some tough guys who worked him over on his first night at the penitentiary. After that, he got involved in a religious program, which helped him earn parole in 1996. His record was perfect, spotless."

"And what kind of time lapse was there between his release and the first murder?"

He was released in February. The first victim¾ a forty-nine year old Texas Ranger¾ was found in late May of the same year. It was November, though, before the FBI put that killing together with three others from that summer and realized that all four men had died at the hands of the same killer."

"And that conclusion¾ that Lennox was the killer¾ was based on what exactly?"

"All of the victims were male, late forties, in law enforcement. All had brown hair, like Lennox's father, and all of them died of the same type of gunshot wound¾ entry point shattering the left cheekbone. Gunpowder on the victim's skin indicated a close range shot. Every one of them died of *that* wound¾ not something that happened beforehand¾ but all had been tortured."

"And the cigarette burns matched Lennox's scars?"

"Yes."

"Okay." Tony turned on his machine and slid a piece of microfilm under the reader. "Let's see what we can find."

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It was late afternoon when Sloan's flight touched down on the tarmac at LAX. It had been a long and tedious flight, a first class seat not enough to insulate him from the sounds of crying babies and one rather sick fellow passenger. He stopped in baggage claim long enough to locate his suitcase, along with the one he'd packed for Julia, and then followed escalators and people-movers to Budget Rent-a-Car.

"Roberts," he told the desk clerk when it was, at last, his turn in line. "I called ahead of time. You should have something waiting for me."

"Roberts?" The woman's long nails click-clacked over her keyboard. "Are you sure that's the name it's registered under?"

"It's the only name I've got." He was beginning to feel truly impatient. "Sloan Roberts, FBI. Does that ring a bell?"

Her face blanched, but apparently not even the mention of his position could make the reservation appear on the computer screen. "I'm sorry, sir," she mumbled. "If you'll just take a seat, we'll see what we can find for you."

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"I think it's about time we called it quits for the day."

Tony turned away from the screen in front of him, rubbing his eyes, and Julia felt a pang of guilt. Here it was, a beautiful Saturday afternoon, and they'd spent the day in a library basement. Still, if there was a chance she'd find something new, she had to keep trying. "Just a little longer, Tony," she wheedled. "Please."

He did not turn back to the screen, but rather rolled his chair closer to hers. "Look Julia, I said I'd help you with this,

but only because I wanted you to see that you were wrong, that you *hadn't* missed something before. Now we've been at this for hours, we're both tired and hungry, and we've found nothing—not *one* article in years worth of newspapers—that you didn't have in front of you when you profiled the guy." He reached out and stilled the hand that kept the microfilm scrolling by. His tone was stern as he turned her to face him. "It's time for you to let this go, hon. You did the best you could with the information available. It's not your fault that Lennox did something unexpected."

Julia *was* tired—the kind of bone tired that had more to do with the emotional than the physical—but she was also desperate to figure out how she'd made such a huge mistake on the Lennox case. "You don't understand, Tony. *I* profiled Lennox as methodical, a planner. I said he was unlikely to react with violence if confronted, that he probably didn't even carry the gun with him." Her voice rose, trembling, as she poured out all the self-accusations. Two days of staring at microfilm had taken its toll, and she felt as though she was about to tumble over the edge of a high cliff. Below, the darkness waited to claim her; the only way out was to fix the mistake she'd made. It wouldn't bring Steve back—she knew that—but it might save someone else's life. It might save *Sloan's* life. The tears were thick in her throat as she admitted, for the first time, what was going through her mind. "It was *my* mistake that got Steve killed. I might as well have pulled the trigger."

He let out a slow, deep breath. "Do you *really* believe that?"

"It's the truth," she said, her voice little more than a whisper. "I killed my husband. And I'd rather die than make that mistake again."

Tony reached past her and abruptly shut down the microfilm viewer. "It was wrong of me to bring you here, to feed this obsession of yours. We're going home. *Now.*"



Julia's hands trembled as she straightened up her work area. This was it—her greatest fear come to life. She'd finally admitted her culpability in Steve's death, and she'd been rejected. Tony hated her for her failure. Soon, everyone would know, everyone would hate her. She'd be alone, just as she had been after the accident that took her parents. Deep in her heart, she knew she couldn't survive that again.

---

By the time he opened the door to Tony's gym, Sloan was fairly knotted with stress. It had taken over an hour for the people at the rental car desk to put him in a vehicle, and then it was a compact that was much too small to accommodate his height. It was probably for the best, then, that the owner of Disciplined Fitness and his current houseguest weren't in when he arrived.

"Oh, you must be Mr. Roberts." An attractive young woman left the files she'd been sorting, and hurried out to greet him. "The boss told me to expect you. He and Ms. Marshall are still out, but he said they'd be back before supper, and to just make yourself at home. Can I get you something to drink or eat?"

"No, I'm fine. But maybe I'll work out, if you don't think Tony'll mind. It was a long flight."

"I'm sure he wouldn't mind at all." The girl stuck out her hand and shook Sloan's with more enthusiasm than he'd expected. "My name's Suzy, by the way. There's bottled water in the fridge in the office. Holler if you need anything."

"Thanks, I will."

As soon as Suzy was safely ensconced in the office, Sloan dropped his gym bag and took stock of the room. Free weights and weight machines, treadmills, exercise bikes and rowers... Tony had quite a set-up here. And of course there was the stair climber, facing the corner. "I'll bet he trains his clients just like the recruits at Quantico... the only difference being that

the women out here are *paying* to have their tail ends blistered." He chuckled to himself. "I wonder what Julia had to say about *that*."

Thoughts of Julia brought the purpose of his visit into focus again, and he made quick work of stripping down to the gym shorts and t-shirt he wore beneath his wind suit. He'd see her soon enough, and it was best that he work out the tension first. He wanted her as far away from danger as possible, but he'd never accomplish that if she sensed the trip to New Mexico was anything more than a routine assignment. And for both their sakes, he had to see her out of harm's way. Her *life* depended on it—and so did his heart.

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"Drink the milkshake, Julia." Tony ushered her across the parking lot towards the building where he maintained both his work and living spaces. "You know anything goes on Saturday. And besides, you need the calories. I *will* have you filling out those clothes before you leave L.A.."

She sipped at double-thick vanilla, despite the fact that it tasted as much like sawdust as ice cream. Another day at the library had left her feeling headachy and defeated. She'd re-read every article available on Randall Lennox—from the initial investigation into his father's death, to the story of his leadership in one of the prison's key rehab programs—but she'd found nothing new, nothing that would have changed her profile. And if she couldn't find her mistake, how could she possibly fix it?

They entered the building together and, as they followed the long hallway towards the gym, Tony's tone grew gentler. "Jules, I need to say something to you." He stopped just outside the double wooden doors, caught her arm and forced her to face him. "What you said back there in the library—about being responsible for Steve's death—"

"Yes?" She looked up at him, waited for the moment of condemnation to come.

"You're wrong, honey. It wasn't your fault."

She let out the breath she'd been holding, relieved, yet unconvinced. She was trembling when she pushed open the inner doors and proceeded into the gym. "I wish I could believe that, Tony. I really do."

The sudden clank of weights slamming into place startled her. She jerked around and there was Sloan, staring at her. Beads of sweat stood out on his face, and ran in rivulets through the coarse, brown hair on his chest. He was lean and strong and beautiful—just as he'd been in her dreams—and she wanted nothing more than to go to him, to pour out all the guilt that was in her heart and beg his forgiveness. But there was something forbidding in his eyes that made her stop where she was. With effort, she straightened her shoulders and met his gaze.

"What are you doing here, Sloan?"

He stood up, and the difference in their height made her feel small, vulnerable. "We need to talk." He took her arm, his touch firm but not unkind. "Tony, is there someplace private?"

Tony! She'd nearly forgotten he was there, and now she glanced around, her eyes pleading for rescue. He only gestured in the direction of his private quarters, though, and told Sloan, "I'm going to be buried in paperwork for a while, so the apartment's all yours."

Julia felt, rather than saw, Sloan's curt nod. He picked up a gray t-shirt, emblazoned with the letters FBI, draped it over one muscular shoulder, and began to steer her across the gym floor.

"Hey buddy." At least Tony's voice was sympathetic when he called after them, though Julia had a distinct feeling that it was past helping at this point. "Go easy... hmmm?"

All was still for a moment, and she sensed that something had passed between the two men, but she could not bear to look at either of them. Then she was ushered into Tony's

kitchen and the door clicked shut, leaving her to face Sloan Roberts alone.

## Chapter Six

Julia set her milkshake on the counter and said, without turning, "I'm sorry about the way I left. I know I should have called, but—"

"You're right, you should have called. You caused a lot of trouble for a lot of people, Julia." He sounded weary. "But that's not why I'm here.

"Then why?" A thought struck her. "You came here to fire me."

"Don't be ridiculous," he said, exasperated, as he pulled his t-shirt over his head. "Of course I'm not firing you. There's been another arson in New Mexico. I brought the case file and some of your things from home. Your flight leaves at 9:15 tomorrow morning."

"Find someone else," she murmured. "In fact, you'll need to reassign all my cases." She didn't realize she'd made up her mind, until the words came out of her mouth. "I won't be going back to Quantico. I'm leaving the bureau."

"What?" He jerked the shirt down over taut stomach muscles, his gaze locked on hers. "You don't mean that."

"I do."

He drew in a deep breath. "Fine. You can put a letter of resignation on my desk, as soon as you get back from New Mexico. I'll expect no less than two weeks notice."

"No, Sloan. I've lost my touch, and I won't put anyone else at risk because of that." Defeat was a heavy, cold thing inside her when she fled the kitchen.

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"How'd it go?"

"Not good." Sloan dropped down onto the sofa opposite Tony's desk, willed the pounding in his head to subside. "I need her in Albuquerque, but she refuses to take the assignment—says she's leaving the bureau. Do you know anything about that, DeMarco?"

"She didn't say anything to me about it, but I'm not surprised. She blames herself for Steve's death, you know... and his partner's, as well."

"I know."

"Do you?"

It was the tone in Tony's voice that made him sit up and take notice. "I thought I did, but it sounds like you don't concur. Want to tell me what's up?"

"We've been at the library the last two days. She's convinced herself that she missed something, Sloan. And she seems almost frantic to find it... to fix what she considers to be her mistake."

Sloan nodded thoughtfully. "It's not that unusual a feeling, Tony. All profiler's go through it at one time or another."

"Maybe. But she's taken it way past the norm. She considers herself guilty... as guilty as if she'd pulled the trigger."

That did come as a shock—so much so, that he didn't know what to say at first. How could he have missed this, have spent so much time with her and yet not known how badly she was hurting? "She told you this, Tony? She said it that way?"

"Yeah. Her words, Roberts... not mine. I've got to tell you, I'm worried about her. She's lost weight—way too much. Have you noticed how her clothes hang on her?

Sloan felt that, a stab of guilt, and shook his head.

"Well, you see her every day, so it was probably too gradual to notice. But it's not just the weight. She's up most of the night—probably doesn't sleep more than three or four hours out of twenty-four—and wakes up crying every morning." He stopped, gave Sloan a frank look and shook his head, as though to answer some unspoken question. "She tries to hide it—never comes out of the guestroom without having showered and put on make-up—but I've heard her. Five-thirty, six o'clock in the morning and she's in there, sobbing. It's been that way ever since she got here." He sighed. "Look Roberts, I'm no shrink, but it's like she's gone all hollow inside. I'm afraid of what she might do."

Sloan closed his eyes, drummed long fingertips against his knee as he took in the weight of DeMarco's words. "Are you saying you think she might—" He could hardly force out the words, but the question had to be asked. "Do you think she's suicidal?"

He was relieved to see Tony shake his head. "No, not really. But she's convinced that she has to protect you—and everyone else working the case—and I'm afraid that may make her reckless."

"You think she'll go after him alone, don't you?" Something was tightening around his chest, exerting pressure in the vicinity of his heart. "Is that what you're telling me?"

"I think she's desperate enough, yes."

"Damn it." Fear and anger, always a powerful combination, had Sloan surging to his feet. "I'm going to put a stop to this right now." He reached for the oval paddle that hung from a nail in the wall. "Mind if I use this?"

"It's all yours... although—"

Sloan stopped in the doorway. "What? Surely you don't think I'm in the wrong here. You left Quantico because you didn't like the PC turn things had taken."

Tony shook his head. "No, I don't think you're wrong, buddy. But there's something else you need to know."

"So tell me already."

"She's scared... not of Lennox, but of whatever's happening between the two of you."

It hurt that she'd come here, that she'd poured out her heart to Tony, but Sloan tucked that pain away to be dealt with later. "I figured that out when she took off, Tony. Don't worry... I won't push her any more."

"Wait a second." Tony rose from his place behind the desk. "You don't get it, Sloan. I'm not saying that she doesn't love you. I'm saying she's afraid to love you. She refers to herself as poison—thinks that everyone she loves dies. She's afraid that you're going to die, too."

Those words acted as a damper on Sloan's temper, and suddenly the paddle felt far too heavy in his hand. He let out a breath and handed it back to Tony. "Thanks... for being honest with me. Maybe I won't need this, after all."

---

Some time later, when a run through the park and a hot shower had left him feeling considerably calmer, Sloan decided to have another go at talking to Julia. Tony was with a client, leaving him uninterrupted time during which he intended to talk some sense into the woman he loved. It might take more than words, of course, but he would do whatever was necessary to get her on that plane to Albuquerque. It was the only way he could be confident of her safety.

The bedroom door was shut, but he knocked only once before trying the knob. After the way they'd left things, he was fully expecting a fight. Where was the sense, then, in standing outside the door like a nervous kid come to pick up



his prom date? Begin as you mean to go on, he reminded himself as he opened the door and strode into the room.

He'd expected to find her pacing, angry and defiant. What he found instead made his heart hurt. She was curled up on the bed, her skin frighteningly pale against a deep blue comforter, and he held his own breath until he was certain of hers. One step closer, then two, and he noticed the dark smudges beneath her red-rimmed eyes. She'd cried herself to sleep. Feeling like a heel, he started to back out of the room; but when she stirred and murmured in her sleep, he changed his mind. She was having a nightmare, and the protector in him wanted to be there when she woke up. He sat down on the side of the bed and, as her cries increased, began to rub her back and talk to her in gentle tones.

"Shh... it's okay, honey. It's okay. I'm right here."

She was wrapped in something black and heavy... something that clung to her nose and mouth as she struggled for breath. Her heart pounded, her lungs begged for air, but her body was heavy and her voice silent. Steve was looking for her; she could hear him calling her name and strained to answer him. "I'm here," she called out, but the scream echoed only in her mind. She was going to die. He was out there, looking for her, but he wasn't going to find her in time. God help her, she didn't want to leave him, but there was nothing she could do.

Then, miraculously, she felt a touch on her shoulder... feather light, yet undeniably the touch of a human hand. He was there, within reach, and all she had to do was move... just the crooking of one finger or the barest of nods, and he'd peel back the heavy layer of darkness to rescue her. She shoved all thoughts of breathing from her mind and concentrated on moving her hand. "I'm here." Silently, she willed him to understand. "Please don't leave me. I'm right here."

"It's okay, Julia." Sloan kneaded one shoulder, then reached for her hand. "I'm not going to leave you. I promise."

She woke at the sound of his voice and, for long moments, was uncertain of her surroundings. Slowly, though, her dream began to fade, the edges washed away by reality. Steve vanished, his features slowly replaced by the strong jaw and graying temples of Sloan Roberts. She swallowed hard and fought the urge to cry.

"You okay, Jules?" He stroked hair away from the side of her face, then slid one broad palm up and down her arm in a soothingly repetitive manner. "Were you having a nightmare?"

She nodded yes, though the word nightmare hardly seemed adequate to describe the terror she'd felt.

"I'm sorry. Do you want anything? Something to drink, maybe?"

"No." Her voice had returned at last. "I would like to know what you're doing in my bedroom, though."

He gazed at her as though he'd just been reminded of a forgotten and unpleasant task. "I came to talk to you, Julia. I'm not going to accept your resignation."

At this, she levered herself up so she could lean against the headboard. "Excuse me?"

"I said I'm not going to accept your resignation. You have a job to do, young lady, and I will not allow you to run away now." He grasped her chin and forced her eyes to meet his. "There's been entirely enough of that already."

Julia drew in a slow breath, everything inside of her came alive with a feeling of nervous anticipation. No one had talked to her like that in years—two years, to be exact—but Sloan's demeanor and tone made her stomach drop in an embarrassingly familiar way. Her voice sounded entirely too small and childlike when she answered his challenge with one of her own.

"Just how do you think you can stop me, Sloan? You can't force me to do the job."

He closed his eyes for a moment, but she saw the transformation as clear as day. His jaw firmed, his lips thinned into an uncompromising line. When he opened his eyes, there

was a glint of steel in the green depths. "Julia, if I let you run away now, you'll never stop." His large hands closed around her upper arms, and suddenly he was dragging her forward and down over his lap. "I'm not going to allow you to throw your career away—and if this is the only way to get through to you, then so be it."

A surge of anger shot through Julia, and she attempted to pull away, but Sloan was stronger and she, exhausted. "You can't do this," she whispered. "Sloan, please... it will change everything between us."

"Good." He overcame her half-hearted attempts at escape, clamped his left arm across her back. "It's time for a change, young lady. It's time you realized how much I care about you."

With that, he brought his palm down across the center of her bottom, hard enough that she squealed in surprise. How could she have forgotten the amount of pain that nothing more than an open hand could cause? She felt him raise his arm for another smack and threw her hand back in a frantic attempt at self-preservation. "Sloan, stop it. I don't want to be spanked."

"I'm sure you don't," he growled, "but this isn't about what you want, young lady. His hand slid down to her right thigh and he patted the tender white flesh. "Move your hand, please."

"No." Hand still in place, she twisted around to look up at him. "I won't do it. I'm not going to let you spank me."

"Oh really?"

He shifted position and she found herself quite suddenly nose to nose with the dust bunnies beneath the bed. Then his broad palm made stinging contact with the top of each thigh, and she couldn't reach that far to protect herself. She cried out, as much from anger as from the pain, but Sloan seemed impervious to her cries.

"Move your hand, Julia," he said, all the while imparting firm and rapid strokes to one thigh, then the other. "I'd rather

spank your bottom, but I can continue like this as long as I have to."

Two more sharp slaps stung her legs, and she knew that particular battle was lost. Silently, she let her hand drop so that her fingertips grazed the floor.

"Thank you." He acknowledged her concession with a volley of five spanks to the base of each cheek. "Now then, Julia Marie, I want your full and undivided attention. Do you understand?"

She knew he wanted an answer, and wasn't about to give him the satisfaction. Damn it, he had no right to treat her like this. She would not reward him with the attention he sought.

"All right then." There was regret in his voice, even as his hand went to the waistband of her blue bikini underwear. "I guess we do this the hard way."

"No!" He tugged at the underwear and, for the first time, she knew real panic. To be bare and vulnerable in his presence was too much. "Please Sloan... not like that—"

It was already too late. It seemed only an instant before the panties were twisted around her knees and he was raining down spank after painful spank on her exposed flesh. "Alright, young lady," he said, loud enough to be heard above the echoing slaps, "you just let me know when you're ready to listen." He picked up the pace, his hand targeting one cheek, then the other, for undivided attention. "Until then, I'll just keep myself busy here."

For what seemed an eternity, she clamped her mouth shut and bore the spanking with silent dignity. She would not let him get to her, could not afford to let him get that close. She drew in sharp little breaths in time with the rhythm his hand had established, and willed herself to resist. Steve had spanked her, and that simple act had opened her heart to him. She moaned as the burning pain increased. If she let Sloan into her heart, he'd end up dead, too. No matter how hard he spanked, she had to resist the temptation to yield to him—for if she yielded in body, she would yield in soul, as well.

"Julia." He spoke to her, the gentleness in his tone a vivid contrast to the hard hand that continued to assault her throbbing bottom. "Please let go, honey. I don't want to do this, but I'll keep it up as long as I have to. And sweetheart?" The steady rhythm of spansks did not alter in the least. "We both know that I can stand it a lot longer than you can."

Tears formed in her eyes, but she blinked them away and refused to answer. His hand stilled and he heaved a heavy sigh. "Alright. You have a hairbrush around here somewhere, don't you?"

The hairbrush? Everything solid seemed to drop out from under her at that moment and she began to kick and squirm like mad. "No, I don't use a brush! Now let me go, you bastard. I've had enough!"

"Bastard, eh?" He gripped her waist more firmly and the room swayed as he stood up, with her pinned neatly as his left hip. "Anybody who can talk like that while she's over my knee isn't even close to having had enough." He carried her to the bathroom and she knew it the moment he'd found her expensive, wooden hairbrush. He didn't even bother to sit down—just tapped it against her already scorched flesh and said, "No hairbrush, huh? I don't like to be lied to, young lady."

All her efforts to keep silent fled with the first crack of wood against her burning bottom. She screamed obscenities and pummeled the back of his leg with her fists. "Stop it!" Slapping at him did no good, so she tried to pry his arm away from her waist, not caring that she'd end up face first on the floor if she managed to work her way loose. With the six-inch difference in their heights, he had no trouble keeping her feet from touching the ground. "Damn it, Roberts... let me go!"

He walked calmly back through the bedroom, paddling her all the way, and took a seat on the corner of the bed. She immediately began to kick and squirm, trying desperately to fling herself off of his lap, but he simply pushed her farther

forward onto his left knee, and proceeded to clamp his right leg down over the backs of her knees.

"Young lady," he said as he brought the hairbrush down on the back of one thigh, "I don't like having to do this." He swung again, and an oval of red bloomed on the other leg, a twin to the first. "But if I have to blister you in order to make you listen—" Two swats to the base of her right cheek brought tears to her eyes. "Then that's what I'm going to do."

A sob shuddered through her body and, her endurance stretched to the limit, she finally let go of the emotions she'd held so tightly in check. "I'm sorry," she gasped between sudden, wrenching sobs. "Please... I'm so sorry. Just don't spank me any more."

Sloan took a deep breath and, tossing the hairbrush aside, immediately lifted her from the submissive position and cradled her against his chest. "It's okay, honey," he said as he stroked her hair, rubbed her back. "I never wanted to spank you in the first place. Just say that you'll talk to me now, and listen to what I have to say, and it'll be all over."

She nodded and he kissed her forehead, relieved. Spanking Julia had taken its toll on him as well, and he was only too glad to hold and comfort her now. Carefully, making as little contact with her angry red flesh as possible, he carried her to the rocker. Her panties had come off, probably in the bathroom, but she was wearing an over-long t-shirt which he pulled down to protect her modesty. Then he held her as she curled into him and cried.

When at last the tears were spent, Sloan broached the subject of the case in Albuquerque. "Why did you want to quit?" he asked, though he knew the answer already. "What did you mean when you said you'd lost your touch?"

She sniffled and clung to him, the awful truth a hot, raw wound inside. "They died because of me," she whispered. "Steve and his partner... they were killed as much by my mistake as by Lennox's gun." She collapsed against his chest

as fresh sobs shook her shoulders. "It was my screw up, Sloan. If not for me, they'd still be alive."

She felt him sigh and then he sat her up on his knee and forced her tear-filled eyes to meet his. "Profiling's not an exact science, Julia. You know that. And so does every agent in the field. They take risks because it's what they're trained to do, not because they believe that a psychological profile is going to protect them from the bad guys."

She took a deep breath, was about to offer an argument when he put his finger to her lips. "If I need to help you release the guilt, I will." He gave her time to think about that, sighed resignedly when she nodded. "Okay. I care for you, Julia Marie Marshall," he whispered. "I have for some time now, and I can't bear to see you hurting like this." He kissed her forehead. "Tell me what I need to do."

It was a struggle, but she forced the words out. "Spank me again... please."

This time she went willingly over his knee and offered no resistance to the firm, but not too hard, smacks he applied to her bottom. In no time at all, she was sobbing out the toxic feelings of guilt and self-loathing that had plagued her for so long. Finally, when Sloan pulled her against his chest, some of the pain had dissipated. It would take time to work through it all, but she relaxed against him, her burden considerably lighter. Maybe she would make it, after all.

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Tony drove them both to the airport the next morning. He shook Sloan's hand with a knowing grin, then wrapped Julia up in his arms. "You gonna be okay, hon?"

She nodded up at him. "Yes... and thank you, Tony. For everything."

"No problem." He kissed the top of her head, then turned again to her companion. "Take good care of her, Roberts."

Sloan nodded. "Don't worry. I will."

Julia's flight was the earlier of the two, so Sloan walked with her to the boarding gate. "You'll keep in touch with me... right? I want you to report anything unusual... anything at all. Got it?"

"Yes, I've got it."

"Okay then." He squeezed her hand gently. "We'll talk more when you get home. And Julia?"

"Yes?"

"No more secrets and no running away. Understand?"

She nodded, the lingering soreness in her backside a reminder of what would happen should she defy him again. "I understand—and I'll talk to you tonight."

---

Once she was safely on the plane to New Mexico, Sloan started making phone calls. He felt bad for having kept the truth from her, but her acquiescence was too fragile a thing for him to risk letting her in on what was happening at home. Five months ago, the first body had turned up in Maine—a small town cop tortured and killed, the pattern of cigarette burns on his left ear identical to those found on all of Randall Lennox's victims. Since then, four more had died—all male, all bearing the same grisly signature. Connecticut, New York, Philadelphia and just two days ago, Maryland—he was working his way down the coast, leading them all on a not-so-merry chase. The last victim had been found within a day's drive of Fredericksburg, a confirmation—to Sloan's way of thinking—that Lennox was nearby. He's right under our noses, and flaunting it. The thought wasn't new, but it chilled him to the bone.

In addition, a new pattern was emerging, this one more worrisome than the rest. Two years ago, after murdering Steve Marshall, Lennox had gone underground. Now he was back and—provided the flowers and phone calls had come from him—had developed a fixation on Julia Marshall. Sloan was baffled by this deviation from an established pattern of



behavior; but then again, Lennox had surprised them before. This time, though, he vowed things would be different. He'd keep the bastard away from Julia, or he'd die trying.

"Continental flight 493 from Los Angeles to Baltimore now boarding at gate 23," a woman's voice announced. Sloan picked up his briefcase and got in line. He was anxious to move forward on the case and hopefully the Maryland State M.E. had found something for him to go on.

## Chapter Seven

"Ms. Marshall?" A flight attendant leaned down close to Julia's ear. "A Detective Brannigan left a message for you at the gate. He said to look for a Sheriff's deputy at the main entrance to the airport. He'll take you to your hotel."

"Okay. Thanks."

"You work for the FBI, right? That must be a tough job for a woman."

The airline employee was young and, Julia supposed, still enthusiastic enough about her job to take personal interest in her passengers. "It's not an easy job... for anyone."

The red ponytail bobbed in apparent agreement, and she patted Julia's shoulder as she rose. "Well, every one of us here appreciates what you people do to keep us safe. Keep up the good work."

Ten minutes later, with a chorus of "Bah-bye's" ringing in her ears, she went in search of her luggage. She'd had to check her small suitcase, thanks to the presence of the firearm she was loath to carry. Sloan had insisted she take it, though; and after the previous night's events, she'd not been inclined to argue the point. She took the escalator down to baggage claim and joined her fellow passengers where they waited, en masse, for their personal and private belongings to be thrown, willy-nilly, onto a conveyor belt. After that, it was up to them to sort

out which green floral overnight bag belonged to whom while a business man with a South Texas accent and the resonance cavities of an opera singer fussed with a baggage clerk about the dent in his golf-club carrier. Having retrieved her bag, she traipsed back down the hallway, took the escalator up and followed the exit signs. Her digital watch read 10:45—she'd have to change that when she got to the hotel—and she was already dog-tired. It was shaping up to be a long day.

She'd been exhausted from the moment she'd opened her eyes this morning. Tony DeMarco's guestroom seemed like a million miles away now, and the thing that had happened there—between her and Sloan—a surreal memory. She'd have been tempted to believe it a dream, in fact, had she not spent the last two-and-a-half hours struggling to get comfortable in her seat. Even now, making her way through a busy airport, she was tempted to massage the still-tender flesh. She refrained by stopping at a Starbucks stand and ordering a drink to take with her. If her hands were full, she couldn't embarrass herself by rubbing her sore bottom.

Waiting in line, she once again examined, in minute detail, her conversation with Sloan. Despite the fact that she'd spent most of the time in a facedown position, she had gotten something besides a throbbing bottom out of their discussion. Sloan cared for her. Of that fact, she was absolutely certain.

"What'll you have?"

She started, then pulled herself back to the present. "Iced mocha latte, grande please."

So, Sloan cared for her—those had been his exact words—but what did that really mean? Was his concern that of employer to employee, friend to friend, or was there something more? He'd made it clear that he would no longer let her to wallow in guilt, but what he'd not made clear was in what way he cared for her. She paid for the coffee, picked up her things, and located the exit sign. Maybe his feelings were more paternal, or perhaps he felt it his duty to watch out for

her. She was, after all, his best friend's widow. The thought left her feeling hollow inside, as did the absence of the one word she'd expected to hear from him. He hadn't told her he loved her; and now, distanced from the situation, she wondered if she'd read something into their previous conversations that simply wasn't there. She felt like a balloon emptied of air. If she had misread him, then she was in for a world of heartache because—much as she'd fought the idea—she'd fallen in love with him.

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The airport was hardly crowded, but the man who watched Julia Marshall had no trouble blending in. The locals here took no notice of him, most likely because half the city's population wasn't employed by the nation's highest branch of domestic law enforcement. Here, he was unexpected. No one would be looking for him—at least not yet. And by the time they were, it would be too late.

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She stepped out into bright sunshine and a wave of heat that would be intolerable in a more humid climate. There were people everywhere, climbing out of taxis, embracing loved ones, lugging suitcases and garment bags in the direction from which she'd come. Then she saw it—a Bernalillo County Sheriff's cruiser, and she wove her way through the crowd to knock on the passenger side window. The deputy inside looked up from his newspaper and, with a white-toothed smile, leaned over to open the door for her.

"You Agent Marshall?"

"Yes. And you're...?"

"Deputy Bobby Cruze. Hop on in and I'll get you to your hotel. Brannigan'll meet you there as soon as he's done checking out the lead they got this morning."

She held up her bag, feeling more than a little annoyed when he didn't get out of the car to help her. He pushed a

button and inclined his head in the direction of the rear passenger side door. "It's unlocked."

"Great." She swung open the door and, with more than a little effort, wrestled her suitcase into the back seat. Then, fighting a feeling of peevishness, she climbed into the front seat and closed the door.

The deputy half-turned and, just when she thought he intended to shake her hand, reached around her and pulled the seatbelt down across her torso. "Gotta buckle up, Ms. Marshall. Can't have you setting a bad example for the citizens, you know."

"Thanks," she said tersely, "but I can manage to buckle a seatbelt."

"Whatever." He let go, and she clicked the buckle into place. "Where did the latest arson take place, deputy?"

"In Old Town, unfortunately. There'll be all kinds of problems over that."

"Why?" They drove out from under the covered pick up and drop off area, and she wished she had a pair of Mirro's like his. Squinting, she flipped down the visor and swung it out to block as much of the bright sun as possible. "What makes this fire different from the rest?"

"Have you ever been to Albuquerque?" he asked. "Ever seen that part of the city?"

"No... to both questions." She half turned in her seat, her back to the passenger side window, in an attempt to avoid the glare.

"Well, Old Town's the historical district. Lots of specialty shops and museums, some pretty unique architecture... a real big draw for tourists."

"I see. So this fire is bad for the city, on a financial level?"

"Yeah." A lock of thick, dark hair fell over his forehead as he glanced in her direction. "Especially now."

Julia rubbed at the throbbing place above one eyebrow. This conversation was turning into a game of ring around the rosy, with her running in circles to catch up. "Why now?"

"Well, because of the body, of course."

"Someone was killed? I hadn't heard that."

"Yeah, well the investigators couldn't get through the whole place until this morning. That's when they found him, back in the private area of the shop. From what I've heard, it was real eerie, what with all those burnt up heads and stuff. They were all over the place, you know."

"Heads? Deputy, what are you talking about?"

"Oh... sorry. It was one of those specialty shops I was telling you about. They sold china dolls, the ones that cost a small fortune. My eight-year-old wanted one for her last birthday, but on my salary? I don't think so."

"So, there was a death? Do they have any idea who it was? The shop owner or an employee, maybe?"

Her mind was already puzzling out this new twist. Up until now, the fires had been confined to little mom-and-pop type places—a couple of groceries and a family-run diner—in a less-than-prominent area of the city. In fact, given the small radius in which the arsons had taken place she'd suspected they were dealing with a transient—most likely another unfortunate victim of the latest governmental health care cuts. It happened all the time... the mentally ill were forced out of group homes and hospital facilities, left to wander the streets without medication or even a family member who cared enough to take them in.

"About the victim," she said as the hotel came into sight. "Is there anything else you've heard... maybe the sex of the deceased or any identification that might have survived?"

He pulled to the curb, shrugged a bony shoulder as he turned to face her. "It was a man. Other than that, all I know is that this one was intentional."

"Intentional?" That was an even bigger surprise. Each of the previous victims were believed to have been in the wrong place at the wrong time. "How do you know?"

"He was handcuffed to the old steam radiator. Somebody wanted that man dead."

Julia released the seatbelt and, gathering up her purse and briefcase, got out of the car. Again, the deputy did not bother to offer assistance, but she was too preoccupied with what she'd just learned to care. She could have kicked herself, however, when she turned around to find him pulling away from the curb.

"Hey! Wait a second," she called out, but he was already too far down the drive to hear her. "Idiot," she muttered. "Oh well... might as well get checked in. If he doesn't figure it out, Brannigan'll know how to get a hold of him."

At the check-in desk, she gave her name to a young woman with a golden nametag that read "Merry" and was surprised when another clerk, this one obviously in charge of things, stepped forward to speak to her.

"Ms. Marshall, I'm glad you've arrived. A Detective Brannigan has been trying to reach you." He handed her a neatly folded piece of hotel stationery. "He left this message."

She scanned the paper and shrugged, unconcerned. "Sorry we missed you at the airport," the note read. "Call me as soon as you get in."

"Thank you." She smiled at the clerk, who look decidedly more worried than she felt. "Everything's fine. I'll let Detective Brannigan know that you got the note to me right away."

The little man relaxed, but only slightly, as he handed her a key card. "Please be sure to call him. He sounded most anxious to hear from you."

"I will. And if a Sheriff's Deputy shows up with my suitcase, will you send it up, please? He drove off before I could get it out of the back of his car."

"Certainly, Agent Marshall." The man's pinched-face expression relaxed a bit more. "My name is Gregory. If you need anything—anything at all—please don't hesitate to ask."

Julia took the elevator up to her room, feeling very much like Alice-who-fell-down-the-rabbit's-hole. First the thick-headed deputy—God have mercy on Bernalillo County, if Cruze was the norm—and now a fidgety desk clerk who took more than a healthy interest in the hotel's guests. What, she wondered, would she encounter next?

That question was answered when she let herself into the room. The phone was jangling and she hastened to pick it up, only to have the infamous Detective Brannigan bark in her ear.

"Marshall, where the hell've you been? You had my men worried when you didn't show up at the airport."

"What?" She dropped her briefcase and allowed her handbag to slide off her shoulder and onto the floor. "What do you mean, I didn't show up? My flight got in right on time."

"I know that." He sounded breathless, irritated. "So why didn't you meet the agents I sent for you? They were waiting just outside the special access door downstairs, as instructed."

"Instructed? By whom?" Her own temper was flaring. Brannigan had made it clear from their first meeting, that he didn't want her working "his" case, but that was hardly call for such rude behavior.

"By Roberts, of course. He arranged everything yesterday morning. You didn't know?"

She kicked off her shoes and, with effort, adopted a soothing tone of voice. "John, there's been some kind of a mix-up. He told me where I was to meet you, but then I got the message you'd left at the gate. I guess you must have changed your mind about picking me up, but I didn't know that, and apparently neither did the Deputy you sent for me. But if you want me to meet you somewhere—"

"What Deputy?"

"Ummm... Cruze." She dropped down into a chair and massaged one foot, then the other. "Yeah... Bobby Cruze."



Black hair, dark complexion—native to the area, I'm guessing—and too lazy to get out of the car. In fact, he's still got my suitcase so—"

"I didn't send a Deputy."

The words stopped her cold. "What do you mean? He was there at the main entrance, right where you said he'd be."

Brannigan no longer sounded irritated. His voice was low and steady, but there was no mistaking the urgency in his tone when he repeated, "I didn't send a Deputy, Julia. My agents were right where they were supposed to be. I didn't leave a message at the gate and I don't remember anyone named Bobby Cruze. Tell me again what he looked like."

"Shit." She sat up, feeling slightly dazed. "Okay." A deep breath helped to calm her and she conjured up a mental picture of the man who'd driven her in from the airport. "He had black hair—straight and too long to be regulation, now that I think about it. It brushed his collar and kept falling in his eyes. The front was shorter than the back, but there wasn't really much shape at all."

She could hear Brannigan scribbling on a sheet of paper. "Okay. What else?"

"He had dark skin—of South American decent, I'd guess—though I didn't notice an accent."

"Fine. What about eye color, height, build? Any distinguishing features?"

"No. He never took off his sunglasses. They were the mirrored kind, so I couldn't see his eyes at all. Also didn't get out of the car, though I'd guess not too tall. I didn't notice his seat being pushed back a lot farther than mine. Damn it, I should have paid more attention."

"It's okay." The fact that John Brannigan wasn't lecturing her made her more nervous than if he'd been shouting. "Just think now. Was there anything else? Anything at all?"

She closed her eyes in an attempt to sharpen her image of the man, and was rewarded with one more detail. "Yes. He

had bad acne scars... pockmarked, you know? There was an especially deep one on the right side of his face, just at the corner of his mouth."

"Good. Now, are you in a single room or a suite?"

"A suite."

"Okay." He sounded entirely too professional, like he was dealing with a victim rather than a fellow agent. "I need you to check out the rest of the room. Do you have your sidearm?"

"No. It was in my suitcase."

"Alright. Maybe you should just go down to the lobby and wait there."

"Don't be ridiculous. I saw the man drive off and there is no way that he had time to park and beat me up here. Hold on a sec." With that, she set the phone down on the desk and opened the curtained glass door to the next room.

The scent—sweet and familiar—was overpowering. It would be, of course, given the fact that heavy vases and long white boxes overflowed from two night stands, a writing table and filled up every nook in the entertain center. "Oh my—" Bile rose up in the back of her throat and she ran for the bathroom, only to find that more of the pale lavender-colored roses covered the counter as well. She fell to her knees and vomited panic into the gleaming white porcelain toilet bowl.

Minutes later, the initial nausea abated, she knocked over a vase as she reached up to turn on the cold water. It was then that she noticed the envelope taped to the mirror, and reached with shaking hands to take it down. She slit the flap with a thumbnail and pulled out a hand-written note. She had to read it twice before the full import of the words hit her.

Little Girl,

I'm so sorry for what I put you through, but it was the only way.

Come to me, as soon as you can get away by yourself. Two blocks west, in the alley between the silversmith's and the pottery shop... I'll be waiting.

Hurry.

Stunned, she dropped the envelope and heard something make a pinging sound against the cold tile floor as it rolled behind the toilet. Heedless of the glass that ground beneath her hands and knees, she reached around the porcelain base, cutting her palm before her fingers found what they searched for. A wave of hysteria washed over her as she held it up to the light for a more careful, but unnecessary, examination. Even slick with her blood, she recognized the "For Always, Julia" carved on the inside of Steve's wedding band. Her heart was pounding, the bright red of her blood a sharp contrast to the white hand towel that she left in the bathroom when she rushed from her hotel room.

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"Agent Roberts." Sloan stepped into the passenger boarding area of gate 4B to find that he was being paged over the Port Columbus public address system. "Agent Sloan Roberts, please pick up any white courtesy phone. That's Agent Sloan Roberts, please pick up any white courtesy phone. You have an urgent call."

Concerned, he caught the elbow of the nearest AW ticket agent. "Where can I find a courtesy phone?"

The woman whirled around, her forehead creased with concern. "Your Roberts? Thank heavens. They said it was an emergency." She slipped behind a small counter and, handing him the receiver, punched the red-blinking button.

"Roberts here."

"Roberts, this is Brannigan. I'm calling from Julia Marshall's hotel room."

Sloan felt something give on the inside, like something cold and heavy had fallen and lodged in the bottom of his stomach. "What's happened?"

"Someone used my name and left Agent Marshall a message to meet a Sheriff's deputy at the main entrance to the airport. He brought her here."

His grip on the phone tightened. "What did he do to her? Is she there?"

"No. She was. We were talking on the phone. I told her to go down to the lobby, but she said she'd check the room out herself."

His mind was racing, prayers going up like rockets to heaven. Not dead, God. Please don't let her be dead. "Any sign of violence? Did she leave a note or call for help?"

"She never came back to the phone. I heard something break—one of the vases in the bathroom—and called for police back-up right away, but she was gone by the time they got here."

"Vases in the bathroom?" He closed his eyes against the possibility. He'd sent her there to keep her safe. "There were vases in the bathroom?"

"Yeah, and boxes, too... all over the bedroom and bathroom. All filled with—"

"Purple roses." His heart began to thump, a heavy beat that he could feel pounding in his fingertips, his lips, his ears. "How long did it take the cops to get there? How far could he have taken her, on foot or by car?"

"A few blocks on foot, provided she was fully conscious and cooperative. Ten miles, maybe, by car. We've got every road out of here shut down. If they're still in the city, there's no way he'll get her out without us knowing."

A blanket of lead had settled over Sloan and, aside from the incessant pounding of his heart, he felt nothing. "You said a vase was broken. Were there any other signs of struggle?"

"I don't know about a struggle, really. There were four other vases left on the counter, and I don't know how many in the bedroom. It looks like only the one was broken." He heard Brannigan take a deep breath. "But there was blood—a lot of it—and someone had taken the time to clean up with one of the hotel towels."

"Find her." He left the "If she's dead, so are you," unspoken. "I'll be there as soon as I can get a flight out."

"There's a pilot with a departmental chopper waiting for you on the roof."

"Thanks. I'm on my way."

Sloan put the receiver down with wooden fingers. "Miss," he asked the middle-aged woman who'd first led him to the phone, "How do I get to the roof?"

She nodded at something behind him and he turned to find a golf cart with a K-Mart blue light waiting. "They'll take you." She looked at him, her eyes sympathetic. "Good luck. Whoever she is, I'm praying that you find her."

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Julia sat with her back to the tree, directly under the clumsily carved initials. Her arms and legs felt much too heavy for her body and, with the bees droning in that constantly busy sort of way, she could hardly force her eyes open. The absence of sunlight, however, had her concerned. It was getting dark, and where was Steve? He'd told her to meet him here, and she'd waited, just like he said; but now she was cold and her head and arm ached, and something about this wasn't right. Bees didn't come out at night, especially on cold nights, so where were they that she could still hear their buzzing? If only she could force her eyes open, just a little, she could figure out where the noise was coming from.

"Good morning, little girl. I was beginning to worry."

"Steve?" Her mouth was dry and it hurt her throat to talk, but she tried again. "Steve? Is that you?"

He laughed, and something about the sound was not at all what she remembered. With effort she forced unbearably heavy eyelids open and tried to focus on the face in front of her, but all she could make out was the shock of dark hair that he pushed away from his forehead.

"You're not Steve."

"Bright girl." He touched her in a much too familiar way. "Too bad he's not here now. He'd be so proud."

## Chapter Eight

The hotel room was in utter disarray. Forensics technicians swarmed in and out, tripping over one another as they searched for fingerprints and DNA, took photos and fiber samples and left grimy gray powder and yellow tape in their wake. Standing in the doorway, Sloan felt old and exhausted and something more. He was being crushed under a weight no one else would understand. *He'd* made the decision to keep Julia in the dark about the roses and Lennox's apparent fixation on her. He'd sent her here, ignorant of what was going on, in the hopes of keeping her safe; and now, it looked like he'd delivered her right into a murderer's hands.

"Roberts, I'm glad you're here." He turned to find John Brannigan motioning to him from across the hall. "I've got something for you to look at."

Brannigan led him into a good-sized room, tastefully decorated in muted shades of gold and rich browns. A map of the city had been pinned to the wall, and a woman in jeans and a navy blue t-shirt was talking on the phone and marking intersections with thumbtacks. Two men—neither one older than 30, by Sloan's estimate—pushed manila folders around on a gray card table while an apple-bellied man in a Bernalillo County Sheriff's uniform hovered over them.

"He's got kids," the Sheriff said. "Two teenagers, and a mid-life surprise on the way. I don't want to tell those kids that their daddy's dead."

Brannigan caught the Sheriff's attention and motioned him over. "Sheriff Hillock, this is Sloan Roberts. He's the head of the FBI's Behavioral Sciences Unit, and the profiler in charge of the Lennox case. Sloan, this is Sheriff Hillock."

They shook hands and Sloan saw his own fear reflected in the Sheriff's eyes. "You're missing a man?"

"Yeah. Nice guy... grew up around here. He was working the 4<sup>th</sup> grid, south of the city. His shift was over at 3:00, but he never showed up at the station."

"His last verified radio contact occurred this morning during a routine traffic stop," Brannigan added. "Car without a license plate—a red Toyota. It was located this afternoon, abandoned, and is already being worked up at the state garage. So far, they've found nothing."

Sloan sloughed off his suit coat and tossed it at the nearest chair. "What else have you got? Somebody had to have noticed all the flowers coming in."

The Sheriff turned back to the card table and Brannigan nodded in the direction of the adjoining bedroom. "Actually, a couple of employees remembered the florist. There's a reception hall downstairs, and he said they were for a wedding taking place there tonight. An artist has been working with the witnesses all day. He's with the last one now."

They stood in the bedroom doorway and waited until a man with elegant hands turned the laptop screen towards a hotel maid. "What about now? Does the nose look right?"

The wrinkled woman glanced nervously in their direction, then went back to her examination of the artist's work. "Yes. Yes, that's right. That's him."

"You're certain?"

She nodded and the officer swept the mouse over the picture, saving corrections. He pushed the laptop in their

direction, and Sloan stared at the unfamiliar face. He sat down to get a better look at the picture on the screen while Brannigan escorted the maid out of the room.

"Witnesses always vary," the artist said quietly, "but not one of them missed the acne scars on the face. Especially that one there." He used a pen to indicate the area directly to the right of a well-formed mouth. "Every one of them remembered that mark."

"Julia did, too." Brannigan was back. "She described the deputy who picked her up as a black-haired man with lots of acne scars, including a very deep pockmark at the right corner of his mouth."

Sloan stared at the computerized sketch. He'd expected, if not the same blonde-haired boy that Randall Lennox had been, a face that was at least familiar. This picture, however, looked like no one he'd ever seen. Confused, he withdrew a folder from his briefcase. From the front pocket he took the most current photos of Lennox and handed them to the police artist. "Could it be the same man? Allowing for the years, plastic surgery or disguises? What do you think?"

The artist shook his head. "I don't know, sir. Plastic surgeons can do a lot, and with make-up... *maybe*. But see here—the differences in the cheekbones and the shape of the chin?" He traced his pen along the lines of the photo, then did the same to the sketch on the screen. "It's one thing to erase wrinkles or make a nose smaller; but under the skin, the doctor's still got the same basic facial structure to work with." He held the photo next to the computer screen and studied the two faces, side by side. "I can't say for sure that it's *impossible*, but I'm pretty confident that these are *not* the same men."

Sloan was baffled. "How confident?"

"95% sure."

"Okay." Sloan wondered if the nightmare he was living could get any worse. "Run this sketch through the system and put out an APB. If there's anyone out there who recognizes our



florist, I want to hear from him, or her." He got up, walked to the window and restlessly pushed aside the curtain. A sliver of pink was all that the sun had left behind in its rush toward nightfall. The crushing weight of guilt and urgency made it hard to breathe, but he asked the question any way. "How long has she been gone, John?"

"A little more than seven hours now."

His jaw was rigid with tension, his neck and head throbbing. "We have to find her. He's never kept one alive more than 72 hours."

Brannigan's window reflection nodded. "I know."

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Julia drifted in and out of consciousness, moments of lucid thought fractured by nightmares and a growing sense of panic. She had to get away from this place—she *knew* that—but her eyelids were impossibly heavy and she could not find her way to the door if she could not see.

"Julia Marie Marshall." Steve was there, barking orders in her ear, and she tried to roll away from him. "Young lady, you get out of that bed this *instant!* Do you hear me?"

"I can't," she moaned. "I'm too tired. Please, Steve... just let me sleep a little longer."

"There's no time." He shook her shoulder to prevent her from drifting off again. "Get *up*, Julia. *Now*."

She tried to obey him—truly, she did—but the moment she sat up, flashes of searing, white-hot pain shot up like sparks behind her eyes. The room dipped crazily and she sank down, unable to move. "What happened?"

"He hit you," he said, fingers probing the back of her skull, "right here. Don't you remember?"

"No." She stopped fighting the exhaustion and allowed her eyes to drift closed. "If this is dying," she murmured, "it's not so bad. It doesn't hurt, really, as long as I lay still."

"Don't talk like that, baby." He gave up on trying to get her out of bed and opted to cradle her against his chest instead. "I don't want you to give up. You are *not* going to die here, like this. I won't let you."

---

Sloan was on the balcony outside his 2<sup>nd</sup> floor window, watching Sunday morning sunlight splinter the pre-dawn sky, when his cell phone rang.

"Mr. Roberts? Did I wake you?"

He shifted in the chair he'd occupied most of the night. "No, I was up, Gertrude. What are you doing at the office on a Sunday?"

Gertrude Baker, long-time assistant to the head of the BSU, was all business, even on a Sunday. "There was so much going on that I thought it best to make sure you connected with all the people who were trying to reach you yesterday."

Sloan rubbed bloodshot eyes. "To tell the truth, I haven't even checked my messages. I'm too tied up here, so why don't you go ahead and let some of the senior profilers field the calls. Okay? If it doesn't have to do with Randall Lennox or Julia, give it to someone else."

"Already done. But the Maryland ME started calling here Friday evening, and refuses to talk to anyone else. They found a second body up there, and he's anxious to fill you in on whatever he's concluded."

"Shit." He grabbed a pencil and paper off the glass-topped table beside his chair. "You got a phone number for me?"

Gertrude rattled off two numbers. "The first one's the morgue. If you can't get him there, he said to call him at home."

"Okay. Got it. Anything else?"

"Yeah. The fire chief in Albamarle County called yesterday. He asked if Julia had been planning to sell the cabin and property up there."

The mention of her name made his heart thud painfully. "No, not that I know of. Why?"

"Well, he said he finally got in touch with the local she'd been paying to watch the place, and the old man mentioned something about a real estate agent he'd talked to back in October."

Sloan sat up, his pulse thrumming. "Did the fire chief manage to get a description of this supposed real estate agent?"

"Yeah. In fact, he faxed a sketch to the office, in the hopes that Julia would be back and able to identify the guy. Do you want me to send it your way?"

He was already booting up his laptop. "Yes. Scan it and send it to my e-mail right away. Maybe it will help us."

"Will do. And boss?" She paused delicately. "Has there been any word?"

His throat constricted around the answer. "No."

"If there's anything I can do, I'll either be here or at home. You have the numbers?"

"Yes. Thanks, Gertrude. I'll be watching for that pic."

Ten minutes later, he opened his e-mail and found himself staring at an all too familiar face. Last month's realtor had the same dark hair and facial scars as yesterday's florist, but neither incarnation had a name.

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"Do you know why you're here, Julia?"

"No." She knew nothing but pain and exhaustion, saw nothing but a cascade of stars that danced against the inside of her eyelids. "Go away."

"I don't think so. It's time you woke up."

She felt a hand on the back of her head, sputtered as water was forced down her throat. She tried to bat the cup away, but her left arm was stuck somewhere above her head and her

right hand throbbed every time she tried to move it. "Get away," she whimpered. "Leave me alone."

"My goodness... stubborn little thing, aren't you." The voice was enjoying this entirely too much. "No wonder your husband took to paddling you. I wonder, is that what you need now?"

Something about his tone made her skin crawl. "Where's Steve?" Little flashes of memory were returning, shimmering like two-minute movie trailers against a mental movie screen. Flowers and blood and his wedding ring—had it been real, or just another nightmare? "I want to see my husband. He was supposed to meet me."

"I'm sorry, Julia, but your husband won't be meeting us after all. He's dead, you know. Has been for a couple of years now."

She tried to force her eyes open. "You're lying."

He laughed, a sound that made her blood feel thick and cold as it pumped into fingertips and toes. "*Poor* little girl... you're awfully confused, aren't you? Keep talking like that, and people are going to think you're crazy." She shivered as he stroked a long finger from her temple to her jaw. "Of course, none of it really matters any more."

Her eyelids fluttered open and she glimpsed the sharp, angular features and dark hair of a stranger. "Who are you?"

His smile was dazzlingly cold. "I'm the man who killed your husband." He bent down, put his lips very close to her ear, and whispered, "And now it's your turn."

---

Sloan's grip on the phone tightened. "Say again, please?"

"I've got a positive ID on the second body." The Medical Examiner for the state of Maryland spoke slowly, his words clipped and precise. "Fingerprints, dental records... all confirmed. Randall Lennox is lying on a slab in my morgue."

"How?" Sloan paced the room, heedless of the looks he received from those who shared workspace in the cramped

hotel suite. "Cause of death? Time? For shit's sake, doc, there has to be some mistake."

"That was my first thought, too, which is why I tracked down the dentist who worked on him during his prison stay. I talked to him *personally*, Roberts. He did a hell of a lot of repair work on the kid after a couple of tough guys decided to welcome him to the cellblock. He confirmed every capped tooth, every old fracture. Randall Lennox is dead." He let that sink in, then continued. "As for time of death, days and times aren't even an issue. Right now, I'd settle for figuring out how many *years* this guy's been in somebody's deep freeze."

"Years?" Sloan wanted to kick something or hurl the phone through a wall. "You're telling me Randall Lennox has been dead for *years*—that we've been chasing the *wrong man* all this time?"

"I'm sorry... but yeah, it looks that way."

"Okay." *The wrong man*. Sloan shoved back the sliding glass door and stepped out onto the balcony. All these years, they'd been profiling the wrong man and now, when Julia had disappeared and every single moment counted, he was going to have to start from scratch. He took a deep breath and forced his mind past the fear. "Okay, doc. Keep this under your hat for now. You got me? Say nothing to the press—*nothing*. This is need to know info and, right now, the FBI is the only agency that needs to know. Understand?"

"Alright." The M.E. sounded neither happy, nor stupid enough to argue the point. "Nobody's going to hear it from me."

---

With effort, Julia focused on the face suspended above hers. "You're not Randall Lennox."

"Bravo." His teeth sparked white in a darkly tanned face. "Aren't you the clever girl?"

"You picked me up at the airport, but you're not a deputy, either." A thought twisted like a corkscrew in her mind. "What did you do with him?"

He moved back just a little, sat on a chair next to the bed. "Him who?"

"The deputy. You were wearing his uniform, driving his car. What did you do with him?"

"Oh... *him*." He grinned—actually *grinned* at her—as if about to share a wickedly funny joke. "I killed him. I'm surprised it didn't wake you. He was something of a screamer."

"Bastard." She tried to scramble off the other side of the bed, but the bite of metal against the tender flesh of her left wrist stopped her cold. Numbly, she stared at the handcuffs with which he'd tethered her to a rusted iron headboard.

He didn't move—just looked at her with cold, black eyes and asked, "Going somewhere?"

"Who are you? Where's Lennox?" Flashes of light danced at the edges of her vision. "Why are you doing this?"

"My name is Robert Alvarez." He watched her as if he expected a reaction of some sort. "Your husband never mentioned me, or my family?"

"No. Never."

He attempted to shrug that fact away, but she could see that it bothered him. "I suppose that's par for the course. Men like him... they don't really think about the lives they affect... do they?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." Her heartbeat was returning to something akin to a normal pace, her ability to reason taking over, and she began to recall the rules of crisis confrontation. *Remain calm. Find a way to relate to the captor. Use his or her first name, if possible.* "How did he affect your life, Robert?"

"Your husband wasn't always FBI, you know. He wasn't always such a big shot. Did he ever tell you why he got called up to Quantico?"

She had to close her eyes in order to block out her surroundings and concentrate on the old memories. "He was young, a small-town cop who discovered a big-time drug ring. The bust got him noticed by the right people."

"Well, at least he remembered that much. Did he tell you about the kids that got thrown into jail because of that bust?"

Julia shook her head, worried about where the conversation was leading. For the first time, she was beginning to see that Steve's death might not have been as random as she'd believed. If the stranger who called himself Robert Alvarez was telling the truth—if he *was* Steve's killer—than clearly he'd killed for reasons she had yet to understand.

"My brother--," Alvarez began. Then, catching himself, he shook off the memories. "Ah, ah, ah." He stood up, twirled the wooden chair around once and shoved it against the wall, out of her reach. "No psycho-analyzing, Julia. This is my show, and I've got work for you to do." He pulled a small tape recorder and a piece of notebook paper from his jacket pocket, tossed them both on the narrow bed. "Read that. Your boyfriend's going to be anxious to hear your voice."

"No." She shook her head. "I won't help you."

"No?" He took a package of cigarettes out of one pocket, carefully and deliberately lit one, and smiled at her over the orange embers. "I'm only going to ask you one more time."

---

"Agent Roberts?" One of Brannigan's detectives, a capable looking woman in her mid-forties, called through the open doorway between the makeshift office and Sloan's sleeping quarters. "There's a call for you. Line two."

He picked up the receiver, wedged it between ear and shoulder. "Roberts here."

"Mr. Roberts?" The woman on the other end of the line identified herself as a records clerk with the California state prison system. "I'm calling about the APB your office put

out—the John Doe who's kidnapped your agent? I believe I've got an ID for you."

Very slowly, he put aside the stack of papers that he'd been poring over. "Go on."

"Father Robert Alvarez. Used to work inside the prison system as a visiting chaplain. He terminated employment in January, 1996... a month before Randall Lennox was paroled."

His heart quickened. "Was there any contact between Alvarez and Lennox?"

"Yes sir. He was in charge of the prison ministry program that Lennox got involved in. In fact, the priest spoke up for Lennox at his parole hearing—helped get him released. It looks like the two were pretty tight."

For the first time since he'd arrived in New Mexico, Sloan felt a surge of hope. "You've been a lot of help," he told the caller. "Now, if you could fax me everything you've got on this priest—social security number, every photo, background history, everything—I'd really appreciate it."

"It's already on the way," the woman replied. "I hope it helps."

Sloan hung up the phone and hurried into the adjoining room. "Make sure the fax is on," he barked at no one in particular. "We've got him—Robert Alvarez, a priest from the prison. We should have his file any minute, and I want—." The look on John Brannigan's face stopped him in mid-sentence. All the movement in the room seemed to grind to a halt, voices hushed, as he asked, "What's happened?"

"A call came in just now." Brannigan turned to the man hovering over a complicated-looking audio system. "Play it back, Mike."

"You'll find the body in warehouse number five, at the abandoned factory." Julia had tried to make her voice as flat and unemotional as possible, but he could feel her terror as she read what was clearly a prepared statement. "He'll call at the



same time tomorrow to let you know where to find my—." She took an audible breath. "Where to find me."

"Lovely girl, isn't she?" Unlike Julia's voice, the man's had been distorted somehow. "This is for Randall Lennox, and my brother, and all the others who didn't get justice. I do this so you'll remember them."

The recording ran out, but no one in the room dared to speak. Sloan met John Brannigan's gaze with a question. "Did you get a good trace? Any idea where the call came from?"

"A cell phone, somewhere within the city limits. That's the best we could do."

He nodded curtly. "A clerk with the California state prison system just faxed us this info. The man's name is Robert Alvarez... at least that's what he went by as a priest at the California State Correctional Facility. We're going to find him." He looked around the room slowly, daring anyone to challenge him. "We are *going* to find this man and we're going to stop him, *before* he can kill again. Understand?"

John Brannigan squared his shoulders and looked Sloan in the eye. "Damn right, we are."

The basement room was cramped and dark, a utility candle the only illumination in the sparse cell. Julia sat on a worn mattress, her back against the rusted iron slats of an ancient headboard, her knees drawn up under her chin. There was less than a yard between the bed and the wall to her left, possibly twice the amount of bare cement flooring to her right. She focused with effort on the man who sat on a wooden chair placed just beyond the foot of the bed. "Why are you doing this?"

"Shut up."

She shook her head. "No. You're going to kill me anyway. What more do I have to be afraid of?"

He kicked a silver cigarette lighter with the toe of one boot. "There are different ways to die, Julia. I can make it easy on you or—"

"Or you can torture me first? Like all the rest?" She swallowed her fear and looked him in the eyes. "Why *did* you burn them? It made sense, when we thought it was Lennox, because the scars matched the ones his father had given him. But now Lennox is where—gone, dead? Did you even know him, or was he just an identity to hide behind?"

He reached into a grocery sack and pulled out an apple, took a knife from his pocket and began to slice into the crisp fruit. "Randall Lennox was a good kid, a victim. His father was the real monster."

"I know."

"Oh?" She could feel his eyes rake over her, assessing. "You think you know—that you're some kind of expert? Tell me then, *Doctor* Marshall, what do you suppose it was like for him—a kid locked away with murderers, drug dealers, pros?"

"They beat him—badly—the first night he was there." She tried to picture Lennox's case file as if lay open in front of her. "And there were other... violations. He never should have been tried as an adult. He didn't belong in that prison."

"He didn't belong in *any* prison!" Alvarez practically erupted with fury. "He was innocent. But no one would believe that—least of all your husband."

"*Calm him down,*" Julia told herself. "*De-escalate, before he loses it.*" To her captor she said, "I'm sorry."

"*Sorry?*" He was on his feet, the apple tossed to the floor but the knife still clutched in his hand. "You don't know shit, you little idiot! You haven't got a clue what it was like for him. He was sixteen—*sixteen*! Perfect little girl like you can't even *imagine* the things they did to him, the things they made him do! You don't know what they turned him into."

She swallowed hard, her eyes on the glint of steel protruding from his fist. None of this was making sense. Lennox had been seventeen when tried for his father's murder,

and he'd never professed innocence. His lawyer had claimed self-defense. Besides, Steve's involvement with Lennox had not come until after the man was released from prison and cops started dying. Clearly, she and Alvarez were talking about two different people. It was time to try another tactic.

"Where is Lennox now?"

The question seemed to set him off balance and he shrugged. "What's it matter?"

"You cared about him."

She watched his face intently, saw something flicker in his eyes, and suddenly the carefully detached man returned.

"I helped him, took care of him when he was in prison, but he was weak. He didn't understand that this was his calling as much as mine." His laughter was harsh, unfeeling. "Here's a kick for you... they actually *reformed* him. I realized it a month after his release. He was going to be useless to me. He didn't have the balls for this, and I didn't have the time to teach him."

"So you killed him." Something inside her clicked, like a door had finally been unlocked. She hadn't been wrong about her profile. She'd simply been profiling the wrong man. "Didn't you?"

His fingers curled around the handle of the knife, his thumb testing the blade. A flicker of candlelight illuminated the red of blood on his hand. "That's enough, Julia. Or do you like *little girl* better?" She tried not to react, to make her features smooth and unreadable, but his smile told her she'd failed. "Thought no one knew about that, didn't you?"

She focused on a point beyond his right shoulder and said nothing.

"What's the matter, sweetheart? Don't like it when someone else is doing the asking?"

She tried to shrug off his words, but anger was building inside and she couldn't stand the wondering. "How did you know?"

Her heart tripped up a notch when he sat down on the edge of the bed. Slowly, he leaned in, wiped the bloodied blade on the collar of her shirt and put his mouth to her ear. "You want answers, Julia? Well, listen up. I wanted your husband to suffer, like he made my family suffer." His breath was hot on her ear. "Just killing him? That would have been too easy."

"Why? What did he do to your family?"

"He ruined us. Tommy was the baby, the hope of the family. He was going to go to college-- be something. He was a good kid who just happened to fall in with the wrong crowd, and there was your husband-- investigating a drug ring and my kid brother got caught in the middle. Tommy got five years in prison, but it ended up being a life sentence.

"Your brother died there?"

"There was a riot, and a fire. He burned to death."

"The arsons," she gasped. It was finally making sense. The murdered law enforcement officers hadn't been Randall Lennox's revenge. Rather, they'd been Robert Alvarez's ploy to get the attention of the FBI and the agent he believed was responsible for the loss of his brother. Now, with Steve gone, he'd turned his fixation on her. "You set the fires for me, didn't you? To get my attention?"

He ignored her whispered questions, went on with his horrible answers in a voice thickening with rage. "I had it all planned. He was supposed to hear you scream, Julia... to hear you beg. I wanted him to find you, and know that it was *his* fault you were dead. I wanted him to watch you burn." Alvarez's chest heaved with emotion. He slid the knife inside her shirt and sliced away the top three buttons. "But *you* screwed that up. You sent him after me and I had to fight back." His eyes were wide and blazing with insane fury. "You stupid bitch. You ruined *everything*."

The cool blade of the knife nicked one white breast and Julia held her breath as warm blood trickled around the plump flesh to soak into her bra. The next moment, her captor drew back his arm, the move as sudden as her realization that she'd

taken her last breath; but the blade flashed past her face to stick in between two cement blocks beside her head. "It's your fault he's dead. You see that, don't you?"

"Yes."

His hand slid up the bare column of her throat, his grip tightening until they could both feel the hammering of her pulse beneath his hand.

"Look at me," he commanded.

She didn't know, really, when she'd shut her eyes, but she opened them now to find him smiling cruelly.

"I could kill you right now. You see how easy it would be for me?"

"Yes," she breathed, gathering her courage. Still, even she was surprised by the vehemence of her response. "So do it already." Her gaze flickered to the knife in the wall. She wanted it over with, longed to join her husband wherever it was that he'd gone. "Or, if you're too much of a coward, give me the damn knife and I'll do it myself."

She saw the anger throb in his tightly clenched jaw, but his grip on her throat relaxed and his lips curled upward in a taunting smile. "Oh, you're good. You think you can make me reckless-- make me do things *your* way-- but you can't. You see, I'm not quite ready for you to die, Julia. Want to know why?" He leaned in closer and said, very quietly, "I made a promise to your husband. When he was crying... begging for his life." He grasped a handful of her hair and jerked her roughly forward. "I told him I'd show you what a *real* man felt like."

He brought his mouth down on hers hard, lips and teeth and tongue probing viciously until the taste of blood made her wretch. It was, likely, the thing that saved her. Disgusted, he shoved her back against the headboard and hastily dragged the back of his hand across his mouth. "What's the matter? Was good old Steve too much of a wimp to take what he wanted?"

She was trembling violently, but forced her eyes to his. "Go to hell."

He retrieved his knife silently, then gathered up the grocery sack and the candle that was the only source of light in the basement room. At the door, he turned back and looked at her with empty eyes. "Sweetheart, this *is* hell."

## Chapter Nine

Julia managed to keep the firewall of anger in place until she heard Alvarez make his way up creaking stairs. Somewhere, high above her head, a door closed faintly. It was then that she fell apart. Sobs of hopelessness and despair wracked her body until she was sure she was going to cry herself inside out.

"God, what am I going to do?" she whispered into the oppressive darkness. She recognized that she was on the verge of hysteria, but was still shocked when a wave of nausea forced her to lean over the edge of the bed and vomit violently.

"Shh, honey." The hand on the back of her head was gentle, but still she started. "It's alright, baby," Steve soothed. "It's just me."

Several minutes later, when the spasms had ceased, she gratefully allowed him to ease her down onto the bed. "You feel so real," she said when he settled, spoon-like, behind her. Tears soaked into the filthy mattress beneath her face. "I know this is a just a dream, Steve... but I don't want it to end. Please stay with me a little longer."

"I'm here, honey. I won't leave you."

"It's amazing what the mind can do," she murmured as she snuggled deeper into his sheltering embrace. "I swear, I can even feel your breath on my neck." She was warm and drowsy, and could almost imagine that she was at home, that he'd never left her side.

His arm circled her waist. "Try to sleep, sweetheart. You're not alone. Even if you can't always feel me, I'm always here."

She drifted off willingly, grateful to lose her fears in the oblivion of sleep.

---

"Play it again." Sloan paced, his eyes on the ever-moving minute hand of his watch, while a young man in a rumpled shirt tapped at a keyboard. They'd been at this for almost two hours—taking the recording apart layer by layer in an attempt to isolate any sounds that might offer a clue as to Julia's whereabouts-- and his frustration mounted with every minute that swept by. "Come on, lieutenant. We can't stop now!"

"Roberts," John Brannigan said from the doorway, "Ease up, okay? Mike's doing the best he can."

Sloan looked up at the intrusion. "We need more help, a faster system. Damn it, there has to be *something* on that tape—some kind of clue."

Brannigan stepped into the room and motioned Sloan away from the digital/audio equipment. His voice dropped down to a low whisper. "If there is, we'll find it. But hovering over the kid's shoulder isn't going to help. Why don't you go lie down for a while? I'm going to want you on my team when we find her, but you won't be worth shit to anyone if you're too exhausted to keep up. I swear, the moment we have anything, you'll be the first to know."

Sloan closed his burning eyes and scrubbed his face wearily. Then, standing toe to toe with the chief field agent, he asked, "Could you sleep, John? If it was Nancy or one of your kids? Could you?"



Brannigan looked away for a moment. "No." There was a new recognition in his eyes when he met Sloan's steady gaze. "How long have you been in love with her?"

"Too damn long. I should have told her months ago. Maybe it would have made a difference. Hell, maybe we'd be honeymooning in the Caribbean by now."

Brannigan exhaled slowly, his expression a mixture of sympathy and regret. "She disappeared on my watch. I swear to you, I'll do everything in my power to bring her home."

Sloan felt suddenly old, deflated. "I'll get something to eat. You'll come and get me if there's anything?"

"You have my word."

---

Across the hall, the senior profiler grabbed a cold-meat sandwich from one of the boxes someone had brought in and made his way down a few doors to his room. The hotel manager had closed off the entire floor and, aside from the agents who came and went, there was no one around. Juggling the sandwich and a bottle of water from the vending machine, he fished the key card out of his pocket and let himself into the darkened suite. The click of the door shutting behind him all but muffled the sound of the revolver as it was cocked and pressed to the back of his head.

He reacted on instinct, spun around and almost managed to take his assailant off guard, but something about the cold amusement in Alvarez's eyes stopped him cold.

"Smart move," the killer murmured. "After all, do you really think I'd risk coming here if I didn't know that I could get out again."

Sloan let his arms drop to his sides. "Where is she?"

Alvarez glanced at his watch, all the while keeping the gun level. "She's safe... for another twenty-three minutes. Of course, if I don't get back in time, there's going to be a real mess to clean up." One eyebrow disappeared into his hairline.

"You ever have to identify the body of somebody who burned to death?"

It was all Sloan could do to remain calm. "No."

There was no humor in the madman's smile. "I have. And if we don't leave right now, you'll be doing the same. So—" He relaxed, all but dared Sloan to take the gun from him. "You gonna holler for help, or are we gonna walk out of here like buddies?"

Alvarez had taken great care to disguise himself, but Sloan recognized the hard, black eyes of a murderer. If they arrested him now, they'd never get to Julia in time. He nodded grimly towards the door. "Let's go."

---

Julia was drowning in the darkness, a black so thick she could feel it pressing in on her, stealing her breath. Panicked, she kicked her legs and swam, her heart pounding until she thought it might burst. Just when she was sure she would die, a hand clamped on her shoulder and pulled her to the surface. She awoke, gasping for air.

"It's okay, baby." Steve was sitting beside her on the narrow bed. "I'm here."

Heart still pounding, she levered herself into a sitting position and tried to rub some feeling back into her shackled arm. She felt Steve's hands join hers and a little sob escaped her throat.

"What is it, little girl?" He stopped rubbing, rested his forehead against hers. "Did I hurt you?"

She shook her head. "No, it's just—I can't help wondering—."

"Wondering what?" His hands started to move again, up and down her now tingling arm.

"Do you hate me? For falling in love with Sloan?"

He stroked hair back away from her face and pressed a kiss to her forehead. "Of course not, sweetheart. I want you to go on... to be happy."

Tears welled up in her eyes, spilled down her cheeks. "I will be, when we're together again. Can you just stay with me, Steve? When he comes back, when he—" She had to fight to get her voice under control. "I'm not afraid of being dead, you know." She tried to laugh away the fear. "It's just the getting there that worries me."

"Shhh." She felt herself enveloped in the strong, familiar embrace. "It's okay, honey. It's not going to come to that. You're going to get out of here."

"How?" Her voice was muffled in the front of his shirt.

"I'm going to help you, sweetheart." His hands moved soothingly up and down her back. "And then I'm going to have to let you go."

"Why Julia?" Sloan asked once he and Alvarez, with a make-up job worthy of Hollywood, made it past the uniforms in the hotel parking lot.

Alvarez shrugged. "Why not?"

"This wasn't random."

Alvarez's laugh was almost startled. "*Random*? You're kidding me. You're the *head* of Behavioral Sciences and you just now figured that out? You're as dumb as she is."

"Isn't that what you wanted?" It was a calculated risk, baiting a killer, but a risk Sloan had to take. At this point, science was the only weapon left at his disposal. He would have to understand Alvarez's motives in order to stop him. "You obviously wanted us to think we were chasing Randall Lennox, and we did. The victims—all of them were officers, all clearly chosen for age and physical build. We believed they were substitutes for the father that abused Lennox, the father he killed. The burns on their ears were identical to the scars on his, scars his father had given him. In fact, you did such a good job of fooling us that nobody's ever going to understand the point that you're trying to make. You said something in the

phone call about a brother? How clever is this plan of yours if no one will ever know who he was and what he had to do with any of this?"

"They'll understand when I want them to." Alvarez walked on, unconcerned. "Just like your buddy Marshall did, before he died. You and Julia will understand, too, soon enough."

"So why not tell me now? You went to a lot of trouble to get her to think her husband was still alive. The phone calls, the flowers—the cabin. Why did you burn it down, anyway?"

Alvarez shifted the gun that he had concealed beneath a dark blue hotel-management blazer. "It smelled like sex... like Steve Marshall screwing his wife. Now it's ashes, just like he is."

"So it wasn't about her after all? It's Steve you hated?"

He watched the man beside him bristle. "You'd best shut up and walk faster, Roberts. Your sweetheart's only got eleven minutes 'til toast."

---

"Let me go?" Julia's breath caught in her throat. There was something in her husband's voice—a deep sorrow that made her hold onto him all the harder. "What do you mean, let me go?"

"I don't belong here any more," he murmured against her tangled hair. "You know that as well as I do."

"No. That's not true." Her heart was pounding with fear and a sense of impending loss that she could not quite explain. "You *do* belong here, Steve. I love you." Panic threatened to close around her. "You'll always be a part of me. Right? Isn't that what they say?"

He deepened the embrace for a moment, then gently held her out at arm's length. "Yes, I'll always be a part of you, honey. You'll keep me in your heart and I'll keep you in mine."

"Okay," she gulped air and forced herself to calm down. "Okay. I'm sorry. I just—you scared me."

She heard his deep, measured sigh. "Sweetheart, I'll always be a part of you—that's true." He ran his hands up and down her arms. "But it can't be like *this* forever. We both have to move forward. You'll have a new life with Sloan, and I'll—"

Julia shook her head in denial. "I don't understand, Steve. I don't know what you mean."

His lips touched hers in an achingly tender kiss that ended much too soon. "You do, sweetheart. You're just not ready to see it yet."

He pulled her into a tight embrace and somewhere, deep inside, she *did* know. "I love you," she whispered hoarsely. "I always will."

His lips touched her forehead. "I love you too, little girl—for always."

---

Alvarez led Sloan into the center of Olde Town, threading quickly through what was left of the day's crowd. They walked past rows of shops and ducked into the alley just one door down from an ancient stone church. Alvarez quickly scanned the narrow walk-through before drawing his gun and motioning Sloan through a side door and into one of the historic building's more recent expansions.

Sloan was tensed, ready to take the madman by surprise. He stepped inside what could only be the kitchen, pivoted quickly and went for the gun. The struggle was brief and ended with Julia's tormentor pinned against the wall, a strong forearm pressed against his windpipe. Sloan placed the barrel of the gun against his prisoner's temple.

"Where is she?"

Alvarez's laughter turned into a sputtering cough as Sloan exerted more pressure on his throat. "Go ahead, Roberts... pull the trigger. But somewhere in this place, your precious Dr. Marshall is sitting on a time bomb."

"Tell me where she is."

Alvarez only smiled wider. "I'll even give you a little clue. She's handcuffed to a bed which has, underneath it, several small incendiary devices." He glanced up at a loudly ticking clock, then locked eyes with Sloan. "In four minutes, the mattress she's sitting on will go up in flames... poof! There'll be no time for the mercy of smoke inhalation. She'll be burned alive." He licked his lips nervously. "So, what's it going to be, Roberts? Kill me and take the chance that you won't get to her in time? Or are you ready to cooperate now?"

Fear and adrenaline pulsing through his body, Sloan stepped back and let the gun swing, muzzle down, between his thumb and forefinger. Alvarez snatched the weapon, then took a pair of handcuffs from his jacket pocket.

"You just slip into these, and then we'll go see your lover."

Angry at his helplessness, the FBI's chief profiler snapped the cuffs over his own wrists. "There. Let's go."

He followed the killer down a long hallway that he assumed led to the priests' private living quarters. However, when Alvarez abruptly stopped and opened the door to a broom closet, he was glad he hadn't tried to find Julia on his own. He watched, impatient, as the man slid aside a wooden pulpit to reveal a door in the floor.

"After you, buddy. And you'd best hurry. She's got two minutes left."

A single bare lightbulb swung from the basement ceiling, shedding just enough light for Sloan to navigate the steep steps. Halfway down, he called out, "Julia! Where are you?"

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Julia awoke, her heart pounding, the echo of her own name ringing in her ears. "Here!" she cried. "I'm down here."

For a moment, she was uncertain whether someone had actually called out, or if it had been another dream. Then footsteps pounded, as though more than one person was running towards her, and the door was suddenly kicked in. The light pouring into the darkened room rendered her

temporarily blind, but she knew Sloan's voice and immediately obeyed his command to get off the bed. She nearly slipped in the sour liquid puddled on the floor and recovered herself just in time to see Alvarez enter the room behind Sloan. He raised the gun high and she screamed out a warning, but it was too late. The sickening crunch of hard metal against bone knocked her rescuer to the floor.

"Idiot," she heard Alvarez mutter as he crouched down and yanked a small metal box from beneath the bed. A tangle of wires followed the device and she realized with some shock that she'd been sitting on a bomb.

"Sloan?" Ignoring her captor for the moment, she moved as close as possible to the motionless form on the floor. "Sloan? Oh God, don't let him be dead."

Alvarez yanked several wires free of the box, then shoved it against the wall before jerking Julia into an upright position. "It stinks in here, you little bitch. What did you do?"

"I... I was sick." Fear for the man she loved left Julia recklessly angry. "If you've killed him, I swear I'll—"

"You'll what?" He drew his hand back and slapped her viciously. "Exactly what do you think you can do to me?"

Julia gasped in shock as Alvarez shoved her roughly down onto the bed. She'd been aware of his volatility, but the sudden, uncontrolled fury took her by surprise. Terrified, she tried to scramble away, but he leapt on her and laid her flat with a punch to the stomach. Air whooshed from her lungs and she instinctively curled in on herself as he stood and reached for his belt buckle.

"It's time you learned how to behave around a *real* man," he said. "I *do* hope your husband is watching. That way, you can both consider this lesson one."

"I'm watching." Julia jerked in recognition of the disembodied voice. "But you're the one in need of a lesson."

In that instant, something shimmered between them—a burst of energy and light that made Alvarez stumble

backwards, screaming. He tripped over Roberts and went down hard, then scrambled for the gun he'd dropped as the light coalesced into solid matter.

Electric currents sparked up and down Julia's spine as she stared at the scene before her. Steve advanced on a wild-eyed Alvarez who somehow managed to retrieve his weapon. Two shots rendered her momentarily deaf, but she didn't need to hear to know that the killer recognized his victim. Whether the shots had gone wild or simply passed through Steve she did not know, but suddenly the madman was jerking her up by the roots of her hair. The acrid smell of gunpowder filled her nostrils as he jabbed the gun painfully against the soft flesh just beneath one ear.

"Back off," screamed Alvarez. "Back off or I'll blow her head off!"

Julia watched, dumbfounded, as Steve went motionless. "You can't get out of here," he said quietly. "I'll never let you go."

"Fine by me. We'll all die—right here."

Julia felt the reverberations as Alvarez pulled back the hammer on the gun, but she kept her eyes on Steve's face. An odd peace had come over her, a confidence that she would soon be reunited with her husband. She smiled at him faintly, as though to assure him that she was not afraid.

In the next moment, Alvarez was jerked violently backwards. Still held by the hair, Julia went with him. She recognized the flash of steel handcuffs against the tan of his throat, heard the gun roar to life; then there was nothing but black.

---

Though dizzy from the blow to his head, Sloan managed to drag Alvarez away from Julia. In some part of his mind he heard the shot, but adrenaline had taken over and he continued to wrestle with his enemy until he felt the man's muscles go slack. He let his arms relax, then, and the killer dropped to the



floor in a broken heap. The sudden odor of bodily wastes told him that there was nothing further to fear from Robert Alvarez.

*Julia.* He scrambled to the bed and managed to roll her onto her back. His heart thudded painfully at the sight of the bloodstained mattress beneath her, but the wound was in her upper arm and not immediately life threatening. He'd have to get her to a hospital, though, or she'd go into shock. He was just about to search the dead man's pockets for a key to the handcuffs when he heard heavy footsteps pounding over head.

"Over here," he heard someone shout and then, thank God, John Brannigan's voice crackled over a two-way radio. "All teams to the basement. Go!"

Sloan put his hand over the slowly oozing wound and looked expectantly toward the door. And somehow, just before the uniformed men burst through the doorway, he heard Steve Marshall say, "Take care of her, buddy."

Stunned, he whispered, "I will."

---

Julia woke from painless dreams to the antiseptic smell of a hospital and the sight of Sloan, asleep in a chair next to her bed. For a moment she closed her eyes and let the memory of her final moments with Steve drift over her. He'd come to her one last time in her sleep; but this time, he'd come to say good-bye. She smiled—a little sadly—but the peace that had enveloped her just before she was shot had remained intact. He wanted her to go on, to forge a new life with Sloan, and this time she would honor his request. Determined to face her future, she opened her eyes and met Sloan's.

"How do you feel?" he asked as he reached out to take her hand. "Pretty rough?"

She laced the fingers of her good hand through his and smiled. "Not as bad as you might think. I take it they've kept me pretty doped up?"

He nodded and drew her hand to his mouth, kissed her knuckles lightly. "Yeah. Do you remember coming in? That was last night, at about 8:15. It's 4:30 in the afternoon now."

"I remember the lights were so bright, and someone said I'd been shot. After that—" She shrugged, then winced at the pain in her shoulder. "It felt good to sleep."

"I'm glad *you* got some rest, Marshall," John Brannigan said from the door. "Because this big lug," he nodded to indicate Sloan, "hasn't left your side all night. We could hardly get him to cooperate with the ER docs long enough for a quick check up."

Sloan smiled and stood, kissing Julia's forehead as he got up. "You got things wrapped up at the station?" he asked as he shook Brannigan's hand.

"Just about. All I'm lacking is a statement from one last witness." He smiled hopefully at Julia. "Think you can handle it?"

"Sure." She pushed herself up a little straighter and smiled at both men. "But could you get me something to eat first? I'm starved. And besides—I've got some questions of my own. Like how you knew where to find us, to start with."

Julia managed to put away two cups of applesauce and a bowl of gelatin while John Brannigan filled in the missing pieces of the puzzle. "We had agents and plain-clothes officers all over the downtown area," he told her. "Luckily, one of them recognized Sloan out on the street. He radioed back to me and we got S.W.A.T. in position. They were upstairs in the sanctuary when they heard the gun go off."

"You know Alvarez set the fires. Right?" She glanced from Brannigan to Sloan. "He admitted it to me. I have no idea who died in the last one, though."

"A priest," Brannigan replied. "The coroner made the I.D. this morning. Apparently the church where you were held was expecting a replacement—their Padre retired last month—but Alvarez got to the man first, and killed him in order to take his place. He spent the last month traveling back and forth from

here to Virginia, baiting us with the arsons here—and I understand you got some phone calls there. Yes?"

"Mmm-hmmm." Julia picked at a loose thread on the coverlet that warmed her bare legs. " He killed so many people, even Randall Lennox, all because of what happened to his brother. And he hated Steve. More than anyone, he hated Steve."

Sloan moved to the edge of the bed and, taking Julia's hand, kissed the bandaged cut on her palm. "I know, sweetheart. But you understand, don't you, that none of this was your fault? He fooled all of us."

Julia nodded, the weight of that guilt finally gone from her shoulders. "I know."

"Okay, " Brannigan interrupted. "How about I get your statement, and then I can let you rest?"

Julia squeezed Sloan's hand. "I'm ready."

Brannigan stepped into the hall to call in the court stenographer he'd left waiting. Sloan stayed, holding Julia's hand as she related the details of the time she spent in the darkened basement room. She saw the tears form in his eyes when she told of Alvarez's brutal kiss and subsequent threat of assault, and did not miss the flicker of acknowledgement in his eyes as she related the bizarre circumstances under which the killer had backed away. "I guess I must have been hallucinating," she added, "but *something* scared him before he could follow through. Otherwise—"

"That's okay." Brannigan nodded understanding. "I'm sure we all get the picture, and I've got Sloan's testimony to take it from there." He looked down at his notebook and added, "There's just one more thing I need to know, Julia. Were you conscious when he took you out of the hotel?"

The question took her by surprise. "He didn't take me out," she said, then hurried to add, "I thought you knew. Alvarez left a note with all the flowers... and Steve's wedding ring, too. I know it was stupid, but I guess I just wanted Steve to be

alive so badly that I believed it was from him. I went to meet him, a few blocks from the hotel. That's where he—Robert Alvarez—ambushed me. Next thing I knew, I woke up in that basement with a massive headache."

She looked sheepishly from one man to the other. Brannigan seemed relatively unperturbed, but there was no mistaking the disappointment in Sloan's eyes. However, it was the wounded look he quickly hid that made her heart ache. She'd never meant to hurt him—had not even contemplated the possibility that her actions would cause him such pain. Now she wondered if it was something that they'd be able to get past.

Finally, the interrogation was over and Brannigan offered to escort the stenographer—an older woman—out to the parking lot. "The docs say they just need to keep you one more night," he said to Julia, "and I'd imagine you'll be wanting to get home. So, if I don't see you again, you take care. Okay?"

Julia nodded, smiling faintly. "Thanks, John. And I'm awfully sorry for what my stupidity caused."

She felt Brannigan's eyes on her face, then saw his gaze shift meaningfully to Sloan. "We're all vulnerable to something," he said quietly. "I'm just glad you're alright."

When they were alone in the room, Julia reached hesitantly for Sloan's hand. "I'm so sorry. I didn't think before acting and I almost cost you your life." She squeezed his fingers and begged him mentally to meet her gaze, but he had retreated somehow and she felt the distance between them keenly. Hurt and uncertain, she added, "I'll accept whatever punishment you decide on."

That got his attention, and she was dismayed to see the anger that flashed in his eyes when he looked up at her. "Damn it, Julia! You were beaten, and almost killed. If *that* wasn't enough to teach you to think before you act, what the hell do you think *I* can do to get the message through?"

Julia bit her lip and fought the tears that threatened. "Sloan, please don't be angry. I never meant to hurt you."

He stood abruptly and she felt more than a little intimidated by his height and raw masculine power. "I'm going to take a walk," he said through clenched teeth. "We'll talk about this later."

She did not argue... only watched with an aching heart as he turned and left the room.

## Chapter Ten

*"You, young lady, are going to learn to think before you act.*

*Julia swallowed hard and tried to suppress the shiver that ran up her spine. She hated corner time—thoroughly abhorred standing with her nose to the wall and her bare bottom on display—especially when said bottom was about to be turned a fiery shade of red. All that waiting, the horrible apprehension that made her feel half-nauseous, was a punishment in and of itself. Surely it qualified as cruel and unusual to have to wait, exposed and embarrassed, when she just wanted the spanking to be over with.*

*Of course it wouldn't be any easier to take afterward, when corner time meant standing still, hands at her sides, all the while longing to rub her throbbing bottom. But at least then it would be over with, and maybe she and Sloan could put everything that had happened behind them. She wanted his forgiveness more than anything, and she'd almost welcome the spanking, if it meant they could get past the anger and hurt between them.*

*"Come here, Julia. It's time we got this over with."*

*She nodded. Yes, it was time... past time, really. The hurt had gone on long enough. Obediently, she draped herself across his hard thighs. He took over then, strong hands*

*guiding her into place, arranging and rearranging her position until, apparently satisfied, he laid his open palm on one upturned cheek.*

*"I love you, Julia Marie," he said in a clear, strong voice. "And because I love you, because we're going to spend the rest of our lives together, I intend to teach you to think before you act."*

*"I know." She hated the little-girl tone of voice, but now was not the time to put on a brave front. "I love you, too. And I'm so sorry."*

*"You will be," he said as he drew back his hand and took aim. "Believe me, when I've finished with you, you'll be very sorry indeed."*

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"Mrs. Marshall?" A quiet rapping woke Julia, and she opened her eyes to find a decidedly young man in a lab coat peering around the door. "How are you feeling today?"

She blinked sleepily, tried to push herself into an upright position and felt a stab of sour pain in her upper arm. "Mmm... sore."

"I bet." The doctor tucked the chart under his arm and, locating the controls for the bed, slowly eased her into a sitting up position. "What do you say I take a look at that arm."

She only winced a time or two as he removed the bandages and carefully examined the wound. "How's it look, doc?"

He smiled and hit the nurse's call button. "You're going to live. I'll have the nurse rewrap this and we'll get you your discharge papers."

"Really? I can go home... already?"

"Why yes—I thought you knew. I told Mr. Roberts last night that I expected to release you today."

The stab was internal this time. "Oh. I haven't talked to him yet this morning."

"Well, the nurse will be in with your paperwork and follow-up instructions. The floor's not terribly busy this morning, so you should be walking out of here by eleven."

"Great. Thank you, doctor."

Julia forced a smile until the doctor left the room. She'd be leaving at eleven, but what then? Sloan had never returned from his walk last night, so she could only assume he wanted nothing more to do with her. Apparently there was only so much he could forgive, and she'd crossed that line the moment she'd left the hotel room in search of Steve. She dashed away a few angry tears and vowed that she'd cried over a man for the last time. If Sloan couldn't understand her actions—if hoping that Steve had lived was, by his standards, some sort of a crime—then he sure as hell wasn't worth crying over. It was time she got on with her life, focused on her career and put the past behind her. Steve wanted her to go on, to be happy; no matter, then, that he'd expected her to be happy with Sloan. She was a strong, capable woman and the last thing she wanted was *Agent Roberts* bossing her around and generally making her life miserable. She didn't need him; in fact, she didn't need any man.

So, a taxi back to the hotel, she guessed, and then an afternoon on the phone, making arrangements for the trip home. She would take the earliest flight possible—a red-eye, if she could manage it—and be home tomorrow. Then, after a good night's sleep, she'd take her resignation to the office and call a real estate agent to come look over the house. She and Steve had purchased it with children and school districts in mind, and she didn't expect to have trouble selling it. There was also plenty of money in the savings account, and maybe she'd even do a little travelling, so as to be out of the realtor's way. She had a friend in Ohio, a professor with the Wright State doctor of psychology program, and perhaps she would visit him. He'd asked her once to consider teaching there, but she'd been young and in search of adventure. Now, having had her fill of excitement, she longed for a different job, the



type that didn't include being kidnapped by a crazed serial killer. She wanted, quite simply, some peace in her life.

A gray-haired nurse with kind eyes knocked just then. "Ms. Marshall? Are you ready for me to bandage you up and get you ready to go?"

"Absolutely." Julia shoved down the remnants of unhappiness and flashed the woman a confident smile. "Why don't you hand me the phone and I'll call over to the hotel and get someone to drop off my bag so I'll have something to wear out of here." She sat up straight and smoothed down the cotton hospital gown in mock appraisal. "Unless, of course, you were planning on giving me this delightful dress."

"Well, they're all the rage around here," the nurse said with a laugh, "but I'm afraid it would cost you a pretty penny to take one home. Besides, Mr. Roberts had your things brought over last night. There's a duffel bag and a suitcase in your closet."

"Oh." Hurt and a wave of self-pity washed over Julia, but she quickly recovered herself. "Well, that was nice of him. I guess I'm all set to go."

The nurse put the finishing touches on the largest of Julia's wounds, then quickly unwrapped her left wrist. "This is still pretty raw," she said. "You should keep it covered for the next couple of days, at least when you're out and about. But be sure to unwrap it for at least an hour a day. That will help keep it dry so it heals faster. You'll probably want to do the same with your foot, but I'll check that first, just to be sure."

Julia winced as the tape was pulled from the bottom of her foot. "I'm sorry, hon," the nurse murmured as she examined the grape-like cluster of burns set into the soft tissue of her instep. "I know it has to hurt. I'm just glad they got the guy who did this to you."

Julia shoved aside the memory of Alvarez and his damned cigarette, put on her bravest face. "Yeah. Me too."

It didn't take long to get the paperwork done and soon, fortified with a hospital nutritionist's idea of breakfast, Julia was dressed and ready to go. She didn't really want to go back to the hotel, so she decided, on impulse, to call about an outgoing flight. Miraculously, there were still seats available on a plane bound for Phoenix and a connecting flight from there to home. She only had ninety minutes, but if she could hurry... she said yes to the flight and called for a taxi and then for the nurse.

"I've got a flight out in just over an hour," she announced the moment Betty—the nurse who'd changed her bandages—walked into the room. "There's a taxi on its way, too. So am I free to go?"

Betty looked at her, obviously surprised. "So soon? The doctor said we'd be releasing you to Mr. Robert's care."

"There's been a change of plans," Julia lied. "Mr. Roberts is unable to get away, so I'll be travelling alone. And I'd better get going, or I'll miss my plane."

"Of course." Betty brought a wheelchair out from the corner of the room. "Your chariot awaits, madam."

"Oh, come on. Do I have to?"

"Hospital orders," the nurse replied. "And you don't want to get me into trouble with my boss, do you?"

"No, I guess not."

Julia hobbled carefully to the chair and sat down, started to reach for her suitcase but was quickly intercepted. "Don't worry about that. I'll have one of the aides follow us down."

"Thanks." She took a deep breath and tried to muster some enthusiasm. "Alright then, away we go!"

---

Morning found Sloan hurriedly making arrangements for his and Julia's flight home. By sheer luck, he'd run into her doctor last night and had arranged for an early dismissal. He'd also spent quite a bit of time with the man, getting detailed instructions on the follow-up care she would need and any

difficulties that could be expected as a result of her ordeal. Although the gunshot wound had been the most dangerous of her injuries, it was the other things that Alvarez had done to her that concerned him now. He had not wanted to ask about the burns and she'd glazed over the subject during her interview with Brannigan, but they'd have to talk about it sooner or later. After the argument last night, he was inclined to go with sooner.

He couldn't say, really, why he'd reacted with such anger to her admission of having left the hotel on her own. Was it simple disappointment that she'd once again behaved recklessly, or maybe even jealousy? Steve had been his best friend, and it hurt to admit that he was jealous of Julia's love for him. Three trips around the block had cleared his head, though, and he'd headed back up to her room to talk it out. He'd just happened to share an elevator with her attending physician, however, and by the time he was satisfied that he had all the doctor's instructions down, he'd found her asleep. The temptation to wake her had been strong, but he'd remembered the doctor's warning about her getting enough rest and had settled for tucking her in before returning to his hotel room for a much-needed night's sleep.

This morning, there had been calls to the office, the airlines and the service the FBI used to clean up after a home had been dusted for fingerprints. The last thing he wanted was for her to walk into a mess like that her first night back. He'd also made arrangements with airport security to take them through the employee's checkpoint, so that she wouldn't have to wait in line. She'd probably insist that she could manage like everyone else, but Sloan had no intention of allowing her to do too much today. In fact, he intended to make sure she spent the month of December recuperating, because he wanted her perfectly healed before they once again discussed her leaving the hotel alone. He still felt that a spanking would be unfair, given the circumstances, but he planned to make it clear, via a

stern lecture, that she could not continue to take chances with her safety. He loved her entirely too much to allow that kind of behavior to continue.

Finally, he was ready to leave. At the curb outside the hotel entrance, he held out his hand to John Brannigan.

"You really saved the day, John. Thank you."

Brannigan shrugged. "I don't know about that, but I'm sure glad that lady of yours is going to be okay. And," he added, clapping Sloan on the back, "I *expect* to be invited to the wedding. Those things always get Nancy feeling romantic."

"You've got it... *if* Julia'll have me, that is."

Brannigan opened the taxi door. "I saw the way she looked at you last night and believe me, she'll have you."

"I hope you're right," Sloan murmured, their argument still weighing heavily on his mind. "I really do."

---

Julia breathed a sigh of relief when the taxi pulled up to the front of the airport. "What is it with you guys?" she mumbled as she passed a \$20 bill over the back of the seat. "Do you all go to the same driving school, or what?"

"Excuse, please?" the beefy man said in what she pegged as a German accent.

"Never mind."

She stepped out of the car and reached back in for the luggage. It was heavier than she remembered and picking it up made all the aching places in her body throb back into life. When a man in a red uniform offered her a luggage cart and some help, she gladly stepped back and let him take over the struggle. Gratefully, she placed the fee in his palm, along with a generous tip. She was already exhausted and at this rate, it promised to be a very long day. With a deep breath and a muttered curse, she pointed the luggage cart in the direction of her check in and started on her way.

---

"What do you mean she's gone?" Sloan stared at the nurse, disbelieving. "Where did she go?"

"To the airport, Mr. Roberts," the gray-haired nurse said nervously. "I asked if she was supposed to be released to your care, but she said there'd been a change of plans—and since the doctor had signed the papers, there was nothing I could do to keep her here."

Sloan drummed fingertips against his leg and, with no small amount of effort, managed to reign in his temper. "I understand, Betty, and it's not your fault. But can you tell me what time she left?"

"Oh yes. It was about an hour ago—10:45, I think. I took her down myself."

Sloan let out an aggravated breath and strode toward the elevator. This was beyond believable. How could she have done something so foolish and defiant? In an instant, his decision to forgo the spanking was overturned. "When I get my hands on you, Julia Marie Marshall—" he muttered.

"Oh, and Mr. Roberts?" He turned back at the sound of the nurse's voice. "When she left, Ms. Marshall said she had an hour and a half to be on her plane. I'd guess that leaves you about thirty minutes to find her at the airport."

The elevator chimed and the doors slid open. "Thank you," he called out as he stabbed the ground floor button. The moment the doors slid shut he added, "I swear, Julia, you are not going to sit for a week!"

He was outside in record time, and just about to hail a cab when he noticed a highway patrol officer sliding coins into a newspaper machine. "Officer," he called out as he yanked his badge from his pocket, "I'm Sloan Roberts, FBI. Is there any way you can get me to the airport? I have reason to believe an injured operative may be there."

The uniformed woman looked stunned, but after a careful examination of his badge, nodded. "Sure, Mr. Roberts." She pointed to her nearby patrol car. "I take it you're in a hurry?"

"Yeah." He jerked the passenger side door open and slid into the front seat. "So if you could step on it—?"

"No problem." The officer punched a button on the control panel and red and blue lights throbbed to life. "I'll have you there in five."

The patrolwoman was true to her word and five minutes later, Sloan said a hasty "thank you" and bolted from the car. He scanned the arrival and departure boards and found the flight he'd been looking for. He'd refused the earlier departure time in order to get first class seats on a non-stop flight, but he felt certain that Julia was on the earlier one. The moment he saw the gate assignment, he took off at a dead run, the sharp sound of his feet on the tiled floor reminding him of the rhythm he intended to set the moment he had Julia over his knee.

---

The airport was teeming with people and by the time she made it to her departure gate, Julia was on the verge of collapsing. She'd felt well enough at the hospital—had even turned down the last dose of pain relievers in order to stay alert—but now all she wanted to do was sleep. Fortunately, most of the passengers had already boarded, and since she'd checked both her bags, she was able to collapse in her seat with minimal fuss. She was, however, stuck in a middle seat and every time the man to her right moved, pain zigzagged like lightening up into her shoulder and down into throbbing fingertips. She must have looked bad because the grandmotherly woman to her left peered at her cautiously.

"You don't look so good, sweetie," she said. "Are you going to be sick?"

Julia let her head drop back against the seat. "I was just released from the hospital," she whispered. "I'm afraid I overdid it by trying to get home today."

"Oh dear." The old woman reached out to pat Julia's left hand, glimpsed the carefully bandaged wrist and gave her a pitying look. "As bad as all that, was it?"

"Oh, no." Julia shook her head quickly. "It's nothing like that. I'm in law enforcement and—"

"Will you two keep it down?" the man by the window growled. "I'm trying to get some shut eye over here."

The grandmother looked up, shocked, but something boiled over inside Julia at that moment. Everything she'd been through, all the hurt leftover from her conversation with Sloan, crashed over her in one vicious wave. Furious, she turned toward the jerk and met his glare with one of her own.

"No, I *won't* be quiet," she said, her voice trembling with rage. "I work for the FBI, and in the last four days, I have been through a hell somebody like you can't even *imagine*. You see this?" She shoved her left wrist under his nose. "This bandage is to cover up the place where my skin was rubbed raw by the handcuffs that a *crazy man* used to keep me prisoner. And my right shoulder—the one you keep jabbing into because you can't manage to keep your fat ass in your own seat—that's where he shot me; and a damn lucky thing it was too, considering the fact that he was *trying* to blow my head off! So no, I'm *not* going to be quiet, you miserable tub of lard. I've spent my entire adult life trying to keep killers off the street for *your* protection. I buried my husband, also an agent, two years ago—." A sudden sob shook her as she realized what day it was. "Two years ago *this very day*, you bastard, and by god, if I want to talk to this nice lady sitting beside me, I'm going to do just that, your sleeping habits be damned!"

"Julia." She didn't realize how very quiet the plane had become until she heard her name. Shaken and embarrassed, she turned to find Sloan looking down at her. "I want you to come with me, please."

"I—" She shook her head silently. "No. I'm going home."

"Ma'am?" Sloan momentarily turned his attention to the Grandmother in the aisle seat. "Would you mind?"

"Not at all." She squeezed Julia's hand, then stood and slipped out into the aisle. "Take your time."

Julia looked at the woman as though she'd been betrayed, but there was no help for it now. "Sloan, please," she murmured as he hunkered down to her eye level. "Don't make a scene. I just want to go home."

"And you will." There was nothing unkind in his tone, but beneath his words flowed a current of strength. "I've already made reservations on the non-stop flight. You'll be more comfortable in first class."

"Oh." As suddenly as the fury had come upon her, it was gone. "I

thought—."

"I know," he said, his voice dropping to a whisper. "And I'm sorry. We have a lot of talking to do, of course—." The look in his green eyes set butterflies loose in her stomach. "But that can wait until you're feeling better." He reached out and stroked her cheek. "You don't look so good, honey. Please let me take care of you."

Overwhelmed, Julia reached out to Sloan, who helped her to her feet. The man next to the window started muttering rude epitaphs, but she felt Sloan look back and the man was suddenly silent. Weak and overcome by her emotions, she walked ahead of Sloan to the door of the plane. The moment they were both on the departure ramp, he lifted her up in strong arms and carried her to the now quiet waiting area.

"You had me worried," he said as she laid her head against his shoulder. "We're going to have to talk about that particular habit of yours."

"I know." He felt wonderful, all sinew and strength, and she just wanted to crawl into him and feel safe. "I thought you couldn't forgive me, that you'd given up. I got angry."

He kissed her forehead. "You had a right to be angry. I shouldn't have lost my temper with you. I understand why you



had to go, when you thought Steve was alive. I would have done the same thing."

"Really?"

He smiled against her hair. "Yes, really. *Today*, however—"

"I know—I deserve a spanking. It was dumb for me to run away like I did. I should have stayed and talked it out with you."

"Yes, you should have." He let out a deep breath. "But that discussion can wait until we're home and you're up to it. Right now, though, we've got a plane to catch. Think you can walk?"

Julia nodded and struggled to her feet, but she'd not gone more than a few steps when, noticing her limp, Sloan commanded, "Sit down, young lady—and don't you move. I'll be right back."

She was grateful for the wheelchair this time, even more so for the roomy first class seats and the steady tha-thump of Sloan's heart as she leaned against his chest. She was especially thankful that, upon arriving home, he did not leave her, but rather joined her in the bed. Tucked tightly against his body, his breath warm on her ear, she drifted off to sleep.

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"Julia? Would you come here, please?"

Sloan's voice reached her from the bedroom and her hands stilled in the dishwasher. She'd spent the last three weeks at his place—an arrangement that felt right to both of them—and she'd wondered more than once when this moment would come. She dried her hands quickly and walked down the hall to the room they shared. He was seated, just as she expected, on the end of the bed. She paused at the door, but only for a moment, before going to him and placing her hands in his.

"You know I love you, don't you?"

The fireplace flickered, casting his face in shadow and light, but she kept her brown eyes steady on his green ones. "Yes. I love you, too."

He smiled, just a little, and squeezed her hands. "And you know, too, that I would do anything to protect you. Right?"

She bit her lip and nodded. A volcano of nervous anticipation threatened to erupt low in her belly. "Yes."

"Okay then." He let go of her hands and began to roll his right sleeve up. "Tell me why you're going to be spanked, young lady."

"I... I've been reckless... acting first and thinking later. First I flew off to California without telling you. Then I got the flowers and that letter, and believing it was from Steve, I left the hotel without back up. And then I left the hospital and tried to get home by myself when I was way too weak to manage it."

Sloan nodded. "Okay, hon. All of that's true, but there are some things I want you to understand." He reached for her hand and gave her fingers a reassuring squeeze. "First of all, you were already punished for the way you went to California. Remember?"

She blushed and looked at her toes. "Yes sir."

"Good. And as far as leaving the hotel—" He stopped suddenly and said in a low tone, "Look at me, Julia."

Her head jerked up and she found his eyes once again.

"I'm not going to punish you for how you reacted to Alvarez's tricks. Anyone in your shoes would have done the same thing." He smiled at her, gently. "None of us knew about his brother and the fire at the prison, about how warped that left him. I doubt even Steve would have made the connection, and I'm certainly not going to punish you for being vulnerable to the man."

"But Sloan, I almost got you killed."

He closed his eyes briefly, then pulled her gently down into his lap. "Honey, you're going to have to trust me on this one. I will *not* spank you for what happened there, because *you* are

not to blame. Understand?" She nodded and he went on. "However, I *will* spank you for holding onto this guilt. And as far as leaving the hospital without so much as a good-bye—" He slid a finger under her chin and made her meet his eyes. "That was defiant and foolish, Julia, and you can expect to be over my knee for a good long time because of your serious lack of judgement. Do you understand me, young lady?"

Julia nodded, suddenly very aware of the nervous tingling that had crept up the back of her legs to settle in her still-clothed bottom. "I understand."

"Right then." His demeanor changed, Sloan set Julia on her feet and told her, "Take those jeans and panties off, young lady. A bare-bottomed spanking is just what you need tonight, and I'm certainly going to give it to you."

Swallowing hard, Julia fumbled with button and zipper, then pushed both her jeans and blue satin panties down to her knees. She looked up at Sloan expectantly. He shook his head.

"I said *off*, Julia. Do you really intend to start off by defying me?"

"Oh, no!" She shook her head and quickly pushed the jeans the rest of the way to the floor. "I'm sorry," she added as she pulled one foot, then the other, free of the material.

"Apology accepted," he said as he steadied her with his hand. Then, the moment she was ready, he pulled her into the "v" formed by his legs. "Over you go," he said as he guided her over his left leg.

The volcano of nerves went into a full-blown eruption as he tipped her farther forward and clamped her legs between his. Then his hand was on her naked, vulnerable flesh and he was telling her, in a low voice,

"I love you, Julia. That's why I'm doing this. Because you need to think before you act in order to stay safe. And because no wife of mine is going to put herself in danger as you've done."

*Smack!* She jumped when his hand made sharp contact with the base of her right cheek, again when he left a matching handprint on the other side. How could she have forgotten what a spanking felt like? Not at all sure that she could stand it, she grasped his ankle and held on for dear life.

"Oh!" He peppered her bottom with sharp spanks as she wriggled and jerked over his knee. "Ouch! Sloan, please... I'm so sorry."

"I'm sure you are," he said, slapping the back of each thigh for emphasis. "But we're just getting started, young lady; and you're going to be a great deal sorrier by the time this night is over with."

As it turned out, he was right about that. Julia jerked and tensed, wriggled and fought, but there was no escaping the relentless rhythm of his palm to her tender bottom. Worse yet, when she failed to control her tongue and uttered several four-letter words, he set her on her feet and ordered curtly,

"Get the brush."

"No!" Her eyes grew round as saucers and she cupped her hands to her flaming cheeks. "No, please. I don't want the brush!"

He said absolutely nothing, just raised one eyebrow and she all but ran to the bathroom to retrieve the dreaded hairbrush. She returned and placed it, handle first, in his palm; but getting back over his knee was a much more difficult task. She was so reluctant, in fact, that he had to "encourage" her with several sharp smacks to the back of one thigh. She danced away, but he managed to grasp her arm and toppled her back over his knee. Then, left arm about her waist and right leg pinning her down, he applied himself wholeheartedly to the task at hand.

By the time the spanking was over, Julia was a blubbering mess. Listening to her cries, Sloan heard the last of the guilt ebb away. Quietly, he set the brush down and laid a soothing hand on one crimson cheek.

"That's it, sweetheart," he murmured. "Just let it all out. I'm here and you're safe—and it's okay to cry."

Eventually he helped her up and tucked her beneath the covers. Then, exhausted himself, he undressed and fit his body, spoon-like, to hers. Both of them were asleep in minutes.

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On Christmas Eve, they drove to the mountains and hiked up to the place where the Marshall family's cabin had been. Julia stopped for a moment and laid her hand over the initials Steve had carved so long ago; and this time, she actually smiled. There was a new peace in her heart, a peace she knew he approved of.

At the top of the hill, Sloan removed his backpack and knelt to open the heavy wooden box. Hesitantly, he called to her, "Julia?"

She nodded and took the brass urn that he lifted out of the velvet interior, held it to her chest until he stood and put his arms around her.

"Are you sure you want to do this today?" he asked. "You don't have to."

She smiled faintly through her tears. "He told me—when he was there with me in that horrible, dark place—that he had to let me go, let me move forward. It's time I did the same for him."

She handed the heavy brass container to Sloan, then pulled out the stopper. Without speaking, he poured the ash—a little at a time—into her hands; and as the wind lifted Steve's body up and away, Julia smiled and whispered,

"They shall mount up with wings like eagles. They shall run and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint."

When the last of Steve Marshall's earthly remains had disappeared, Sloan put down the urn and wrapped Julia in his strong, comforting arms. "I love you, sweetheart."

"I love you, too." She gave his hand a squeeze. "Come on. Let's go home."