

Debbie Gould



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Chapter One

Dan's eyes flew open at the sound of his phone ringing. As he fumbled for the receiver, he glanced at the bedside clock. Three-thirty in the morning. Damn, it was never good news at this hour. He took a deep breath, then blew it out and answered.

"Hello?"

"Oh, Danny, thank God you're there. I'm in trouble here. It's bad this time, real bad. I don't know what to do. Oh shit, Danny. What am I gonna do?"

Her voice came over the phone shaky and breathless. She was almost to the point of hysteria.

He was immediately alert, his heart pounding in his chest. Melanie was always the level-headed one in the family. He'd never heard her sound like this, like she was about to jump out of her skin.

"Melanie, sweetheart, calm down. Take a deep breath and talk to me. What's happened?"

"Oh, Danny, I messed up big. I caught him with a woman at his office this afternoon. I thought I could finally be free, so I told him I was done, that I was leaving. He lost it, Danny, totally lost it. I truly thought he was going to kill me

this time. He just left, but I need to get out of here before he comes back. He took my car keys with him and it's snowing so damn hard I can't walk anywhere. I need help. Please Danny, I really need your help."

Dan couldn't fathom what the hell was going on, but the terror in Melanie's voice told him he'd better figure it out. He pulled on his jeans and threw a shirt over his head.

"Back up, Mel, what do you mean you thought he was going to kill you *this time*? What is going on?" Dan had a strong suspicion he wasn't going to like her answer.

"There's no time now to get into it. Danny, please just come help me."

"I need to know something, Mel, like why you wanted to finally be free? What the hell's been going on?"

He was having a hard time hearing what she was saying through the sound of her sobs and hitching breath. Dan suddenly felt sick to his stomach. He forced the lump in his throat down and tried to calm her. He got his socks and shoes on and found a sweatshirt.

"Honey, calm down. Of course, I'm going to help you. Can you call a cab to take you to a hotel 'til I can get there?"

"No, I already tried; it's like a blizzard outside. Nobody will come out."

“Okay, get your things together and wait for me. I’ll be there in an hour or so.”

“Danny, it’s a two hour drive and it’s snowing.”

“Well, I guess it’s a good thing you have an ex-cop for a brother with a heavy-duty four-wheeled drive pickup. Don’t worry. I’ll be there before you know it.”

“Danny...hurry. Please be careful. There’s so much you don’t know about Tony. He’s a dangerous man. I can’t live like this anymore. I’m so, so tired of it all.”

Shit! Shit! Shit! Why didn’t he know any of this? Was he so damn busy with his own life he didn’t know the hell his sister had been living through? He had to know one thing before he hung up. “Mel, how long...how long have you been living like this?”

There was a long pause before she answered, followed by a deep sigh. “Since the day I married him.”

“Damn it, Melanie! Why didn’t you tell me? Why the fuck didn’t you get out?” *Why didn’t you know asshole? Why weren’t you there for her?* Dan could hear her crying again, but could barely hear her words.

“Please, don’t hate me. Please, Danny, I couldn’t bear it.”

“Aw, Mel, I’m sorry. I could never hate you. You’re my baby sister. I love you,

sweetheart. I *will* fix this for you. You're coming home and everything will be fine. I promise. I'll have my cell phone on and I'll be there before you know it. I love you."

"Thanks, Danny. I love you too."

Dan hung the phone up, grabbed the whole thing, and flung it against the wall.

"Fuck!"

How could he have missed this? How could he have allowed his sister to live through five fucking years of unimaginable hell? Had he really been so damn preoccupied with his own damn life? She only lived two hours away, for shit's sake. Why hadn't he visited her more often? Made more of an effort?

He'd been so caught up in his own dramas that he hadn't even noticed his sister was in trouble. When Hannah left him four years ago, he'd thrown himself into his work and hardly noticed life went on around him. Shit!

Dan grabbed his wallet, shoved the nine-millimeter into its holster and threw on his coat. He left his room, went down the hall, and took the stairs to Luke's room two at a time before bursting through his bedroom door.

Luke, his best friend from high school and partner in their PI and security business, needed to know Dan would be out of town for a while. They became partners six months ago when Luke was discharged from the Air Force due to

injuries he received in Iraq.

Dan felt for the light switch, and when he turned, found himself staring down the wrong side of the barrel of a nine-millimeter.

“Jesus H. Christ, Luke! It’s me.”

Luke immediately swung the gun up and away from Dan’s head.

“God damn it, Dan! What the hell is wrong with you? I could have killed you. Shit!” Luke turned and walked away from him.

Dan knew Luke well enough to give him a second to gather himself. Luke had told him about some of the shit he had seen and done when he was a Ranger. Dan knew it was the watered down version and could only imagine the demons that lived inside his friend. Dan also knew better than to bust in on him as he’d just done, but with the call from Melanie, he had forgotten that.

“Sorry man, I wasn’t thinking. Look, I just got a call from Melanie and I wanted to let you know I have to leave. I’m not sure when I’ll get back, but just so you know, I’m bringing her home with me. You’re going to have to meet with Kahn in the morning. I doubt I’ll be back in time to make it. He wants us to install a security system in his daughter’s lake house. I’m supposed to meet him there at nine to do a walk-through.”

Dan turned to leave when Luke’s voice stopped him. “Wait just one

goddamned minute. What the hell are you talking about? What kind of trouble? Legal?”

Dan didn't want to get into this with Luke. Number one, he didn't have time for it. Number two, Luke and Melanie had a history. He knew she wouldn't want Luke to know what was going on. He shoved a hand through his hair. “No, not legal. I really don't have the time to get into it now. I needed to be there like five minutes ago. I'll fill you in when I get back.”

Luke was dressed and grabbing his boots before Dan finished talking. “Fill me in on the way. Let's go.” He grabbed his jacket and gun and pushed by Dan to get out the door.

Dan ran down the stairs and caught up with Luke at the back door. “Damn it, Luke, there are things you don't know, and I'm fairly sure Mel wouldn't want you to.”

Luke stopped, hand on the doorknob, and hesitated for a quick second. He took a deep breath, then opened the door without looking back.

“Probably not, but if she is in trouble, and she must be to have you this wound up, I'm going. If it turns out you don't need my help, then I'll stand down. She won't have to deal with me. But if you do need me, I've got your back, always. And so does she. That's what friends and partners do. I'll deal with the personal

issues. Let's just get going."

Dan shook his head and smiled. It was good to have Luke back. He'd missed his best friend the nine years he'd been away. It was nice to know he could count on him when the chips were down. He just hoped Melanie agreed. "Okay partner, let's go."

They jumped in Dan's truck. He drove while Luke laced up his boots and put his jacket on. Dan and Luke had been friends since they could walk. There wasn't anything one wouldn't do for the other. There wasn't anything they couldn't say to each other or talk about, except Melanie. He really dreaded telling Luke what was going on.

Twenty miles down the road Luke couldn't stand it anymore. He wanted to know just what the hell this was all about. Understandably, with his and Melanie's past, he and Dan had an unspoken agreement not to discuss Melanie for the sake of their friendship.

So, he got by with listening to bits and pieces of their phone conversations or when Dan talked to other people about his sister. Luke would shift a little closer to listen in. He had no one to blame for that but himself. He was the one who screwed up and lost the girl. A mistake he regretted. His only solace was in knowing she was happy, and he hadn't screwed up her life the way he had his

own.

Luke took a deep breath and looked over at Dan. “Okay, we’re on our way. Fill me in.”

Dan was silent for a moment. Luke was beginning to think he wasn’t going to answer him. “It seems Mel has been having some trouble with her husband.”

Luke stiffened. This was not what he wanted to hear. “What kind of trouble?”

Dan shook his head. “Look, I’m pretty sure Mel wouldn’t want me discussing this with you, and from what I just found out, I can’t say as I would blame her.”

“Dan, just spit it out. I am the last person who would judge her. I hope you know that.”

‘Yeah, I do. I just don’t think she does. Anyway, she called to say she needed to get out of the house. Apparently, she found her husband cheating on her and told him she wanted a divorce. He threatened her, and she is very afraid of him. She’s afraid he’s going to kill her.’

Luke’s stomach flipped and bile clawed up his throat. This didn’t sound like the happy life he imagined for her.

“Is he home now? If she’s that scared of him, why doesn’t she drive

somewhere public and wait for us instead of staying there?”

“He’s not home right now and they just got dumped on with a shitload of snow. She said not even the cabs are running. Plus, he took her car keys with him when he left.”

“Why is she so afraid of him, Dan? What the hell has been going on?”

“I don’t know. When she said she was afraid he was going to kill her, she said *this time*. I asked her what that meant, but she wouldn’t tell me. I did ask her how long this had been going on, and she said since she married him.”

Luke could feel the heat rising in his face. His voice shook with anger. “Are you trying to tell me Melanie’s husband has been abusing her for years and you had no fucking clue?! How the *hell* could that happen? You two are supposed to be close. How could you not know this was happening to her?”

“Look, you don’t have to beat me over the head with it. I fucked up. I don’t know how I could have missed something like this. Melanie is one of the most important people in my life, and I’ve let her down. Do you know how that makes me feel?”

Luke took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Yeah, as a matter of fact, I do. Sorry I blew up at you like that. Why doesn’t she go to the cops? Have the bastard arrested.”

“Probably because he is a cop. A decorated, highly regarded, detective. Used to work Vice. Everyone thinks he’s this hero, a super cop. I doubt anyone would believe Melanie. Beyond being a cop he also has some pretty hefty political contacts.”

Luke thrust a hand through his hair. “So she’s basically a prisoner in her own home.” Damn, he couldn’t believe this was happening. She had to be living in hell. It was something he knew well. All this time he thought he was doing the right thing by her by staying away.

“I don’t know how I missed all this. She’s changed, Luke. She’s not the fun, life-loving girl she used to be. How could I not see that?”

“I’m not sure you realize what your sister meant to me back in the day. She was everything to me. All this time I have been patting myself on the back, telling myself what an honorable thing I did by breaking it off with her. What a bunch of bullshit! I know I hurt her back then. What you need to know now is that I will help the both of you get through this. I’ll do what I need to make this up to her.”

“Don’t you think you’re taking a lot on those big shoulders of yours, Luke? Besides, it’s not me you need to convince, is it?”



Melanie sat cross-legged on her bed. She was finally ready to get the hell

away from Tony. She had always known Danny would help her, but had been too afraid and ashamed to ask him. Besides, she hadn't wanted to put him in that position. Tony was not a man who would allow her to leave without retaliation.

When she discovered that one of his attacks on her left her pregnant, she knew it was only a matter of time. If she were to protect her baby, she would need to leave. She still hadn't told Danny about the baby.

Not because she was ashamed; she loved her baby more than life. He was giving her the strength she needed to get her life back together. But, she was ashamed about the violent way he was conceived. She never wanted Danny to know what her marriage was like.

Well, he was going to find out soon enough, wasn't he? She got up from the bed and started shoving clothes into an overnight bag. Her left wrist throbbed where Tony had grabbed it and twisted earlier. Between her wrist and her swollen right eye, she figured she'd gotten off easy this time.

She needed to concentrate on getting out of here. The little boy she carried was her world. She'd had nothing to live for before him, but now she could see a new future for herself and her son.

God, how much longer until Danny got here? An hour and fifteen minutes had passed since she called him. *Please, let him get here before Tony comes back.* She

grabbed her cell phone and dialed him, unable to wait any longer.



Dan's cell phone rang, breaking the silence that filled the cab of the pick-up. Dan handed the phone to Luke so he could concentrate on driving. Only fifteen minutes away and he had the suspicion that every minute would count.

"Hello." Nothing but silence answered him. "Lainie? Is that you?"

Luke heard a gasp when he used his old nickname for her. "Lainie, please answer me. Are you okay?"

Melanie's voice trembled as she answered. "I'm fine. Could I please speak with my brother?"

Luke handed the phone over to Dan. "Melanie? Honey, are you alright? We're about fifteen minutes away."

"Why, Dan? Why is he with you? I didn't even know he was home! How could you do this to me?"

Her voice sounded nearly hysterical to him. He glanced over at Luke who was watching intently. Christ! Why did things have to be so difficult?

"Listen to me, Mel, everything is going to work out. I promise you. No worries, right?" That had always been their motto. No worries.

"No worries? This has got to be one of the worst nights of my life and you

bring *him* with you. Are you trying to shame me more than I already am?”

“Listen, Mel, no one is judging you or your situation. Shit happens. I am here to make sure nothing happens to you ever again, and I mean that. No one will hurt you again.” He gave Luke a pointed look.

“Okay, Danny, I’m sorry. It was just such a shock. I ...“

Dan heard a loud crash and Melanie’s scream. “Oh God, he’s back Danny. It’s too late.”

“Stay on the line, Mel, don’t disconnect. I’m giving the phone to Luke so he can three-way nine-one-one. Hang on, honey, we’re almost there.” Dan threw the phone to Luke and stomped on the accelerator.

Luke got the nine-one-one operator on the line and gave her Melanie’s address as Dan gave it to him. He switched back over to Melanie so that now the nine-one-one operator could also hear what was happening since he had no idea himself.

“Lainie? You still there? Tell me what’s going on.” He could barely hear her whispered voice coming through the phone.

“He’s home. He’s downstairs yelling for me. It’s too late, Luke. I can hear him coming up the stairs.”

Luke could hear the angry voice of a man getting closer. Never had he been

so terrified for someone in his life. The blood raced through his body, pounding in his head. He felt impotent, useless. His hand clenched the phone tight, turning his knuckles white. There wasn't a damn thing he could do for her.

“No, Lainie, it's not too late. You just hang tight. We're coming. You hear me, Lainie? We're on the way.” He pleaded with her to hear him, to hang on to hope while he was losing it himself. Just a few more minutes he told himself.

Luke heard Melanie scream and the sound of a door splintering apart.

Chapter Two

Melanie screamed as her bedroom door shattered and Tony came storming into the room. She backed herself into the corner of the room, clutching the phone like a lifeline. She saw when Tony noticed her packed overnight bag. His eyes widened and, if possible, his face grew even redder.

In two long strides he stood in front of her. He punched her in the face, full-force, and her head ricocheted off the wall. Pain exploded inside her skull and black dots swam across her vision. He grabbed her by the shoulders and flung her onto the bed.

Landing on her back she tried to roll to her side and crawl off the other end. Before she could even make it to her side, he jumped on top of her. “You stupid, stupid, little bitch. You’re not going anywhere. Just who the hell do you think you are, causing that scene at my office? You’re lucky the place was full of cops or I would have killed you then.”

He backhanded her again, leaving the side of her face burning, and climbed on top of her, straddling her hips. Grabbing her hair in one hand, he yanked her face up to his. The tangy taste of blood filled her mouth and sharp pinpricks bit

into her scalp.

He twisted her head sideways and whispered in her ear. “This will be the last time you embarrass me like that.” She shivered and Tony pushed her head back into the mattress, and then ripped open her shirt in one angry pull of the cloth.

“Please don’t do this, Tony.” *Oh God, please don’t let him do this*, she pleaded silently, trying not to let him see her fear. Her abdomen contracted and she feared for her baby.

”Time for another lesson, Melanie. You know what happens when you go against me. You really do bring this on yourself, ya know? Not that I don’t enjoy reminding you of your place in life now and then. I do.”

He bent down and bit her breast hard, drawing blood. Melanie screamed out, the pain making the room spin. She pushed against his chest, but he didn’t budge.

“That’s it, baby. Tell me how much you like it.” He grabbed her breast and twisted hard, at the same time yanking her hair back, causing her neck and back to arch into him. She could feel his body against her. The more she screamed, the harder he got. Bile rose in her throat and she fought to keep it down.

“Admit it. You like it rough. You want it like this. That’s why you make me

punish you.” He straightened and leaned back on his heels, beginning to unbutton his pants. She had to do something. This was it. For her baby and herself, she wouldn’t be his victim any longer.

As he went to free himself, Melanie brought both feet up and slammed them into his groin, throwing him off the bed. She couldn’t go through this one more time. Tony cried out in pain as she rolled off the other side of the bed and scrambled to her feet.

She ran out into the hallway, but he was on her just as she got to the stairs. Apparently her aim hadn’t been as true as she thought. He grabbed her hair again and pulled her backwards. “That’s it, bitch. You *will* pay for that.”

She screamed as he grabbed her shoulders and pushed. As she started to fall backwards down the stairs, two things registered in her mind. The first was Luke’s voice calling to her and the second was that she was not going down those stairs alone.

At the last minute she dropped the phone and gripped the front of Tony’s shirt, jerking him to her as hard as she could. They went down the stairs together, tumbling one over the other, and when it was over, Tony was at the bottom with Melanie on top of him.

It felt as if the world stood still for a moment, until she realized she was still

alive. Large hands were all over her and she flinched, thinking it was Tony. Opening her eyes she looked up into Luke's concerned face. "Don't move, honey, we need to see if anything is broken."

Wanting to get as far away from Tony as she could, she ignored Luke's advice and slowly stood. Luke's arm wrapped around her and guided her away from the body. Melanie looked back at Tony and saw blood pooling beneath his head.

Danny pressed his fingers to Tony's carotid artery, feeling for a pulse. Dan shook his head at Luke and she realized he was saying he could find no pulse. Tony was lying dead at the bottom of their stairs.

Dan walked over to her. "It's over, honey. He won't hurt you, ever again."

Sharp pain shot through Melanie's abdomen, around to her back. She gasped, and bent over at the waist.

It was only then that she noticed the blood flowing down her legs. Clutching her very, pregnant belly she cried out. "Oh God, Danny. The *baby!*"

And with that, everything went dark.



Dan rode in the ambulance with Melanie to the hospital while Luke stayed behind to answer questions for the police. He wanted to be with Melanie, but the

police, who'd arrived only minutes behind him and Dan, were adamant. Their questions were pretty cut and dry for now. They had the nine-one-one tape and it was evident from the scene what had happened. But a man died and an investigation had to be conducted. Whatever!

An hour later, he was in Dan's truck headed for the hospital, trying to get the sound of Melanie's screams out of his head. He had heard everything that happened in that house. Every sick and twisted thing Tony had said and done to Melanie. The sickening sound of flesh hitting flesh, and every harsh breath whispered in her ear. Every fucking single cry of pain.

Luke slammed on the breaks and swerved to the side of the road. Throwing the gears into park, he bolted out of the truck to the side of the road where he fell to his knees, and lost the entire contents of his stomach.

He was no innocent when it came to witnessing the brutality in this world. Far from it. Hell, he'd been on the giving end of a lot of it in his special ops days. But this was Melanie. He had only heard ten minutes of her life. He could only imagine what she had gone through for five years with that bastard.

He got to his feet and walked to the side of his truck. He needed to get a hold of his emotions before he got to the hospital. It wouldn't do anyone any good if he walked in there a basket-case full of fury. He couldn't even get the satisfaction

of killing the son of a bitch himself.

But he could stand by Melanie and help her through this, her and her baby. And he would, whether she wanted him to or not. He wasn't walking away from her this time.

Chapter Three

When Luke got to the hospital, he found Dan pacing the waiting room. At six-foot one, Dan usually made a formidable impression. With brilliant blue eyes like those of his sister, he was a man who exercised hard and had the physique to prove it. Right now, his broad shoulders slumped, his feet shuffled and his head hung down to his chest. He was a mere shadow of the man that normally commanded attention from women and men alike.

“Any word yet?”

“No, nothing. Not a damn thing.” Dan threw himself into one of the chairs lined up against the wall. He ran an impatient hand through his light brown hair, then stood again and continued to pace. “You’d think they would know something by now. What the hell is taking so long?”

Luke grabbed Dan’s shoulder and steered him over to the chairs. “Let’s sit down for a minute. You’re not going to do Melanie any good, worked up like this. Take a couple deep breaths.”

“I know, I know. But it’s hell sitting here wondering what’s going on with her. Damn it, Luke, I didn’t even know she was pregnant. How is it that I didn’t

know I was going to be an uncle? I'd better do a heck of a lot better by her baby than I've done for Mel. 'Cause let me tell ya, pal, I've royally screwed the pooch here. Her husband's dead, and she's in the hospital fighting for her life. Can you say failure any louder?"

Dan buried his face in his hands.

Luke knew he was hurting, but so was he and most importantly, so was Melanie. "Listen Dan, stop feeling sorry for yourself for a minute and look at what's important. Melanie never has to go back to that man again. That part of her life is over. Nothing you or I do can change what happened to her."

He had Dan's attention, which was a good thing. "What we need to concentrate on is the future. Melanie has been through a lot. Years of abuse. It's like being held hostage, and that I have a lot of experience with. She needs you now to be her rock, not sitting around feeling sorry for yourself."

Dan just stared at him for a moment. He opened his mouth to say something when a doctor walked into the waiting room.

"Mr. Hunter?"

Dan and Luke stood to greet the doctor. Dan stepped forward to shake the man's hand.

"I'm Daniel Hunter. Is my sister alright?"

“Your sister is in recovery. We had to perform a cesarean section to deliver the baby because she was losing too much blood. We were able to stop the bleeding and barring any unforeseen complications, she should fully recover.”

Dan nodded, glanced down, and then raised his eyes apprehensively to the doctor. “What about the baby, doctor, did it make it?”

The doctor shook his head. “No, I’m sorry, he didn’t.”

Dan bent and braced his hands on his knees, while Luke placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. Letting out a deep breath, Dan stood straight again.

The doctor continued. “The injuries from the fall were too severe. Your sister was approximately seven months along. Her son was fully formed and weighed three pounds, one ounce. He probably could have survived, but the fall tore the placenta away from the uterine wall, and he went too long without oxygen. The nurses have him cleaned up. Your sister may want to say goodbye to him when she awakens. We actually encourage that. When a baby dies this close to term, it can be helpful in the grieving process.”

Dan nodded again, but didn’t speak. His Adam’s apple moved up and down and his eyes were glassy with unshed tears.

Again, Luke laid a gentle hand on Dan’s shoulder and addressed the doctor. “Does Melanie know about the baby?”

The doctor shook his head. “No, we thought it best she hear it from a family member. But if you are uncomfortable with that, I will notify her.”

Luke shook his head. “No, that won’t be necessary. We’ll take care of it. Are there any other injuries we should be aware of?”

“Lots of bruises and abrasions, and what looks to be a re-fracture of her left wrist. Nothing that should be worrisome. She’s going to be very sore for a few days though. If her recovery goes as planned, we should be able to release her tomorrow afternoon. We’ll let you know.”

Dan managed to get his voice back and shook the doctor’s hand again. “Thank you for all your help, doctor. Can we see her now?”

“Sure, she’s been moved to a private room. She’ll still be a little groggy from the anesthesia, but you’re welcome to sit with her. I’ll have the nurse show you to her room.”

“Um, do you mind if my friend goes with you to her room. I...uh...I would like to see my nephew if that’s allowed.” He was looking at the floor, and Luke could tell this was going to be very hard on Dan.

“By all means, Mr. Hunter. Nurse Davis will take you to see him and then show you to your sister’s room.”

“Thanks. You okay with that, Luke?”

Luke couldn’t miss the tears in Dan’s eyes. “Of course. You take as much

time as you need. I'll watch over Lainie.”

Luke and the doctor left Dan to go to Melanie's room. Dan walked over to the nurse's station. He wasn't sure if he was ready for this, but he felt an overwhelming urge to see the nephew he had grown to love over the few short hours he knew of his existence.

Dan was lead into a small room, decorated with blue walls and clouds painted on the ceiling. The lights were dim. Two rocking chairs, a round braided rug, and a nightstand filled the room. Two wall hangings caught his eye. One was of a wide-open meadow with wildflowers growing throughout the field. Two small children were running after a puppy, chasing butterflies.

The other was of a mother, sitting in a rocking chair, cradling a baby in her arms. The baby was wrapped in a pure white lace blanket, snuggled in its mother's arms. Surrounding the two of them were the wings of an angel. The peacefulness of the room took Dan's breath away. Dan dropped into one of the rocking chairs and waited for the nurse to arrive with his nephew.

The nurse came into the room with the baby wrapped in a blue blanket with a blue knit cap on his head. She put him in Dan's arms and quietly left the room.

The little boy looked to Dan as if he were sleeping. He was so small he fit into one of Dan's hands. But other than that he was perfect. A perfect little boy.

Dan lifted the cap and found a shock of sandy colored hair, just like Melanie's.

“Oh, God, little man, I am so damned sorry I couldn't protect you.” Dan buried his head in the blanket until his tears ran dry. “Just know that your mother and your uncle love you very much. I'll look after mom for you. She'll be okay. I'll see to it. I promise you that I won't let her down again.”



Luke opened the door to Melanie's room and quietly walked over to her bed. She slept so peacefully. Her sandy blond hair was draped over the pillow, long eyelashes resting softly on her pale cheeks. Oh, but he had loved her so much.

He shook his head. That was in the past. He only needed to look at the swollen black eye, the split fat lip, or the stitches in her forehead to remember this was the here and now. She looked fragile and small, lying in the hospital bed.

Luke couldn't imagine what she was going to go through when she woke to find her baby didn't make it. After what he heard tonight, it didn't take a genius to figure out how the baby was conceived, but that wouldn't have mattered to Lainie. He knew that much hadn't changed about her. She would have loved that little boy more than her own life, of that he was certain. He would have been the one bright spot after years of torture, a reason to go on.

Now that reason was gone. Torture was one thing he knew about. He could see her through this. He could make sure she had something to live for. What, he

wasn't sure, but he would figure it out.



Her head was pounding, and her throat was so dry, it felt as if she'd swallowed a glass of sand. Melanie brought her hand up to her face and was halted by the tug of the IV line. *What the...?* As she opened her eyes, the memories came flooding back.

Tony, the fight, the fall down the stairs. The blood, *oh God*, the blood. Bringing her hands down to her abdomen, she felt for the hard lump of her baby, but it wasn't there.

Struggling to get out of bed, the excruciating pain of the incision in her stomach had her falling back onto the pillow and crying out in agony.

"Whoa, whoa, honey. Lay still, Mel. You're in the hospital, and I'm right here with you." Melanie looked up to see Dan standing at the side of her bed.

"Where is he, Danny? Where's my baby?" Her voice near hysteria, she continued to fight through the pain and wires to get out of the bed. She needed to find her baby.

"Danny!!" Melanie noted the tears in Danny's eyes as he continued to hold her shoulders down. "Where, Danny? Take me to him. Now. *Please.*"

"I'm so sorry, Mel. The doctors did everything they could to save him, but they couldn't."

No, no, that wasn't true. He was alive. He had to be. Oh, please, he had to be. Shaking her head, Maggie yelled at Danny

“No! I don't believe you. Why are you lying to me, Danny? Let me up. Let me up, now! I have to find him. Where is he? Where? Where?!!”

Dan continued to physically restrain her in the bed. He sat on the edge, put his arms around her, and held her tight until she stopped fighting and her body started to shudder with sobs. Finally, she was still.

“Why, he was just an innocent baby?” she whispered into his chest. “Why was he taken away from me?”

Dan rocked her in his arms. “I know it's not fair sweetheart. I can't tell you why. But I do know he's at peace. He looked so serene, Mel, just like he was sleeping. I believe he truly is in a better place. He's safe now. Safe in the arms of angels.”

Melanie brought her head up to look at Dan. “You saw him? Oh, please, Danny, can I see him? Is it too late?”

“I'll go tell the nurses you're awake and would like to see your son,” Luke said from the corner of the room.

Melanie pushed her brother aside to see him. He glanced over at her on his way out of the room. His eyes were red, and watery. She buried her head back into Dan's chest as she heard him thank Luke.

She didn't want Luke here. Didn't want him seeing the pathetic mess her life had become. Everything was wrong. Nothing would be right again; she was sure of it.

She couldn't even think about Tony right now. She didn't feel any pain over losing him. She felt nothing for him, no anger, and no regret for pulling him down the stairs with her. Certainly no love. That had died years ago, if she had ever truly loved him at all.

Dan continued to hold her, his warmth wrapped around her giving her comfort and the impression of home. She clung to him with everything she had, not wanting to get lost in the despair she felt swirling in her mind. It had been so long since she'd felt safe.

"I would have been such a good mother to him, Danny. I loved him so much," she said softly.

"I know you did, honey. He knew it also. He was surrounded by your warmth and heard your heartbeat for seven months. He knew how much you wanted him. Don't doubt that."

Luke came back into the room followed by a nurse. He stood at the door, looking down at the floor while the nurse walked over to Melanie. "I just need a few minutes to check your vitals and your incision, and then I'll bring you your son."

Melanie silently nodded, and moved away from Dan to sink lower in the bed.

“Would you gentlemen please excuse us for a moment?”

“Of course.” Dan complied, moving off the bed and toward the door. “We’ll be right outside the door, Mel.”

Outside the room, Dan stormed up and down the hall. “If that bastard wasn’t dead, I’d kill him myself. What kind of monster does what he did to her?”

Luke leaned against the wall, his arms crossed over his chest. “Do you really need an answer to that? The guy was scum and got what he deserved.”

Dan stopped abruptly. “No, he got better than he deserved. What he deserved was to be locked up in a dungeon somewhere and beaten every day for the rest of his miserable life.”

Luke winced and paled slightly. “Yeah, that would be torture, wouldn’t it?”

“Damn, Luke, I wish you’d tell me what the hell happened to you.”

Luke pushed away from the wall. His mood gone from sullen to explosive in the beat of a heart.

“It’s not exactly polite conversation, Dan. You may think you want to know. You may even think you know. But you don’t, on both counts. I need some air. I’ll be back in a while.”

Dan watched as Luke practically bolted down the hallway. He should know

better than to push Luke like that, but he'd seen the color drain from Luke's face, saw the perspiration break out on his forehead when he talked of locking Tony up and beating him daily.

The guy needed to talk to someone about what happened to him in Iraq, but it was obvious to Dan, that wasn't going to happen anytime soon. Who knew, maybe Luke and Melanie could help each other somehow. Dan knew for a certainty that Luke was not over Melanie, and that he would help her anyway he could. Maybe it would be mutual. He could only hope.



The nurse brought the baby to Melanie. She knew Dan remained just outside the door, in case she needed him. The tiny blue bundle was placed into her arms, and the nurse quietly left the room.

Melanie stared down at the baby boy for a moment, unmoving, waiting for him to move or cry or reach out to grasp her finger, but he didn't. She moved the blanket aside and took in his tiny hands and feet. They were so small, so perfect. Ten tiny fingers and toes.

She bundled him back up and removed his cap. "Oh, look at your hair. So fine and silky. Just like your uncle Danny's. He would have been so proud of you, and you would have loved him so much. I'm so sorry I couldn't protect you, sweet boy." She wiped away a tear that had dropped on the baby's nose.

“Oh, I don’t mean to cry on you, little one. You don’t want that, do you? No, your mommy will be brave, just like you. You’ll never be alone, sweetheart. You’ll have the angels, oh, and Poppy and Nana. They will watch over you and love you until you and I meet again.”

Melanie’s voice caught. She took a deep breath and moved her head up and away. She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to swallow through the painful lump in her throat. She wanted to be strong for her little boy. If there were such a thing as heaven —and she had to believe there was—she didn’t want her son looking down on her crying.

Melanie looked back down at him. “I hope there are ponies in heaven. Poppy taught me how to ride. You make sure he teaches you everything you need to know, and let Nana give you those huge bear hugs she loves to give. Let her wrap you in her arms so tight you think she’ll turn you into a pancake. Her hugs are what I miss the most.”

Melanie spent another ten minutes talking to her baby and memorizing his every feature. She told him all about his Poppy and Nana and all they would do for him. She looked up when she heard the door open and Dan walked in.

He stood in the door for a moment, then slowly walked over to the bed.

“The nurse is ready to take him, Mel. We need to make the funeral arrangements for him.”

Melanie nodded, “His name is Dylan. I want him sent home. We can bury him in the family plot, with Poppy and Nana. No services, Danny. We’ve said our goodbyes for now. In the spring, when we can place him in the ground, we can have a small gathering. That’s all I want. Can you make the arrangements for me? Please?”

“Sure, Mel, I’ll...uh...send the nurse in, okay?”

“Okay,” was all she could choke out.

This was so hard. She didn’t want to give him up. She wanted to hold him like this until a miracle happened and he woke up and cooed at her the way newborns were supposed to, but she refused to get caught up in some dream world. She had to face reality. Her reality was that her baby was gone. He wasn’t going to wake up, and she would never know the potential he could have realized.

Melanie kissed her baby on the forehead. “I will never forget you, Dylan. You will live forever in my heart. My sweet, sweet boy. I’m so sorry. I love you.” She replaced his cap and arranged his blanket just as the nurse came in.

“Shall I take him now?” the nurse inquired.

Melanie nodded. “Thank you for allowing me this time with him. It has meant everything to me.”

The nurse smiled. “I’m glad it helped. Please let me know if you need anything.”

Dan leaned down and kissed Melanie's cheek. "Why don't you get some sleep? I'm going to go make a few calls and I'll be right back. Get some rest, Mel, okay?"

"Sure, Danny." She rolled over onto her side and closed her eyes. When she heard Dan move away from the bed and then the door open and close, she broke down and cried herself to sleep.



Dan walked out of the hospital and found Luke leaning up against the truck. He watched Luke draw in a long breath and let it slowly out.

"Hey," Dan offered.

Luke shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "Yeah, look, about the way I reacted in there. I apologize. You've got enough on your plate without me going off on you. I'll try to keep a handle on that from now on."

Dan held his hand out and Luke reached out and grasped it. "No problem. You know if you ever need to talk, well, I've got a good ear."

Luke shrugged and dropped Dan's hand. "Thanks. How's Melanie?"

Dan stepped back and sighed. "She's strong, but..." His voice trailed to a mere whisper. "How well does anyone handle losing their child? It's hard. Ya know?"

Luke nodded. Yeah, he knew.

“Anyway,” Dan continued. “I have to make a few arrangements for the baby and everything. Mel’s sleeping right now, but I don’t want her to wake up alone. Would you mind going up and sitting with her while I’m gone?”

Luke shook his head. “Of course not. I’ll head right up.”

Luke walked back into the hospital, taking the stairs back up to Melanie’s room. He just needed the extra minute to clear his head, to get his thoughts back to the present and out of Iraq and the past. If he was going to be of any help to Melanie, he had to find a way to come to grips with what happened to him. And he *was* going to help her get through all this.

Luke quietly opened the door to her room, not wanting to wake her. Melanie was sleeping, so he made his way over to the chair in the corner of the room. The lights were off and it was dark in the room. He walked by the bed and caught a glimpse of a small dark object lying on the end of the bed.

Luke looked closer. What the hell? He picked up the rose for a closer inspection. The black shriveled petals crumbled in his hand. How the hell did a dead rose end up on Melanie’s bed? Who would have done this?

Luke crushed the dead flower in his hand and shoved it into his jeans pocket. He walked back out into the hallway. One of the nurses was nearby arranging items in a closet. Luke walked over to her. “Excuse me, has anyone been in Melanie Giordano’s room?”

The nurse jumped. “Oh. Uh, sorry. No, I haven’t seen anyone. Is there a problem?”

Luke shook his head. “No, no. I was just wondering if she had any visitors or if anyone has asked for her.”

“Oh, well, I haven’t seen anyone, but you can check with the desk.” She pointed towards the nurse’s station up the hall.

“Thanks, I will.” Luke walked up to the desk and spoke to the nurse sitting behind it. “Hi, I’m just wondering if Melanie Giordano has had any visitors besides her brother or me.”

She looked up at him with a friendly smile. “I haven’t seen anyone. We did get a couple of calls, both stating they were police officers inquiring on her condition. They were both told that we couldn’t give out any information. The first caller said he would call her brother to set up a time for an interview and the second caller hung up.”

Luke frowned. “I see, thanks.”

He returned to Melanie’s room. Someone had been in there, and whoever it was left her a dead rose. He didn’t like the feeling he was getting. What other reason would there be to leave the rose than to make some kind of statement, and a dead, black rose made one hell of a statement. He also didn’t understand why the police would call twice. They obviously got their answer with the first call. Why

call again? Unless the second call wasn't the cops.

Luke tried to shake off his uneasiness as he went back into Melanie's room. He walked over to the chair next to her bed, instead of the one in the corner, and sank into it. As he looked at Melanie, he remembered the girl she used to be. She always had a smile on her face, always so happy and full of life.

She had grown up to be a stunning woman. Her golden blond hair looked as though it reached her mid-back. Through her tears earlier, her brilliant blue eyes had shown. But she looked so small and fragile. Too thin, she needed some color to her skin and some more meat on her bones.

Melanie's head thrashed from side to side, and she whimpered in her sleep. Not wanting her to suffer through a dream, he moved to sit next to her on the bed and gently tried to wake her. She woke with a look of terror on her face.

"Shhh, Lainie. It's just a dream, sweetheart. Just a bad dream."

Melanie opened her eyes and gazed up at Luke, her look of terror turning to one of confusion.

"Luke?"

"Yeah, honey, I'm here. You just had a bad dream, that's all," he crooned, trying to sooth her. He could tell when reality slammed back into her. She stiffened and looked away from him.

"I don't want you here, Luke," she moaned. "I don't want you seeing me like

this. Please, just leave.”

That may be what she thought now, but he wasn't swayed. Luke had known what her reaction would be. He just had to get her past it.

“Hey, this is me you're talking to. If nothing else, Lainie, we've always been friends. With a little work, we can get back there. I've never judged you, never looked down on you, and never will. Let me help. Life has changed both of us, honey, and I don't know about you, but I could use your friendship right now. What do you say?”

Luke waited for what felt like an eternity, then Melanie's eyes overflowed with tears and she nodded. He pulled her into his arms and let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding.

He sat there in the dark, rocking her, and whispering that everything was going to be okay.

Neither noticed the person looking through the slightly ajar door, nor when the door quietly shut. They didn't hear the vow of revenge, and didn't see the black rose that was left on the floor. The onlooker snuck down the stairs with a huge smile. Anthony's death had not gone unnoticed. Revenge would be had. Oh, yes, revenge would be sweet.

Chapter Four

Luke sat in the darkened hospital room while Melanie slept quietly in her bed. His heart was heavy and his mind filled with a mixture of emotions and thoughts. First and foremost was Melanie.

He was so damn angry. At Dan, for not knowing his sister was in trouble. At Melanie, for not asking for help sooner. Deep down inside, he knew his anger at them was unjustified. He truly didn't blame either of them, but never claimed to be all that rational at times.

Mostly, he was angry with himself because let's face it, if he hadn't decided to screw up his life and dump her, Melanie would never have been in this situation. She would have still been with him, where she belonged. Unfortunately, that was a bridge long ago burned. Even when Melanie was ready to face that part of her life again, he wouldn't be.

He could no longer offer a woman anything other than friendship. He hated that, hated what had happened to him, and wasn't anywhere near ready to accept it.

The other issue troubling his mind was the dead rose he found on Melanie's bed. There was no way it landed there by accident. But what did it mean? Was

someone sending her a warning? If so, for what? The only thing that came to mind was Tony's death, but Tony had died by his own hand. How could anyone in their right mind blame Melanie? Then again, who in their right mind would leave a dead rose on the hospital bed of a woman who'd just lost her baby? None of it made sense.

The door opened, and Dan walked into the room. He froze as something crunched under his foot. Bending down, he found he had stepped on a dead flower. Instantly, Luke was standing in front of him.

"What the hell do you make of this?" Dan asked quietly.

Luke bent down to see what Dan was looking at. *SHIT*. "Bring it out in the hall. We need to talk."

Dan grabbed as much of the flower as he could and backed out into the hall, Luke following him. Once the door was shut again, Luke spoke.

"I found the same thing when I came in the room earlier. It was lying on the foot of Melanie's bed. A dead, withered, rose. I know for sure the one you have was not on the floor when I came in, and I have been in that room since you sent me up here. "

"I don't get it. Who the hell would leave Mel dead roses and to what end?"

Luke paced the width of the hall. "I don't know, but I don't like it, at all."

"Neither do I. The police detective will be here in an hour. He still needs

Melanie's statement. I'm not sure I want to mention this to him right now. I don't want to trouble her with this."

"I agree. She doesn't need anything more to worry about. The nurse came in with dinner a half hour ago. She picked at the Jell-o, sipped some of the tea and then said she was full. She refuses pain medication, but she's sleeping okay, I guess. She did have a nightmare, though." Luke felt like he was rambling, and wasn't quite sure why.

Dan smiled. "She always did have a high pain threshold. She's one tough cookie." Frowning, he continued. "I guess she's had to be. We better wake her up before the detective gets here. I talked to him earlier. The crime scene unit has been and gone. As soon as he has his statement from Melanie, the house will no longer be off limits."

"Listen, Dan, about this rose business. When I asked the nurses if anyone had been in to visit, they said no, but they did take two calls from the police inquiring about her condition. The first said he would call you and the second just hung up. I'm wondering, if there is only one detective, why the two calls?"

Dan shook his head and looked at the shriveled flower in his hand. "I have no idea, but I mean to find out. According to the detective, Tony was a hotshot vice detective, well known and well liked. Maybe one of his pals isn't too happy he's dead, but if they think they can terrorize Melanie, they can just get over it. It

ain't gonna happen."

"No, it won't."

"Excuse me."

Dan and Luke turned to see a tall man, dressed in black slacks, a dark blue dress shirt, and tie and sports jacket, standing behind them.

"Yes," Dan offered.

"I'm Detective Harris, would one of you gentlemen be Mr. Hunter?"

Dan offered Detective Harris his hand. "That would be me, and this is a friend of the family, Luke Mclean. You don't mind if I ask for ID, do you?"

"Not at all." The detective showed them his wallet carrying his ID and badge.

"Thanks."

The detective shook Dan's hand and then Luke's. "I'm sorry to have to meet under these circumstances. The D.A. and I have gone over the nine-one-one call several times. Everything appears in order. It's a clear case of self-defense. The tape clearly identifies Tony threatening Melanie's life several times. While we couldn't see what was happening, we can certainly hear it. No charges will be filed against your sister. I just need her statement of what occurred and we can close this case. I have to tell you, I knew Tony personally, and I thought he was a really good guy. A bit of a temper now and then but..." He shrugged. "Listening to the tape made me

sick. You think you know someone. I'm sorry for what your sister went through.”

“Thank you detective. Well, let's get this over with.” Dan motioned the detective toward Melanie's room.

Dan stayed in the room with Melanie while the detective took her statement. Luke heard enough while it was happening. He didn't want to listen to Melanie rehash it. He was waiting in the hallway when Dan and Detective Harris came out.

The three men shook hands and the detective turned to leave.

“Detective Harris,” Luke called out. “I'm wondering, would you have been the only one officially calling the hospital from the police department to check on Melanie?”

“Officially, yes. I'm the only detective assigned to this case. Why do you ask?”

Luke lifted a shoulder. “No reason, I was just curious.”

Detective Harris raised an eyebrow. “Sure.” He handed Dan one of his cards. “If you have any other questions or something comes up, please give me a call. “
With a nod of his head, Detective Harris turned and left.



The following morning Melanie woke to find Dan sprawled out in the chair next to her bed and Luke stretched out in the one in the corner, both asleep. She

smiled. They looked so uncomfortable, two big, tall men trying to fit into two tiny chairs. It was laughable. Then she sobered, remembering why they were there. The pain rushed into her heart with the force of a locomotive. Oh God, was it always going to be like this?

The physical ache was getting better though. Getting up and walking around last night helped with the soreness from the incision. The pounding in her head and dizziness was another thing. It was as if someone was using a jackhammer inside her head. Her ribs only hurt when she moved or breathed, and her wrist was throbbing. All in all, not so bad. Tony did worse in the past. What a wonderful day to be alive. Yeah right!

On the other hand, the emotional pain was almost unbearable. She pushed those thoughts into the furthest recesses of her mind. She could handle the physical. She'd dealt with it daily during her marriage, but she couldn't deal with the huge void in her heart. Not now, maybe never.

And then there was Luke, with the same jet-black hair — although much shorter than he'd worn it in high school. Now it showed off his strong jawline. His eyelids were closed in sleep, but it didn't take much to remember how she used to get lost in those deep brown pools. He looked so much stronger and confident than when he left all those years ago. Maybe he was right. She *could* use his strength and friendship right now.

She groaned and shifted on the bed to sit up. Two sets of eyes popped open and two grown men jumped as though someone had lit firecrackers under their asses. Melanie couldn't help it, even with everything weighing on her, even with feeling no desire to go on, she laughed. Good God, can you say jumpy? They were both staring at her as if they thought she'd lost her mind. She laughed harder, until the staples in her belly pulled painfully.

All at once she was sobbing. Dear Lord, she was so messed up. Nothing would ever be right again. Melanie buried her face in her hands, embarrassed by the mix of emotions she was displaying. At once Dan was at her side, rubbing her back, enveloping her in his strong arms.

Looking up at him, Melanie tried to smile through her tears. "I'm sorry. I guess I'm a little emotional this morning. Please, if you don't mind, I just need to be alone for a few minutes."

Luke straightened and groaned. "Damn, that's one uncomfortable chair. I don't think I'll ever stand straight again," he whined, moving his neck from side to side.

Dan stood and stretched as well. "Tell me about it. I must have the worst crick in my neck ever. My back is stiffer than hell."

Melanie shook her head. "Do not stand there and whine to me about your aches and pains, gentlemen. If you want to compare, I will win."

They both froze and looked at her as though they didn't know what to say. "Relax boys, I was kidding you. But I would win." She plastered on another fake smile. Right now, she didn't want their pity. If she had to pretend that she could deal with this, then pretend is what she'd do.

The door opened and the doctor walked in. "Good, I was afraid I was going to have to wake you." He approached Melanie. "From the notations on your chart, it looks like you had a fairly good night. I'd like to examine you and then the nurse will be in to change the dressing on your abdominal incision. If everything looks good, you could be discharged as early as this afternoon, but you'll have to see me or your regular doctor in a week so we can remove the staples. "

"Oh, thank you, doctor. I really would like to get out of here."

Luke stood and nodded to Dan. "Why don't we go down to the cafeteria. I don't know about you, but I need an infusion of caffeine."

Dan stretched and got up. "Absolutely. We'll be back in ten minutes, Mel. You need anything?"

Melanie shook her head, "No, I'm fine, Danny. Thank you."



Luke and Dan sat at one of the tables in the large cafeteria, sipping coffee.

"Aw, shit," Dan murmured. "I totally forgot about Sarge. I'll be right back. I need to call and have Josh pick him up. Christ, the poor dog's bladder must be

about to burst. I'll be right back.”

“No problem.” Luke leaned back in the chair and stretched his legs out as Dan ran over to the payphone on the wall. Sarge was a five-year-old retired police canine Dan acquired two years ago when Sarge’s handler was killed in the line of duty. He was now a big part of the family.

Dan sat back down. “Josh’s mom is going to send him right over and have Josh bring Sarge back to their house ‘til we get back. I can’t believe I forgot him.”

“Well, it’s not like we haven’t had other things to think about. He’ll forgive you. Listen, since the cops have cleared the house, we should ask Melanie if she wants us get any of her belongings. I don’t think she’ll want to go back in there.”

Dan nodded. “You’re right, we’ll see what she wants and head over.”



Luke walked into Melanie’s kitchen while Dan was upstairs collecting some of her personal belongings. He needed to clean out the fridge and freezer so she wouldn’t have a stinking mess to clean, if she ever came back.

As he walked up to the fridge he noticed a three-by-five dark photograph stuck on the door by a magnet. Examining it closely, he realized it was an ultrasound photo of her baby, dated two weeks earlier. It was amazing. It was so detailed, you could even see him sucking his thumb.

Luke took the photo down and held it in both hands. His throat tightened

painfully as he caressed the picture with his thumb. He wished this had been his son, that he was still tucked safe inside his mother's tummy, and that what Melanie had suffered was just a bad nightmare.

But none of that was so, and it never would be. He would never have a son of his own, and never have Melanie as anything more than a friend. Anger at the injustice of it all swept through him, as he turned to the kitchen table and violently upended it with one hand, spilling whatever had been sitting on top of it onto the floor.

Kicking the table he let out a string of expletives that would make even a sailor's wife blush. Damn, he needed to get control of his emotions. Luke tucked the ultrasound in his back pocket as Dan came through the kitchen door. "What the hell are you doing in here?"

Luke shrugged. "I saw a mouse? You know how I hate those things."

Dan raised one eyebrow. "A mouse, huh?"

"Yup."

"Alrighty then. Let's clean this mess and get back. Melanie should be ready to leave." Dan righted the table and began picking things up and Luke went back to the fridge. Neither spoke again about what happened.



Melanie sat in the wheelchair grumbling. She wasn't an invalid and didn't

need to be escorted around in a wheel chair.

Dan was laughing at her. “Mel, it’s hospital policy. Just humor us, will ya?”

“Whatever. Can we please just go?”

Luke pushed Melanie down the hallway as Dan led the way. When they walked through the lobby doors, she was assaulted by the bright afternoon sun. The warmer weather had worked its magic on the snow they’d received during the blizzard, and it was melting quickly. Squinting to see through the sunshine, she noticed the long black limo that just pulled up in front of them.

The driver opened one of the back doors, and a tall man unfolded from the car. Dressed entirely in black, the man turned to face her. Melanie gasped and stiffened as she watched Tony’s brother hold his hand inside the car and help a woman out.

Instantly, she was flanked by Dan and Luke at either side. Luke leaned down. “Melanie? What is it, do you know these people?”

Shaking, Melanie could barely get the words out. “Y-yes. It’s Tony’s mother and oldest brother.”

Dan started to step in front of her, but she held out her hand. “No, Danny, just let them say what they need to.”

Tony’s brother stayed with the limo while his mother approached Melanie. Antoinette Giordano was a tall slim woman who looked much younger than her

sixty-five years. Her long gray hair was covered by a black veil, which she lifted as she addressed Melanie. Anger filled her eyes. Her mouth drawn into a straight line, she pinned Melanie with her glare.

“It is my understanding that you have managed to make the police believe you are not to be held accountable for the death of my son. They may not wish to consider you culpable, but that does not make it so. Therefore be warned. While you will not feel the full wrath of the Giordano family, we will be watching. You’ve already lost your son because of your stupidity. If you attempt, in any way, to profit from my son’s death, you will be sorry you crossed me.” Her voice was sharp and full of anger.

Dan made a move to say something but Melanie grabbed his arm. The older woman turned on her heel and went back to the limo without another word. After guiding his mother back into the car, Joseph Giordano walked up to Melanie.

This time both Dan and Luke stepped directly in front of Melanie to block his path. They seemed to grow taller and broader in front of her eyes.

Melanie bristled. “Please, just let him have his say so he can leave.”

They moved slightly apart, so that Joseph could be seen, but not enough so that he could get close to her. Joseph seemed to pay no attention to either man. “Melanie. I see you are at no loss for male companionship. Not wasting any time, are you?” Contempt dripped off his words.

Luke leaned slightly toward Joseph. “Listen here, pal...”

Melanie cut him off. “Luke, please.”

She just wanted this over. She didn’t want to give these people any more ammunition against her. They were a powerful family. She wanted them out of her life. Besides, didn’t she deserve their scorn? They’d never liked her. They had to know of the abuse. She was nothing to them. Dirt under their shoes.

Joseph smirked and continued. “That was my mother’s way of saying the family will seek no retribution for my brother’s death, unless you try to cash in on any life insurance policies or try using the Giordano name to make your life easier. You are no longer a Giordano. Remember that.” He stabbed a finger toward her.

“I don’t want your money, Joseph. I never have.” Melanie was shaking inside. These people terrified her. She licked her lips and looked down at her feet. She couldn’t meet his eyes. They were Tony’s eyes.

“So you say, Melanie. Just make sure you remember it. I don’t agree with my mother’s position that your punishment for killing my brother was the life of your son. So, don’t forget. I will be watching for you to slip up. All I need is one excuse, sweetheart, and...”

Luke grabbed the man by the lapels and drew him close, just as Melanie heard the click of a knife being sprung open. Joseph brought his hand up between himself and Luke and positioned the knife over Luke’s heart. Neither man made a

move. They stared each other down and Melanie was more frightened than she'd ever been. She sank further into the wheelchair, eyes wide, pulse racing.

Dan pulled Melanie's wheelchair back away from the men and stood in front of her.

Joseph was looking straight into Luke's eyes as he smiled and backed down. Luke let go of the man's jacket and took a step back. "Threaten her again and you won't like the repercussions."

Joseph smiled, straightened his suit jacket, and nodded his head toward Luke, eyes cold as a dark winter's night. "I'll look forward to it. Good day, gentlemen."

Luke made another lunge, but Dan grabbed him by the shoulder. "Let them go, Luke. We're making a scene."

Luke looked around at the people who started to gather. No wonder the man backed down so easily. Joseph Giordano sauntered back to the limo and folded himself in. His eyes followed the limo as it drove away from the hospital, wondering if that was the last he'd seen of Joey.

He looked over at Dan. "Why don't you go grab the truck? I'll wait here with Melanie."

He waited until Dan left and then knelt in front of the wheelchair. He put his hands on Melanie's knees and squeezed. "Are you alright, honey?"

Melanie shook her head and burst into tears. Pulling her close, Luke circled his arms around her and held her tight. When Dan pulled the truck up to the curb, Luke lifted Melanie up in his arms and carried her to the truck. They got in, and drove off in silence.

Luke had to wonder about the roses. Did they come from Mrs. Giordano and her slimy as a snake son? With Melanie's head buried in his neck, he tightened his arm around her. If he had anything to say or do about it, nothing bad would happen to her again.

Chapter Five

Melanie woke as Dan pulled the truck into the driveway. Slightly disoriented from sleep, it took her a moment to remember where she was. Home. The one true home she'd ever had. The house she and Tony shared certainly wasn't a home — more prison than anything. It would be good to be back.

Lifting her head off Luke's shoulder, she looked out the windshield at her surroundings. Nothing had changed. The big white farmhouse stood steady and strong. The horse barn off to the right had a fresh coat of red paint, as did the hay barn and chicken coop. The huge pine tree in the back yard still stood tall, the tire swing still attached to one of its lower limbs. She smiled. Yes, it was good to be home.

Dan put the truck in park. "Well, here we are. Are you feeling okay?"

"I'm fine, Danny, or at least I will be now that I'm home." She gave him a weak smile and nodded to the above-ground pool in the middle of the lawn. "New addition? It looks huge."

"Yeah, I had it put in last summer. I know the lake is just down the road, but it is so nice just to come home from work and jump in the pool. Mom and Dad should have put one in for us when we were growing up. It would have been a

blast.”

She actually laughed. “Yeah, I can just imagine the girls you would have had in it, and all the midnight pool parties.”

Luke chuckled. “Sounds like she’s got your number. Remember how you tried to convince Julie Miller to go skinny-dipping with you in the lake? You told her she wouldn’t get in trouble for getting her clothes wet if she just took them all off..”

“Oh, yeah, that got me real far. She told me to go first; then she would. I stripped down to nothing, went into the water, then turned around, and she’s taking off with my clothes. It’s a damn good thing it was dark out. I had to walk a mile, naked, before you and Mel came along. I knew it was you coming because you had a running light out.”

Luke laughed even harder, and turned to Melanie. “Do you remember what you said when he jumped out into the street in front of us?”

“First thing I did was scream. You laid on the brakes. When I saw it was Danny, I said ‘Oh my God, he’s naked, and he needs a bath.’ You cracked up, but I was serious. He was plastered with mud from head-to-toe.”

“I put mud all over me so no one could tell I was naked,” Dan said.

That got a big laugh out of Melanie. “Yeah, well, you forgot one important

part. It was really obvious your little willy wasn't clothed."

Luke hadn't stopped laughing. "Yeah, an-and you made him ride in the bed of my tr-truck," he said, having trouble talking and laughing at the same time.

"He was filthy!"

"What do you mean *little willy*?" Dan shot back

Melanie and Luke burst out laughing uncontrollably.

"Oh, stop, stop. It hurts to laugh like that."

Luke sobered immediately. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine, really. It was nice to have something to laugh about. Thank you, both, for everything." Maybe, she thought, it was going to be okay having Luke around. Maybe, just maybe, things were going to be all right. They would all be able to live here under the same roof, and she would be able to live a normal life.

And maybe she was still lying to herself as she had the past five years.

Luke jumped out of the truck, but instead of moving aside to let her out, he grabbed her up in his arms and headed for the house.

Startled, Melanie threw her arms around his neck. "Luke, put me down. I can walk."

Luke tightened his hold. "I know you *can*, but you don't have to. You're nowhere near healed, Lainie. I don't want you re-injuring yourself."

She wanted to kick her legs and jump out of his arms to get away from the illusion of safety and warmth. But the pain in her head and abdomen wouldn't allow for that type of thrashing around, so she held on, afraid to take a breath until he walked through the back door.

Unfortunately, he didn't let her down once they were inside the house. He headed through the kitchen and then up the stairs to her old bedroom.

“Really, Luke, this is ridiculous. I'm not an invalid. “

He shook his head and looked down at her. “Would you just be quiet and let us help you?”

She let out a humph and didn't say another word as he made his way up the stairs. Dan was right behind them with the suitcases they had retrieved from her house. She looked around the room as they came to the top of the stairs. Nothing had changed; luscious green plants still hung from the double bay windows, the rocking chair still sat next to her queen-sized bed. Even the purple, lilac-covered quilt was still spread over her bed. And the bookshelves—goodness, they were still loaded with all the romance and mystery novels she'd read.

Luke stood to the side of the bed while Dan pulled down the quilt and sheets, and then placed Melanie gently in the middle of the bed. Covering her up, he sat on the edge. “Is there anything I can get you?”

Melanie looked from Luke to her brother and then around her room once more. Stunned into silence by the feeling of comfort and home, she shook her head as she swallowed the lump in her throat.

Dan moved away from the bed. "I've got to run next door and get Sarge. I'll be right back. I'm sure he'll be happy to see you, Mel."

After Dan left, Luke stood. "I'll go get you some water and one of your pain pills. You can try to get some sleep while I start supper."

He left the room and Melanie slid lower under the covers. Tears fell from her eyes as she rolled to her side and buried her face in the pillow. They were being too nice to her. She didn't deserve their sympathy and didn't want their pity.

What happened to her was her own fault. She married Tony. She lived with the abuse and did nothing to stop it, until it was too late. It was her fault her son was dead. She was the one who would have to learn to live with it. Nothing they did could change those facts.

Melanie felt the mattress dip and opened her eyes to find a big, wet, black nose inches from her face. Attached to the nose was her brother's one-hundred-and-fifty pound, four-year-old, black German Sheppard, lying down next to her. He looked at her with the saddest eyes she'd ever seen.

He knew. Somehow this beautiful animal knew she was in pain. Sarge

inched his way closer until he was tight up against her. He laid his head on her arm and closed his eyes. Melanie threw her other arm around him and broke down in sobs while hugging the dog close. She just wanted all the pain to go away.

Luke watched Melanie and Sarge from the door. His throat painfully tight, he left the water and pill on the bedside table and quietly backed out of the room. He wished he knew what he could do to help her, but hell, he couldn't even help himself.

He was trying hard to forget the feel of Melanie in his arms. The rightness of it. It was just a painful reminder of everything he could never have.

Back downstairs, Dan was bringing in the last of the boxes they took from Melanie's house.

"Was she able to fall asleep?"

"Sarge made a beeline for her when you let him in. He crawled over to her and they're lying up there cuddled up together. It's like he knew just what she needed."

Dan nodded. "I knew he could help her. He's a very intuitive animal."

Luke grabbed some hamburger out of the freezer and dumped it in a pan to thaw and cook. Spaghetti sounded good. He turned back to Dan.

"So, what do you make of that visit from the in-laws?"

Dan leaned up against the counter. “I don’t know. I don’t think they were just blowing off steam. They meant business. I want to get on the computer and see what I can find out about them.”

“Good idea. I also don’t think they’re the ones that left the roses. The roses were a subtle threat. These people are not one bit subtle. They get off on their power. I’d like to meet Joey-boy in a dark alley and wipe that damn smirk off his face. I get the feeling I just might get my chance.”

Dan grabbed them both a couple of sodas from the fridge. “Well, if you do, I’d watch your back with that guy. I get the impression he doesn’t fight fair. “

“Yeah, well, I never claimed to fight fair either. I’d say he ought to worry about me.”

“This still doesn’t help us figure out what’s up with the damn rose.”

Luke added crushed tomatoes, tomato sauce, and herbs to the cooked hamburger and started the spaghetti cooking. “Maybe whoever it was got it out of their system.”

“Maybe. We’ll see.” But he didn’t sound very convinced. “I’m going to go get on the computer and see what I can dig up on our friends, the Giordanos.”

Luke finished up the spaghetti and made some garlic bread. He couldn’t stop thinking about the incident with Joseph Giordano. He didn’t believe for one

minute that the man was going to back off, whether his mother wanted him to or not. Giordano was going to be trouble. They all were.

Well, bring it on. That kind of trouble Luke looked forward to. Joey-boy might be intimidating to some, but Luke was chomping at the bit to get a hold of the man.

He could use a punching bag right about now. Just thinking about the bastard had his adrenaline flowing again. He'd been ready to take the man down right there in the hospital parking lot. But as Dan had pointed out, they had attracted lots of attention. He would get his chance though. Of that much he was sure.

Chapter Six

Melanie slept the next five days. She got up to go to the bathroom, and ate when she was told to do so. But her days and nights were spent in the numbing escape of sleep. She couldn't escape the nightmares, but even they were welcoming, lest she forget what she was or what she had done.

Her brother and Luke kept trying to help her. 'Here, honey, eat some food. How about something to drink? Do you want a pain pill?'

Agghh! She wished they would just leave her alone. She didn't want any of it. She didn't deserve any of it. She just wanted to be left alone.

She had just started to drift in the cocoon she'd made for herself when she heard Luke's questioning voice.

"Lainie?"

That's it. She'd had it. "Dammit, Luke! I ..." She froze when she whipped her head around and saw him looming over her and cringed. Oh no! Was he mad that she'd yelled at him?

Luke slowly sat on the edge of the bed. "Finish what you were going to say Melanie. Don't ever be afraid to speak your mind with me or to your brother. This

is your home; neither Dan nor I would ever raise a hand against you in anger, or any reason for that matter.”

Melanie nodded. “I’m sorry.”

“Honey, there’s nothing to be sorry for.”

Melanie rolled back over. “I just want to be left alone, Luke, please.”

Luke stood again and took a deep breath. “I’m sorry, Lainie, but I can’t do that.” He unceremoniously whipped her covers down and bent to lift her in his arms.

Cool air whipped through the thin material of her nightshirt.

Flabbergasted, she screamed from shock. “Put me down! Now Luke!” With her abdomen feeling much better she was able to kick her legs. She also beat him on the back with her fists, but he continued down the stairs.

“Of all the nerve! What do you think you’re doing? You can’t do this! *Luke!* Luke, are you listening to me?” When he continued to ignore her, she switched tactics. DANNY!” She yelled her brother’s name at the top of her lungs.

Dan met them at the bathroom doorway and stepped out of the way. Shaking his head he told Luke everything was set and walked away.

“Dan! Where are you going? Are you just going to let him get away with this?”

She heard him yell, “I love you, Mel” from the other end of the house. What the hell did the two of them think they were doing?

When they got into the bathroom, Luke set Melanie on her feet.

“Melanie,” he started, sounding way too condescending, “you’ve been in that bed five days, with only the occasional bathroom break. I hate to say this, but mushrooms are going to start growing out of your ears if you don’t take a bath soon.”

Melanie gasped, and brought her hand up to her hair, for the first time noticing how oily and matted it felt. Good lord, he was right. But still.

“We’ve drawn you a hot bath and put some of that nice smelly stuff in it. You just take a good long soak, wash your hair a couple of times and we’ll see you for supper when you get out. At the table.”

She just stood there with her mouth open, staring at him. Luke reached over and lifted her jaw, closing her mouth for her. “Are you going to take a bath willingly, or am I going to have to help you?”

The teasing spark in his eyes and knowing smirk on his face was the final straw. Bastard! “Out! Out! Out!”

Melanie pushed him out the door and slammed it behind him. Ohhhh! Who did he think he was? She was steaming mad until she saw her reflection in the

mirror. Her eyes and cheeks were sunken in. The dark circles under her eyes almost looked like bruises. There was no color to her face at all and her lips were like a shade of faded pink paper.

Oh God, and look at my hair. It hung in snarled strings from her head.

Oh my God, what's happened to me?

At the pounding on the door, she jumped.

“Do I need to come in and physically put you in the tub?” Luke called through the door.

“Go away. I’m getting in.”

And she did. Once she was submerged in the hot water, she felt all the tension in her body fall away. The sent of lilacs surrounded her, lifting her mood. She lay back, closed her eyes and only thought of the calming aroma and the heat of the water seeping into her.



Forty-five minutes later, Melanie joined Dan and Luke at the dinner table. She’d found a pile of clean clothes in the bathroom with a note on top that said, ‘Real clothes. Put them on.’ As opposed to the pajamas she’d been in for the last week. *Smug, arrogant bastards.*

They both looked up at her as she walked into the room. “Well, I suppose

you're both happy now?"

She didn't miss the look that ran across Luke's face and for a split second, thought she saw desire flash in his eyes. But it was gone just as quick and she dismissed it as a ridiculous thought on her part.

Dan stood and gave her a hug. "Much improved, baby sister. You smell so much better."

Melanie punched him in the arm; then smiled. "Thank you, both of you. I guess I didn't realize how bad it had gotten. I'll do much better from now on. You won't have to threaten to dump me in the tub, ever again."

Luke stayed suspiciously silent, looking much more interested in the plate in front of him than anything else in the room.

When Dan brought the platter of steaks from the grill, and added it to the baked potatoes and salad already on the table, they began their meal quietly.

Dan was about to scream from the silence when the phone rang. Luke got up so fast his chair tipped over backwards. "Um, I'll get it." He ran from the room.

Melanie glanced over to her brother. "What's with him? Why is he acting weird? This is the quietest I've ever seen him."

Dan had an idea what Luke's problem was, but he didn't figure either of them would want to hear it. He'd caught Luke's reaction when Melanie came into

the room earlier. In faded jeans and a form fitting t-shirt, she looked like the old Melanie, despite the pallor of her cheeks and the weight she'd lost recently. She looked like she had before Tony entered her life.

Unfortunately, he knew that both Luke and especially Melanie, were not ready for any of the emotions he saw flash over Luke's face. So he just shrugged and continued eating.

Ten minutes later Luke joined them again at the table. "That was another call for Hunter & McLean Security and Investigations. I couldn't find the appointment book anywhere on that mess you call a desk, so I left a slip of paper taped to the computer monitor."

Dan knew the desk was a mess, but they'd been so busy trying to catch up, neither had had time to organize the damn thing.

"Anyway," Luke continued. "That was Diane McCann. She just bought a house in Rupert and wants an estimate on a new security system for the place. Since I'm gone for the next two days with the Hamilton case, I told her you would call her in the morning for directions and a time to meet her."

"Fine." Dan looked over at Melanie, who had done a decent job of eating for once. "Mel, I hate to ask this, but we are desperate for some help. You know computers and stuff. Would you mind playing secretary during the day 'til we

catch up?”

After all Dan and Luke had done for her, how could she possibly say no to his request for help? Even if she didn't think she was ready. “Of course, I'll help you.”

Dan released a breath. “Thank you so much. Everything is such a mess and business has really picked up. Come on, I'll show you what's what.”

Dan looked to Luke, but he shook his head. “I'll take care of this mess while you two take care of business.”

After they left the room, Luke let out a deep sigh. He had no idea what had gotten into him earlier when he first saw Melanie after her bath. Dear God, he even thought he felt a tightening in his groin, which he knew was impossible.

He hadn't thought of a woman sexually since before he was taken prisoner nine months ago. Why bother? He could never have that kind of a relationship again. Hell, he was barely fit for friendship. So what the hell was his reaction to Lainie all about?

Christ, even if he was capable of feeling desire for a woman, Melanie was a week out from a vicious attack by her husband and losing her baby. She certainly wasn't looking for anything from him.

Pushing back from the table, he took the dirty dishes to the sink and finished cleaning off the table. It would be good to get away for a couple days. He hadn't been thinking with a clear head since finding Melanie at the bottom of her stairs.

Playing bodyguard to a spoiled artist for a couple of days would be just the thing to get his head back together, and give him something else to focus on.

But even then, he knew there would come a time when he had to face his demons if he was going to help Melanie face hers. Facing what happened to him was going to be damn difficult. He'd been degraded, humiliated, and infuriated. For months he'd blocked it all out, refusing to think about it.

Then he'd been angry at the world. He'd served his country, for God's sake. How could this have happened? He vowed revenge on the vile, war-hungry men that tortured him. On the weak women who did their bidding, and especially on the sadistic degenerate who enjoyed mutilating him.

Now he was somewhere between uncontrollable anger and resignation. There were days the rage was so thick, it was difficult to function. Then other days when he was almost resigned to the fate he'd been dealt — no loving family, no soft, warm body in bed with him every night. Dammit!

Smashing a coffee cup against the wall, Luke grabbed his coat on the way

out the door. He needed air and he needed space, most of all he needed to get Lainie's flowery fragrance out of his nostrils.



Melanie watched from the window as Luke stormed over the hill and out of sight into the woods. She knew something terrible was bothering him; his long angry strides and stiff back gave him away. She wished she could help, but she had all she could handle trying to keep her own head afloat, much less help someone else who was drowning.

She heard Dan come up behind her. "So, please, tell me what happened to him."

Dan wrapped his arms around her and rested his chin on her head. He thought maybe if she had someone else to focus on it might get her over her own troubles.

"I only know barebones, and none of it has come from him. I did some digging when he showed up six months ago. He looked like death warmed over. He was a good twenty pounds lighter than he is now, and extremely agitated. He'd jump at the slightest sound. "

Dan grabbed Melanie's hand and led her to the couch in the living room. As they sat side-by-side, he ran a hand through his short hair.

“All he would tell me was that he had some trouble overseas and had gotten a medical discharge from injuries he received there.”

Melanie brought her hand up to cover her mouth in an unconscious gesture. “Oh, Dan. What injuries? What happened?”

“That’s what he wouldn’t talk about. I didn’t find much information, but was able to talk to one of the guys that served with him.” Dan got up and started pacing.

“He was stationed with a RED HORSE unit out of Florida. Luke was a security specialist. He was in the tail Humvee of a convoy traveling through Iraq when they hit an IED. The Humvee was destroyed, two men were killed, and he and another guy were taken captive.”

Melanie gasped, tears filling her eyes and threatening to overflow.

Dan came over and knelt in front of her. “All the guy would tell me was that Luke was held for sixteen days before a joint Army/Air Force operation got him out. I’ve no idea what his injuries were and can only imagine what he had to endure. I’ve tried to get him to talk about it, but he won’t. I’m sure he’d be pissed as hell if he knew I had been digging into it, much less telling you any of this.”

Melanie bent over and hugged her knees.

Dan put his arms around her. “The only reason I’m telling you this is to help

you understand him better. There are days when he is in a very dark mood, times when the least little thing agitates him. And don't *ever* sneak up on him at night when he's sleeping."

Melanie looked up at Dan. "How can I help him?"

"I don't know that you can. You might want to look up PTSD — post traumatic stress disorder — and learn about it, but he's not very open to help right now. Actually, he's pretty focused on helping you. So you may want to cut him some slack when he goes all Neanderthal like with the bath. He really does want the best for you."

Dan stood and Melanie joined him. She threw her arms around his neck and hugged him tight. "Thanks. You are the best brother anyone could ask for. I won't let on that you told me, but I am going to find a way to help him. Starting tomorrow, I'm going online to see what I can find out about PTSD."

Dan kissed her cheek and smiled at her. "You're a pretty decent sister yourself, and friend. Anyway, I'm gonna go call that new client and turn in for the night. Got an early day tomorrow. Night."

Melanie went up to her bedroom and sat at the bay window, looking out at the dark night. What happened to Luke was horrific and she prayed she could find a way to help him open up about it. She knew well enough how an emotional

wound could fester if you didn't talk about it. She lived five years with a festering wound. The day she called Dan was the beginning of her healing. She knew she had miles to go, but Luke pushed her today into facing it. Hopefully she would find the way to push him into facing his own path toward healing.

Chapter Seven

February turn to March, and March to April. Everyone settled into some semblance of a routine. Melanie worked every day handling the business end of Hunter-McLean Security and Investigations, leaving Luke and Dan free to do the investigative end.

The snow melted, giving way to green grass and small buds of leaves on the trees. Melanie sat at her desk in the upstairs' room which Dan had turned into an office, staring out the window. It looked so nice out. She'd just opened the window. It was the first really warm day they'd had — unseasonably warm.

She inhaled the scent of morning deeply. It smelled of fresh cut grass, daffodils, and morning dew. The birds were singing to each other, beautiful songs of spring. With a smile on her face, she started the day's work, checking today's list of appointments.

Last night, Luke returned from a week in Killington where he was helping an old buddy with an investigation. The man's wife had been stalked by an former co-worker. The police issued a restraining order, but there wasn't much they could do until the guy made a move. Luke's friend pretended to go out of town for a

couple nights, and Luke stayed in the house to protect the wife and wait for the stalker to show.

Sure enough, the guy showed up. He broke into the house carrying a gun. Between the husband — who'd been hiding in the house along with Luke — and Luke, they'd disarmed the man and subdued him until the police arrived, with minimal injuries to the stalker.

When the police checked the man's car, they found chloroform, ropes, black garbage bags, and a shovel. Seems the man was about to move beyond stalking to murder. Joe, Luke's friend, spread the word and just yesterday afternoon, they had four calls for evaluations of security systems in Killington and Woodstock.

Melanie hadn't seen Luke yet to tell him about the new work piling up. He'd gotten in late and wasn't up yet. She was excited for him and her brother. Their business was doing great.

Danny hadn't come home yet, either, but that wasn't surprising. He'd been seeing Diane Lassiter since they put the security system in her house. He'd spent most of his nights with her for the past month. *I think Danny's in love.* Melanie smiled. It was great that her brother had found someone. He hadn't brought Diane home to meet her or Luke, but said he would soon.

The phone rang, bringing Melanie away from her thoughts and back to

business.

“Hunter and McLean.”

“Time for another lesson, Melanie, you know what happens when you go against me.”

Melanie dropped the phone, struggling to get up and away from the desk. Her feet tangled in the chair and she fell, hitting her knee on the hardwood floor. Sharp pain shot up her leg. She couldn't catch her breath. She tried to suck air into her lungs, but it would only come in short gasps. The room started to spin; colors turned to gray. She thought she could hear Luke's voice, but it was so far away. Then it faded into the darkness along with everything else.

Luke heard a banging in the office, which was next to his room, and jumped out of bed. Throwing on his boxers, he ran down the hall, and threw the office door open to find Melanie on the floor, the phone hanging from the desk, and the chair lying on its side by the wall.

“Lainie!” Luke bent and grabbed her in his arms. She was limp and her head lolled back against his arm. What the hell had happened? With his heart trying to beat its way out of his chest, he took a deep breath to keep from panicking. She was breathing smoothly, but her skin was pale and clammy.

“Lainie, baby. Wake up, honey. I’ve got you. Come on, come back to me.” He brushed the hair back away from her face and brought her tighter against his body. He didn’t let go as she started to stir. Her eyelids fluttered and relief swept through him as she woke.

At once it was like holding a tiger in his arms. She threw her arms and legs out in different directions, bucked with her body and started clawing at his face with her fingernails.

“No! Oh...God ...No! Let me...go!”

She was breathing too fast and Luke knew she would pass out again if she didn’t get herself under control.

He tried the best calm, soothing voice he could find in himself. “Lainie, sweetheart. It’s me, Luke. I’ve got you, honey. You’re safe right here in my arms. Shhhh. Take slow, deep breaths for me.”

Luke watched as she visibly tried to calm herself, but wasn’t having much luck. She was trying to take a deep breath and talk at the same time.

“Shhh, honey. Don’t try to talk. Just breathe deeply. I’ve got you, Lainie. That’s it, nice and slow.”

Luke held her tight, whispering soothing words as she slowly brought her respirations under control. Running a soothing hand over her arm and back, he

just sat there on the floor, rocking her in his lap as the minutes passed by.

With a sudden movement, Melanie turned her face into his chest and started sobbing. As his skin turned damp with her tears, Luke pulled her up even closer and lowered his head to hers. He said nothing to her, just held her close until she was done. When her shoulders stopped shaking, he slowly ran his hand over her back.

Eventually, Melanie picked her head up and moved slightly away. Luke loosened his hold on her, but didn't let go. "Can you tell me what happened?"

She stiffened in his arms.

"It's okay, Lainie. I would never hurt you, not for anything, but something scared you. Please talk to me. Tell me what happened."

"The phone...the phone rang, so I answered and...oh, God, Luke...it was Tony. It was Tony on the other end telling me it was t-time for another lesson. He's not dead, Luke. He's not dead."

Luke grew tense, red-hot blood flowed swiftly through his veins, making his heart race and his head spin for a different reason. He knew without a doubt that Tony was dead. Whoever Lainie heard on the other end of that phone was not Anthony Giordano, but someone trying to stir up trouble. Maybe the same someone who'd left the dead roses at the hospital.

Luke got to his feet, bringing Melanie with him. He walked across the room and righted the chair, motioning for Melanie to have a seat, then went and picked up the dangling phone receiver. As he knew it would be, there was nothing but a dial tone coming through.

Hanging up the phone he picked it up again and dialed star-six-nine. Unlisted number. No big surprise there. He walked over to the computer and typed in a series of commands then turn to kneel in front of Melanie, speaking for the first time since she told him about the call.

Taking her hands in his, he thought about how and what to say.

“Lainie, Tony is dead. I know what you heard on the phone must have sounded like him, but I can assure you, it wasn’t. I watched them zip him up in the black coroner bag myself. Your brother, the police, and I, have all told you this. Please believe it. Someone is just trying to scare you.”

She pulled her hands from his and buried her face in them. Head shaking back and forth, she looked back up at him. “I may believe that somewhere inside me, but I know what I heard, Luke. It was Tony’s voice. Trust me, I would know those words and that tone anywhere. It was him.”

“I do believe you, Lainie. There’s got to be an explanation, and I *will* find it. Okay?”

Melanie nodded and Luke stood back up and went over to the computer again. He and Dan had put a tracing program on the computer, hooked up to the office phone. It was always nice to have info on the people you were going to potentially be working for.

The trace on the last call came back to a pre-paid cell phone. Damn it. Isn't anything ever easy? He entered a few more commands into the computer and turned back to Melanie to see her face had turned red and her eyes had widened, staring at his naked chest.

He looked down and realized for the first time since entering the office, he only wore boxer shorts. Shit!

Melanie's face turned an even darker shade of crimson as she shifted in the chair and fidgeted with her hands. Remembering how she felt up close against his chest and seeing her intent stare, Luke felt a growing pressure in his groin.

Impossible.

Melanie's eyes raked over the scars visible on his chest and abdomen. Then she turned her head and looked away.

Angry with himself for even entertaining the idea, he pushed away from the desk and left the room, telling Melanie he'd be back. Slamming the door to his own room shut, he threw a punch at the wall. Pain vibrated throughout his hand. The

damn wall didn't give an inch.

What the hell was wrong with him? The poor girl had just had the fright of her life and all he could think about was how good she felt in his arms. Christ, how damn selfish could he get? He knew he didn't have a damn thing to offer her. And hell, what was with the whisper of a hard-on? If that wasn't some kind of a joke, he didn't know what was. He knew the damn thing didn't work, would never work again.

That part of his life was over, and the sooner he accepted it, the better off everyone would be. But damn it all to hell and back, how was he supposed to accept the fact that he would never make love to a woman again? That the butchers that held him captive for all those horrifying weeks had mutilated him so badly, that even if he could feel anything through the scar tissue, he still couldn't get it up. And he would never subject the horror of his body to a woman. Luke knew what a terrifying vision he made. The look of disgust on Melanie's face only confirmed it. No woman would ever be able to get beyond his scars, and neither would he, the ones inside or out.

Well, hell, here we go again feeling sorry for ourselves. Soldier up, McLean, and get over yourself. Get your ass dressed and figure out who the hell is after Melanie.



Twenty minutes later, after a shower and putting some damn clothes, on Luke headed back to the office. He wanted to apologize to Melanie for the way he left the room before.

He heard voices and found Dan talking on the phone. Melanie was nowhere in sight. Dan ended his conversation and hung up the phone.

“Where’s Mel? I got here about fifteen minutes ago, but she wasn’t in the office. Damn phone’s been ringing off the hook, I haven’t had a chance to look for her.”

Luke shoved a hand through his hair. “My guess would be her room. We’ve had a bit of trouble here this morning.”

Dan lost the smile on his face. “What kind of trouble?”

“She received a phone call from someone sounding just like Tony. He told her it was time for another lesson. I heard a crash in the room and found her as she passed out from hyperventilating. She was understandably upset, to say the least.”

Dan stopped his pacing. “Damn it, Luke. I thought this shit was over. After the two roses, we hadn’t heard a thing. It’s been two and a half months. I’d hoped this wouldn’t happen.”

Luke walked over and sat down at the desk. He brought the tracing program up to see if it offered any more information than before.

“The trace came back as a pre-paid. Unfortunately, we aren’t dealing with an ignorant person. They at least had smarts enough to purchase an untraceable phone.”

“Great, the fucking psychopaths just keep getting smarter and smarter. Where’s the justice in that?”

“Don’t talk to me about justice. As far as I’m concerned, not much in my world makes sense anymore.”

“Listen, I’ll call my ex-partner on the force to report the call and see what help, if any, he can give us.”

Luke nodded, but he’d stop listening. The walls in the room were closing in on him, and the air was getting stuffy. “Listen, I’ve got some things to do, and there is an appointment for a system evaluation at eleven. If you could cover the three appointments in Killington this afternoon, I think I’m gonna try to get Melanie out of the house. As far as I know, she hasn’t stepped one foot outside in the two and a half months she’s been here.”

Luke had the feeling Melanie had built herself into a safe little cocoon here in the house and was afraid to venture outside it. Meanwhile, he was the opposite. He couldn’t stand being cooped up too long. He couldn’t breathe full and deep unless outside, away from the constraining walls.

“That’s a good idea. I think you’re right about her not being out. Yeah, I can do the Killington appointments. Maybe I’ll take Diane and make a night of it.”

Luke noted the huge sappy smile on Dan’s face. “So, things are going good with her?”

“Very good. She might just be the one.”

“Hooowee, you better be bringing her by to meet Melanie pretty soon if that’s the case. But I do approve, she seemed like a really nice gal when we installed the system in her house. Anyway, I’m going to go talk to Melanie. See ya.”



Melanie was sitting in the window looking out into the bright morning. She needed some time to wrap her mind about everything that had happened this morning.

Now that she’d stopped panicking and thought more about the phone call, she knew it wasn’t actually Tony making the call. It was Tony’s voice though, and she had some thoughts about that that she wanted to go over with Luke.

Then there was Luke. What in God’s name had she been thinking? He’d definitely made her feel safe and protected when he’d been holding her. There was nothing sexual about her contact with him though. That is, until she’d calmed down and noticed all he had on was his underwear.

Good grief, talk about an adolescent reaction. She'd sat there in the chair, watching him work on the computer, when she finally had the where-with-all to notice the long, muscled pair of legs attached to the man, and his back — golden tanned, all sinew and rippling muscle.

He'd turned around and caught her staring at him and she could feel the heat crawling up her neck and cheeks. And good Lord, the front of him was so much sexier than she'd remembered. He'd definitely filled out since he was eighteen. She'd grown even warmer.

But then she caught a glimpse of the scars. She'd been horrified for him. The pain he must have suffered was beyond anything she could comprehend. Sure, Tony had hit her often, beaten her up and broke bones. But what Luke went through was torture, pure and simple.

She'd been embarrassed by her reaction to him. She hadn't had a physical reaction to a man since her wedding night—not a sexual one anyway— and her reaction had taken her by surprise.

But she'd also seen Luke's reaction to her obvious admiration of his body. He was disgusted by it. Why wouldn't he be? She'd been used and abused by another man. What honorable man would have any interest in her? None!

She didn't understand her reaction to him, anyway. She knew she would

never be able to have a healthy, giving, loving, or sexual relationship with a man. It was just the shock of the phone call, was all.

“Lainie?”

Speak of the devil. She really didn’t want to face him, but knew it was inevitable.

“Up here.”

She took a deep breath as his footsteps made their way up the stairs, then turned to face him. He was fully dressed this time in jeans and a black t-shirt. His hands were in his front pockets, and he was silent for a moment too long.

“What’s up, Luke?”

“First, I’d like to apologize for leaving the room the way I did earlier. I hope I didn’t upset you more than you already were.”

Melanie got up from the window and leaned up against the wall. “I understand, Luke. You really don’t need to apologize.”

“Well, I could have been a little more sensitive.”

Melanie shook her head and looked down at her feet. “I don’t blame you for your reaction. I really do understand.”

“Well, anyway, I’ve got a couple appointments this morning, but was hoping you’d climb Haystack with me this afternoon.”

Melanie straightened, and felt a squeezing sensation in her chest. “Oh, Luke, I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Please, Lainie, I have some things I really need to talk to you about, but I can’t do it in here. I need to be outside.. It’s important to me.”

Oh, God, what did he want to talk about? Maybe she was wrong, maybe Tony wasn’t really dead. No! She knew he was. It had to be something else.

“Okay, Luke. I’ll make us some sandwiches to take along.”

“Good, and thank you. I’ll see you in a couple hours.”



Luke let out a heavy breath as he walked out the back door. Damn, he needed to get over this closed in feeling. He hopped in his truck and glanced up at Melanie’s window as he pulled out of the driveway.

Well, he convinced her to go with him. Now how the hell did he tell her about Iraq and what happened to him there?

Chapter Eight

Melanie watched from the window as Luke pulled out of the driveway. She had no idea why she agreed to go climb Haystack with him. She didn't have any desire to leave the house. It was safe here. Nothing could harm her here. No one could touch her.

Well, that's not exactly true, is it? Tony got through. Tony had penetrated the walls of her fortress with a single phone call. Even from the dead, he continued to punish her. And for what? The simple mistake of marrying him?

Would this nightmare ever end?

Downstairs in the kitchen, Melanie made sandwiches and snacks to take on the hike. Dan came in as she put the last water bottle into the cooler.

"Hey, I heard about the call. Don't let it freak you out, Mel. We'll get to the bottom of it."

Melanie nodded, but turned away to look out the kitchen window. "It's a beautiful day out, isn't it? The sun is hanging bright in an ocean blue sky. Birds are singing. It's spring, the rebirth of mother nature, everything coming back to life."

She turned to face her brother, her fear a weight the size of a huge bolder on

her chest.

“Why do I still feel so dead inside? I’m trying so hard. It’s been over three months. I look outside and know I should feel...something. All I feel is cold...and empty.”

So damn empty.

She watched his expression change from encouraging to sympathetic. Dan would do anything to help her if he could; she knew that. Unfortunately, he couldn’t fix this for her. She had to find her own way this time.

“Mel, I...”

“I don’t expect you to say anything, Dan, or find a way to see me through this. I was just thinking out loud, I guess.”

“Mel, nobody is putting a timeframe on when you should get over losing your baby. Don’t you think you’re being just a little hard on yourself?”

“It’s not just that. I’ve accepted losing him. It’s just that...I don’t know...I can’t seem to...I just feel lost, I guess. I don’t know where to go from here. How to get on with my life? I can’t seem to find any purpose.”

She turned away from her brother to look back out the back door window. When she felt his hands on her shoulders, she leaned back against him. “Luke wants me to hike Haystack with him. Says he needs to talk about something.” She

shook her head.

“Do you know, I can’t bear the thought of leaving this house? I look out there and know I should feel peaceful, but I don’t. I feel peaceful right here. At least I did, until the phone call this morning. Now, I don’t know where I can feel safe.”

Dan turned her around to face him. “You are safe here, with me and Luke. It doesn’t matter whether you’re inside or out. Nothing bad will happen to you again. You can’t live your life afraid. Too many years have been wasted already. You’re out of that situation. You’re twenty-seven years old, and a beautiful, giving, loving woman. You’ll find your way. Of that, I have no doubt.”

Melanie embraced Danny in a fierce hug. The guy always knew how to make her feel better. Now, if she could just believe everything he’d said, she’d be golden.

She let Danny go and finished packing the lunch when a thought occurred to her. “Danny, what if Luke wants to talk about what happened to him in Iraq? Do you think he does?”

“I don’t know. I suppose it’s possible. If he does, you’d better listen. He hasn’t said a word about it to me, or anyone else for that matter. From what I can gather, he even closed up to the Air Force shrink.”

“Then what does that mean if he wants to tell me?” Scared to death she

would fail Luke the way she failed herself and her son, she needed to know what to do. She wasn't trained for seeing someone through a trauma. Hell, she couldn't even get through her own trauma.

“It means that he trusts you. That he needs to get this out of his system, and you're the one he chose to talk to about it.”

Oh, dear Lord, she didn't know if she could handle that. It was too much pressure on her. How could she possibly help Luke when she was such a mess herself? But she knew she had to. Luke was hurting badly, and she really did want to do something to repay him for all he'd done for her.

“What if I say the wrong thing? What if I do the wrong thing and only end up hurting him worse? I'd never forgive myself if that happened.”

“Mel, unless you're a selfish, uncaring SOB, which we both know you're not, I don't see you saying or doing anything wrong. Relax. Number one: you don't even know if that is what he wants to talk to you about. Number two: if it is, you'll know what to do. Have some faith in yourself. I do and so does Luke. Everything will be fine. You'll see.”

Melanie smiled. For the first time in months she was starting to feel excited about something. Danny and Luke seemed to have so much confidence in her. Maybe some of it was starting to wear off. She could only pray it was true. If she

could help Luke through his trauma, then she would truly have accomplished something important.

“Thanks, Danny. You always know how to help me work through something. You’re a great guy.”

She watched as Dan’s face turned red. *Interesting*. Maybe it was his turn to talk. “So, you’ve been spending quite a few nights away from home. What’s up with that? Are things getting serious between you and this Diane?”

“Yeah, actually, I think it is. She’s an awesome lady. You’d like her a lot.”

“Says you. When do I get to judge for myself?”

“Soon, I promise. She’s kinda shy, but I’ll bring her around soon. Maybe we can all take the horses out for a ride.”

“Oh, that would be fun, wouldn’t it? I hope she’s what you’re looking for, Danny. You deserve some happiness.”

“Don’t we all? Listen, I’m taking Diane to Killington with me to look at those jobs, so we’ll probably stay there tonight. I’ll be around tomorrow, though, and you can call if you need anything. I love you, squirt. Don’t worry about Luke. He’ll come through this. We won’t allow any other outcome. Will we?”

Melanie shook her head. Absolutely not. Not if she had anything to say about it, anyway. Maybe things *were* starting to look up. She leaned up to give him

a kiss on the cheek and another quick hug.

“No, we won’t. Have a good time in Killington. I’d wish you luck, but I know you don’t need it.”

Five minutes after Dan left, Luke came back home, nervous as all get out. He still didn’t know how he was going to talk to Melanie about his past. How do you bring up that topic?

‘Jeez, Lainie, great egg salad. Did you know I was tied up and tortured for two weeks, raped by a woman in front of a crowd of cheering enemy militants, and carved up like a thanksgiving turkey? Oh, and how about those Yankees?’

Yeah, that ought to work real fine. Shit, who the hell did he think he was kidding? He had no right to burden her with his nightmares. Why the hell did he think he needed to tell her in the first place? He couldn’t do it. Could he? Lord knew there were days when he thought he could. That he needed to talk to someone about it all. But was Melanie the right person? Dan had been after him since he got home. He knew Dan wouldn’t judge him, but it was damn hard to even think about, much less talk about.

It would be so much easier to talk to Melanie about what he’d been through in Iraq. She would listen and understand and be horrified for him, but she wouldn’t pity him the way a man would. A man would understand exactly what

he'd lost. A woman couldn't possible understand that. This is why he couldn't talk to Dan about it. He was ready to face that much of his reality.

But was it selfish of him to want to unburden himself to Melanie? Didn't she have enough troubles of her own to think about? Well, this would certainly get her mind off her own problems. Damn, he was a mess.

He walked in through the kitchen door to find a packed cooler on the island. *Well, looks like there are no more excuses.* He inhaled deeply and let his breath out slowly; then called up the stairs to Melanie.

"I'll be right there. Just putting on my hiking boots. I can't believe my old ones were still here and they fit."

Luke watched as she came down the stairs and into the room. She was wearing a light blue t-shirt, with a dark blue sweatshirt tied around her waist. Cargo shorts, white socks and old faded hiking boots completed her outfit. She had her long, dark blond hair up in a ponytail.

Luke caught his breath. She looked so much like the girl he left behind ten years ago. Young, happy, and carefree. God, he wished for so many things to have been different. If only he could go back in time.

He knew exactly where he would go; back to the day he wrote the letter to her breaking things off. That had been by and far the absolute biggest mistake of

his life. If he had only one thing in life he could do over, it would be that. Her voice brought him out of the past.

“... just can’t believe they feel so comfortable. Luke, are you okay? You seem a little out of it.”

Luke shook his head and cleared his throat. “No, I’m fine. I was just making a mental list of what we needed to bring. You got water and snacks?”

“Yup, everything’s in the cooler.”

“Well, okay then, I’ve got a blanket to sit on in the truck. Hopefully, the trail is as easy as it was ten years ago. I don’t think we need any heavy climbing gear, so I think we’re all set. Ready?”

“As I’ll ever be.”

Luke caught the nervous shuffle of her feet. He knew this wasn’t easy for her. She hadn’t been out of the house since she’d been home. Luke also knew she was doing this for him. The knowledge humbled him. After the way he’d broken her heart in the past, she was still willing to do something she found difficult — for him. Melanie was stronger than she knew. She would realize that soon.

Chapter Nine

The drive to Pawlet and Haystack Mountain only took fifteen minutes. They parked in the field, just below the trailhead. The moment they stepped out of the truck, Melanie couldn't get over the feeling they were being watched. The hairs on the back of her neck rose and she had the sensation of a hand at her back, just about to grab her. She pulled her shoulders up and back in a gut reaction. She turned around, but, of course, no one was there. She was being silly.

She brushed it off to the nervousness of being out in the open and not tucked safe and sound inside the house. Besides that, the old woman who owned the field was most likely looking out her window to see who was parking. She was kind enough to let hikers use her field for access to the trail. Still, Melanie didn't doubt she would be on the lookout to see who was there. She glanced over at the house, but saw no one.

Luke grabbed the cooler and blanket and they set off up the trail. Haystack was 1860 feet, but the trail was a gradual incline. It didn't get steep until three-quarters of the way up. By that time, an hour and a half had passed. They talked about the beautiful day, and about how not much had changed since they'd been

there last. About business and old friends.

Melanie couldn't help but notice Luke's strong, muscled legs, outlined in his tight jeans. Or the way his biceps flexed when he moved the cooler from one arm to the other.

He'd filled out since high school. He was more muscular, his shoulders more broader, and leaner at the waist. She could walk behind him for hours and not get tired of looking at his tight butt. Good Lord.

What on earth was she thinking? She didn't need these feelings right now. He'd made it very clear earlier that he wasn't interested in her. Christ, she'd practically drooled over him and he'd run out of the room. Couldn't get much clearer than that. But still...

The last quarter of their trek was tougher going and they didn't talk at all. Her thighs burned and she sucked in precious air, both indicators of her physical condition. When had she let herself get so out of shape? She wasn't carrying anything heavier than a blanket, yet she was still out of breath. Heck, as teenagers they'd climb this mountain with the girls loaded down with the blankets and coolers, and the guys carrying cases of beer and not get winded at all. Maybe it was time to start getting back in shape.

The feeling of being watched had gone away. So had much of the

nervousness she'd felt about being here. She took in her surroundings and the beauty of the forest and wildlife. They came across a mother deer and her twin fawns. They were glorious to watch. She knew there were other, more dangerous wildlife in these woods, but generally if you didn't bother them, they wouldn't bother you. They wanted no more to do with humans than the humans wanted with to do them.

When they finally crested the summit and came into the clearing, she stopped, took in a deep breath, and looked out over the scenery. Turning in a circle, she was struck with amazement by the stunning sight. She could see for miles and miles. The day was clear. She swore she could see all the way to West Mountain, which was an hour drive. The many different green colors of the trees, deep blue cloudless sky, all the vibrant colors of spring, and the lure of the peacefulness, was exactly what she needed. She'd have to remember to come back in the fall. The multi-colored leaves of yellow, red, and orange would be astounding.

Lord, how she missed this place. It was so peaceful, like a therapeutic salve that warmed her heart.

Melanie turned to Luke and smiled. "Thank you. How did you know this is what I needed? It's all just so beautiful, Luke."

“Just goes to show you, I’m always right.”

He had a big stupid grin on his face, the grin that could always disarm her. She punched him in the arm. Melanie spread out the blanket and took the cooler from him. She opened it, grabbed two bottles of water, and handed one to Luke.

“Always right, my Aunt Fanny. Do you remember the time we took your pickup truck mudding? I told you not to go through that last mud hole; that it was too deep and you’d get stuck. Did you listen to me? Oh, nooooo. ‘I can make it,’ you said, with your chest all puffed out. I laughed my ass off when Dan had to tow your big, bad truck out. Of course, that was *after* you had to get out and walk through waist deep mud to go get help. Fool.”

Luke shook his head and laughed.

“Okay, so one time I misjudged the situation. I meant I have always been right since then. Besides, how was I supposed to know that pit was four feet deep?”

Melanie laughed. He’d never give in.

“Come sit down and eat. I’m starved after that climb.”

Melanie patted the spot next to her and Luke took a seat. He was so close she could smell the spicy wood scent of his aftershave. His thigh touched hers and the warmth of it spread throughout her body. She had trouble concentrating on

just unwrapping her sandwich. Her fingers wrestled with the cellophane so much, the sandwich was almost flat when she finally got it out.

Stop! She chided herself. This just didn't make sense. She had no desire for a man in her life. Yet Luke stirred a yearning she hadn't felt in years.

Desire!

Nonsense. It was just because she was outside and enjoying it. High on a mountain where the air was thinner. *Concentrate on the food, girl.*

They spent the next five minutes wolfing down ham sandwiches and another bottle of water each. Melanie was restless, wondering when he was going to start talking about whatever it was that was bothering him.

Luke twisted off the lid from another bottle of water and began to pace back and forth as he took small nervous sips. She could tell he was fighting with himself about something. Maybe he'd changed his mind.

Melanie got up from the blanket and went over to where he'd stopped. She put a hand on his shoulder and turned him to face her. Looking in his eyes, she could see his torment.

"Whatever it is that you want to say to me, Luke, just come out and say it. Just start at the beginning and say whatever it is that's on your mind."

Luke nodded. "Yeah, it should be that easy, shouldn't it? Two friends talking

about something bothering them. That is what we are, isn't it, Lainie? Friends? Can we at least claim that?"

Melanie wasn't sure where he was going with his question. "Of course we're friends, Luke. Why wouldn't we be?"

Luke knelt down on one knee and picked at a piece of long grass. "Well, I wasn't too kind to you back all those years ago when I broke things off. I know I must have hurt you badly, and after seeing how your life turned out, and what you've gone through since then, well, I just feel very bad about the way I handled things. I can understand why you wouldn't want anything to do with me now. But, I really would like to be part of your life, Lainie, even if it's only as friends."

He reached out to touch her arm.

Melanie could feel the fire burning in her blood. As he'd been talking she was getting angrier with each word he spoke. Of all the foolish thoughts she'd had, this beat all. Here, she thought he came up this damn mountain to bear his soul of all his nightmares, when all he wanted was an appeasement for his guilty conscious. Of all the nerve. She was going to let him have it with both barrels, dammit.

"Is that what this is all about? Luke feels guilty about the past and wants to make himself feel better?" she spat.

“No, Lainie, that’s not...”

But she was just getting started.

“Who the hell do you think you are? You have an awfully inflated opinion of yourself and your influence over my life. The great and wonderful Luke dumps poor Melanie, and devastated, she turns to a physically and mentally abusive man to help her get over the wasteland her life has become. Please, Luke, get the hell over yourself. I did. Who’s to say we would have ever made it anyway? We were teenagers dreaming adult dreams. They meant nothing in the larger scheme of things.”

Wow, she couldn’t believe this was what they were talking about. Enough was enough. Time to get the hell out of here. There wasn’t enough room in this vast open space for herself and Luke’s humongous ego.

“Dammit, Lainie, that’s not how I meant things. You’re blowing everything out of proportion.”

She spun around to face him. Her ponytail whipped from side to side.

“Oh, so now I’m the overemotional female, is that it?”

Luke’s face had turned red and she could see the muscles in his jaw clench. Good, let him be angry. The big, stupid jerk.

“Come on Lainie, you can’t say you weren’t upset when I broke up with you

the way I did. Just a letter that said there was too much of life to see and I didn't want to be tied down by a small town girl."

Melanie started to shake. He was hitting too close to the still raw nerve.

"Sure it hurt, for all of two days. Then I came to realize how right you were. That there was more out there for me to see. I was happy not to have to be committed to someone at eighteen years old."

"Right, you went from planning our wedding one day to speed dating the next. I don't believe you."

Tears were running down her face now and she was aghast that he'd pushed her to this. He was cruel and unfeeling. As much of a bastard as he'd been back then. Why did he have to do this to her again?

"I don't care what you believe, you heartless bastard. Of course, I blame you. I blame you for every damn thing he did to me. Every hit I took in my face, every kick I took to my ribs. Every time he tied me down and viciously took what I didn't want to give. Every demeaning word he said to me and every degrading sexual act he made me commit. All of it. I blame you for it all. Is that what you want to hear, you son of a bitch? Do you want me to bleed for you? Well, too late. I did, the entire time I was married. You just weren't around to see what you'd done. You were off living, seeing your big, bad world without the commitment you so

hated.”

Dammit, she'd lost it. She turned away from Luke and brushed her tears off her face while trying to take a deep breath. She felt Luke's hand on her shoulders and shrugged him off. He placed his hand back on her shoulder and forced her to face him.

She tried to push away from him, but he just held her tighter. “I'm sorry, Lainie. I never meant to hurt you.”

She pounded his chest with her fists, trying to get away from him.

“Why? Why did you leave me like that? Why couldn't you love *me* enough? You promised to love me forever, you said we'd be married. Why...?”

Melanie gave up fighting him and collapsed, sobbing, into his arms. He lowered them to the ground and held her in his lap. She buried her face against his chest and cried. Minutes passed as they sat there together. When she regained her composure, she pushed away to look at him. She'd been ready to apologize and leave, until she saw his face.

His eyes were red and watery and his skin pale, void of all color.

Melanie lifted her hand to his cheek, “I'm sorry. I thought I had all that out of my system years ago. It's not rational to blame you, and I really don't think I do. I just never got a chance to rant and rave at you, to tell you how much you'd hurt

me back then. Maybe I just needed some kind of closure from that time in our lives.”

Luke nodded his understanding. “I’m sorry I pushed you like that. I just wanted it out of our way. If we are really going to move on from then and be friends, we needed to get it out in the open. I do really want to be a part of your life, Lainie. Not out of any guilt I may have felt, but because you were the best part of my life at one time. There are so many things I can’t get back. So many mistakes I can’t undo. If you could see your way through to letting me back in your life, well, it’s just something I really need. I need you, Melanie, more than you could ever know.”

Melanie turned and threw her arms around him in a fierce hug. “Of course you’re in my life. Despite the way we parted, Luke, I’ll always care about you and be here for you. Just the way you’ve shown you’re here for me.”

Luke buried his face in the crook of her neck and inhaled deeply.

“Thank you,” he mumbled into her hair. “Thank you, Lainie.”

She shifted off his lap and onto the rock next to him. Sharing her feelings had been difficult, but now that it was over, she was glad it’d happened. There were things she’d said that had needed to be said. Life was so damn hard, but sitting here like this with Luke, quietly taking in nature’s beauty, this was easy.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Luke asked quietly.

Chapter Ten

Luke's words jolted her out of her musings. Did she want to talk about it?

Hell, no, she didn't want to talk about it. It was private, and embarrassing, but she knew he wouldn't judge her. On second thought, maybe she should talk about her life with Tony. It would be a way to purge the painful memories from her system. Besides, in her anger, she'd spouted everything except the details.

She concentrated on the scenic view. "Fine, sure. I'll talk."

She cringed at the edge in her voice and focused on controlling the delivery.

"After your letter, I kind of blew away the summer in a daze. It took a while for me to realize we were really over. I finally decided to go to college and chose SUNY. I majored in computer programming. After graduation, I'd just started a job in New Hampshire for the police department in their computer crimes unit. That's where I met Tony. He'd just made detective and had been assigned to the same unit. He switched to homicide after we were married. Anyway, one thing led to another and we started dating. He was handsome and charming. He was so nice and attentive, I guess what they say about someone being too good to be true is dead on. I hadn't dated anyone since you and he swept me off my feet. After three

weeks, I agreed to marry him and we tied the knot two weeks later. That was the end of the fairy tale.”

Melanie twisted her hands in and out of each other while staring down at the ground. Luke crept closer, reached for her hand, and gently squeezed, but didn't speak. She looked up and gave him a weak smile.

“It started on our wedding night. We...we hadn't had sex yet. I'd wanted to wait and he'd been fine with that. I was a little timid that night and I guess his patience came to an end rather quickly. He'd told me he'd enough of the virgin act, and...well...you know that wasn't an act, but he didn't believe me. He'd had too much to drink at the reception and was very aroused. There was no foreplay, no gentle loving caresses. He mounted me, took what he wanted, and fell asleep. I remember making excuses for him and crying myself to sleep.”

Luke's body tensed next to her. She heard him softly swear and knew he felt anger for her. But she continued, needing to get it all out.

She sucked in a breath. “The next day, I was angry with him and told him he could have been gentler with me. I'll never forget his response. ‘That was gentle, babe, this is rough.’ That was the first time he raped me. I had so many bruises I had to wear pants and long sleeves in the middle of July. He bruised me so bad internally, I bled every time I had a bowel movement for three days. And on it went

for five years. He moved me into his guest bedroom. Told me he had no desire to feel my body next to his throughout the night. He would come to my room whenever he wanted 'a piece of ass' from the dead fish he called his wife. He was always drunk, and mean, and violent. He always told me I was good for only one thing and even that was piss poor. He never failed to tell me that if I even entertained the idea of leaving him, he would kill me, and get away with it because he knew how to beat the system. Then he'd laugh and say 'Hell, I am the system.' Tony also threatened Danny. I had no doubt he would do as he said. I knew him. He carried out his promises." She shivered at the memory of those promises.

Melanie tugged her hand free from Luke's. What else was there to say? She'd known all along she should have gotten out of the marriage after that first night, but she'd been scared. She hadn't wanted Danny to know the terrible mistake she'd made. Tony had made her quit work, and cut her off from her friends and family. She had no money and nowhere to go. When she became pregnant, she'd known that she had to get out. But she'd waited too long and lost everything because of her fear.

Danny was right. It was time to stop being afraid of life. As far as she was concerned, it couldn't get any worse than what had already happened and she'd survived that. It was time to take on the rest of her life.

Luke shifted next to her, catching her gaze. “Lainie, you do know I would never hurt you like that, don’t you? I have a hot temper, and it’s been harder to control since I got out of Iraq. In fact, there are times when I do lose control and lash out. But please, know I would never intentionally cause you pain. That much I *know* I can control. You will never have reason to fear me. I would die first.”

“Funny thing is, I do know that. Whatever your demons are, I know and I trust you.” And she did trust him, it wasn’t just words she was spouting at him. If she didn’t, she would never have been able to tell him what she just had. The revelation startled her.

“You’re a very strong woman, Lainie. To survive what you did...I wish I had half your strength.” He hung his head, breaking eye contact.

This is it, Melanie thought. Maybe she’d had to tell her story, so he could feel safe enough to tell his. She felt better for having confided in him. Could she make him feel safe enough to talk to her? *Please*, she prayed, *don’t let me mess this up*. She had a feeling she would only get this one chance.



Luke sat there the entire time Melanie told him about what she went through and could only admire her. She’d lived a life of hell, of torture and captivity for five long years, and come out of it a stronger person. He’d lived

through two weeks of captivity and torture and come out of it a angry, tormented, half a man. Compared to her, he was a failure.

He wanted to take her in his arms and show her how sweet and sensuous making love could be. That it was an act of love and tenderness, not violence. How he wanted to show her the gentleness that Tony never had. But that was the one thing he couldn't do for her and it killed him. Anger welled in him at what life had dealt. He'd been a very sexual man. It was an important part of his life. He knew he would miss it, but until this very moment...Shit!

His heart ached for what he could never have with this woman.

"Luke?" Her tentative voice jolted him. "You're being too quiet. Is it what I just told you? Maybe I shouldn't have unloaded all that on you. I'm sorry if I made you uncomfortable talking about it."

Luke stood. No way could he face her while he told her about what he'd lived through. He turned and walked to the edge of the cliff.

"It's not you, Lainie. I'm in awe of you. I wish I had your strength. I'm sure Dan has told you I was taken hostage in Iraq. I haven't told anybody about it. The shrinks all tried to get me to talk about it, but I couldn't, or can't. Hell, I don't know. I couldn't even talk to Dan, my best friend. So what does that make me? A coward? When I think of the crippling hold it has over me, the anger chokes me

until I can't breathe.”

He kicked a couple rocks around, then picked them up and chucked them out into the wind. He could feel Melanie's eyes on his back, watching him, probably waiting for him to jump. Hell, he wasn't that far from it.

“Ya know, earlier, I was thinking about all the mistakes I've made in my life. There was only one I would go back and change, and that was kicking you out of my life. I've never regretted joining the Air Force and serving my country. I fully believe that what we were doing over there was for a righteous cause. I love my country and would fight to the death for our beliefs. But death would have been so much more welcome than what I received in return.”

He sidestepped as Melanie tried to reach out to him. His back stiffened.

“Please talk to me, Luke. Please tell me what they did to you.”

Luke faced her and read the concern in her eyes. Damn, he didn't want that look to turn to pity.

“Are you sure you can handle this, Melanie? It's not the watered down version the media hands you. It's the blunt, angry truth. It's bloody and dirty. After your own experiences, can you handle that?” His voice hinged on rage. He didn't want to frighten her, but his truth ached to be free.

She walked up to him and stopped just inches from his face. Looking him

dead in his eyes, she swallowed and nodded.

“Yes, Luke, that’s what I want. I told you the down and dirty truth about me. You just got done telling me how strong I am. Tell me what happened. All of it. Get it out and then we’ll bury both our pasts.”

Luke stepped around her and started to pace. It was a few minutes before he could prepare himself to talk.

He gulped in air and stilled. “I was in Red Horse. They’re a unit of engineers who are ready to deploy at a moment’s notice. They build new bases from the ground up — air strips, buildings, roads. You name it; they do it. They’re self-contained, with their own security forces, food service, engineers and laborers, what have you. I was the team leader of their security force. We were in a convoy, moving from Baghdad to Fallujah. I was in the last Humvee, about a mile back from the rest of the convoy, when we hit an IED, an explosive device, that was planted alongside the road. Three of my men died instantly in the fire that engulfed the vehicle. I and two others were thrown from the wreck. Insurgents were on us before we had time to get on our feet. The two other men were badly wounded. Rivera’s leg was busted, the fibula sticking straight out of his skin, and a river of blood flowing down his forehead. Smith’s arm was broken and his left foot was gone. We were loaded up and taken to a camp about fifteen miles away.”

He remembered being more afraid for his troops than himself. He had foolishly believed he could get them out of the mess they were in. He'd been stupid and cocky. It wasn't long before he realized just how much trouble they were in.

“We were thrown into separate cells. The cells were dirty and smelled of old urine and shit. We could also smell the coppery scent of blood. It blew on the wind straight through the bars on our windows. There was no escape from that smell. The floors were dirt, and if we wanted to relieve ourselves we had to do it in the corner. There were no toilets or sinks. I spent twenty-four hours listening to my friends groan in agony. They had to lie in dirt, who knows what infecting their wounds, without the benefit of any pain medication. All our captors did was wrap the wounds, nothing else. I guess the guards got sick of listening to them because they brought them, one at a time, out into the yard. They kept them directly in front of my window, where I was forced to watch my men being tortured, fucking helpless to do a thing about it. I had to listen to their cries of pain, while they were whipped and caned. Afterward, the guards ground dirt and shit into their wounds.”

He fisted his hands in front of him, his fingers wrapped around the metal bars imbedded in his memory.

Melanie's silent tears ran down her cheeks, but he couldn't comfort her

right now. He couldn't stop. He was back there with his men, absorbed in their pain. He slowly lowered his hands, wiping sweat-drenched palms on his jeans.

“This went on for three days. They took turns torturing Rivera and Smith, while I screamed and begged for them to take me and leave my men alone. But they never even glanced my way. They never came for me. By the dawn of the fourth day, both Rivera and Smith lay dead in the middle of the yard. Covered in flies and maggots. I'd failed to protect them and they'd died horrifying, degrading deaths, while I watched on and did nothing.”

Melanie shook her head and hugged herself. “Luke, it wasn't your fault...”

But he cut her off and jabbed at the air.

“The hell it wasn't. They were my troops. It was my job to keep them safe, and I failed them.”

He swept up more rocks then flung them out into the air with all the force he could muster. He couldn't see the green trees, or hear the birds singing. He couldn't smell the flowers or the fresh Vermont air. All he could smell was blood and death. All he could hear was the screams of his men. All he could see were the smiles on his enemy's faces.

Melanie inched closer.

“No one could possibly understand exactly what you saw or the emotions

you experienced, but Luke, they were grown men, who signed up to do a job they knew was dangerous. You couldn't stop what was happening to them. If there was any way humanly possible to do that, you would have. It just wasn't possible, and not because of anything you did or didn't do. You need to realize that."

"They didn't sign up to be tortured, to be disgraced. They were American soldiers and they were degraded to piles of shit to be spat on."

He would never shake the image of them lying dead in the dirt. It was etched in his soul.

Damn, but Melanie wouldn't give up. She wouldn't let it drop.

"Did they beg for mercy? Did they give up valuable secrets? Did they beg to die or did they fight for their lives? Did they never give up until their last breath? Did they fight for what they believed in? Were they honored when they were brought home or were their families ashamed that they couldn't finish the fight? Were they hailed as heroes or buried in a hushed up ceremony and never honored again?"

Well, damn, she knew how to fight back. Luke hadn't thought about those things. The families of both men had held off their funerals for an entire month so Luke could attend. They'd visited him in the hospital and had shown strength and pride in the soldiers. They were both given a hero's funeral and their communities

had come out in full force to honor the men. He knew it hadn't ended with the funerals either. They'd erected memorials and taken the fallen men's widows and children under their wing. They'd done right by the men. Had he? Or had he been using them as another excuse to feel sorry for himself?

Luke looked more closely at the woman in front of him. She was right and he knew it.

"I guess I hadn't thought about it like that."

He gave her a pathetic smile he didn't quite feel.

"When did you get so smart anyway?"

She looked back at him, but didn't smile.

"What happened to you, Luke? What did the captors do to you?"

Chapter Eleven

Luke submitted to the heaviness in his chest and legs and sank to the ground, knees up to his chest. He hung his head. Could he do this? Could he finish this part of his story? Shit, she'd probably run off, screaming into the woods, but she hadn't yet. A flare of hope warmed his heart. When he got right down to it, what more could he possibly have to lose? *Fine, suck it up, big guy.*

“They left me alone for another day. Another day, to stare out at the lifeless bodies of my friends. On the morning of the sixth day, I looked out the window and they were gone. The animals who declared they were fighting the war for their God had moved my men and all that was left of them were the blood stains in the dirt. That's when they came for me. For days on end, from the time the sun came up to the merciful rise of the moon they had me tied up naked in the middle of the yard. They'd take their turns whipping me or using knives, whatever tripped their trigger. They'd switch me from lying on my back to my stomach. They couldn't let an inch of my skin be untouched or unbroken.

My back was as raw and bleeding as my chest and stomach, but they were pissed because I wouldn't cry out. I'd just grit my teeth and take the pain. It made

them angry. They'd stand in a circle around me and speak in a language I couldn't understand. Staring at my body, laughing, spitting on me. Two days before the rescue, they left me tied up out in the yard all night. I hadn't had water in forty-eight hours and I was dehydrated. One by one the men came over and urinated on me. On my face, my chest, in the lacerations they'd made with the knives and whips. I was covered in it. They went off laughing and bedded down for the night."

He took a deep breath. This was it. The worst part. He'd felt so sorry for the girl. He looked at Melanie and again her face was wet with silent tears. Her hand covered her mouth and her body shook. Luke looked down at his own hands and noticed they shook as well.

"The next morning, they had someone new at the camp. She couldn't have been over eighteen or nineteen years old. She had long black hair and the darkest eyes I've ever seen. She'd been crying, and even though I didn't understand the language, I knew she was pleading with them. Another older woman came out of one of the tents and smacked her around a little; then one of the men grabbed her by the hair and threw her onto the ground beside me. I prayed to God then. Prayed for him not to let what was about to happen, but no one listened. They grabbed the girl by the hair and forced her head down over me. They shouted at her and forced her to take my cock in her mouth. I couldn't move. They had me strapped so

tight, spread-eagled, I couldn't move a muscle. I screamed at them to stop her. But they laughed even harder and forced her head up and down. I got sick and threw up on one of the guy's feet. He kicked me in the head for my troubles. When it was obvious the girl wasn't getting the job done, they pulled her off me and commenced to raping her. Every one of those bastards took their turn at her. When I heard her yell for her mama. The other woman walked over to her, slapped her again, and dragged her to back to their tent. Her own fucking mother!"

Luke heard Melanie sobbing, but once again he couldn't look at her or do anything to comfort her. It was almost over and he needed to get through it. To get it all out, once and for all.

"While the men where taking their turns at the girl, they were also taking their turns kicking the shit out of me. When one guy took his steel-toed boot to my groin, it was lights out for a while.

When I came to the older woman had come over to me. She had a hold of my cock and was moving her hand up and down for all she was worth. After just being kicked, I don't know why she thought it would work, but it didn't and that made her extremely angry.

She knelt down over me and took up where the girl left off, and when that didn't work, she started yelling to one of the men. He brought her what looked

like a surgical blade. At that point, I screamed my fool head off and prayed they would just kill me. But they didn't. They all watched on as she took the blade and ran it down the length of my penis. Not deep enough to flay me, but deep enough that I needed stitches once I was rescued. She continued to bring the knife across the width and then over the head. Then she was nice enough to carve her name in my thigh. Something to remember her by, I guess. As if I could ever forget. I'm told it still works, you know...but...there is so much scar tissue, I don't have a heck of a lot of sensation. And the thing sure as hell isn't as pretty as it used to be."

He laughed, but it wasn't with humor. He hoped she understood what he was saying, that he couldn't get the damn thing up anymore. That he felt like he was less than a man. That he didn't have enough sensation left to be able to feel the pleasure of making love to a woman. He finally walked over and knelt in front of where she sat.

"Rescue came the next day. And that's where they found me, tied up spread-eagled in the dirt, bleeding from just about everywhere on my body. I saw the horror in their eyes when they saw what had been done. Nobody said a word, just covered me, wrapped me up in blankets and got me the hell out of there. I was in the hospital for four weeks. I lost one of my testicles from the boot kick, had infections raging throughout my body. But, hey, here I am in one piece more or

less. Right?”

Melanie threw her arms around his neck and held on tight. Luke was shocked by the move. It wasn't what he expected her to do. Run away in disgust, yes. Cling to him like she'd never let go, no. That was when he felt her body shake and the dampness of her tears on his shoulder.

“Hey, hey, what's this? You're supposed to be comforting me, not the other way around.”

That got him a punch and half a laugh. He was hoping for a whole laugh, but, hell, he'd take what he could get. He held her in his arms and actually felt lighter than he had in months. It helped to talk about it. Huh, who knew the shrinks could be right?

Melanie brought her hands down to his face and looked him in the eyes. She was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen — runny nose, watery eyes, blotchy, red face and all. He couldn't get over it. Her tears and pain were for him. She was the most giving person he knew and was humbled that she cared enough for him to be so moved by what he'd told her.

He wasn't sure who moved first and didn't really care. The next thing he knew, their mouths had come together in the most tender of kisses. Her lips were soft, and warm, and she tasted of new beginnings. Luke pulled her in closer until

her breasts were crushed up against his chest. She felt so damn good up next to him, in his arms. He wasn't sure he'd be able to let her go.

He traced her lips with his tongue, begging entrance. Melanie complied, thrusting her tongue in his mouth, dueling with his until he felt himself start to shake. Her hands slipped down his chest and around to caress his back. Fire shot through his bloodstream and started to settle in his groin, which started growing uncomfortable.

Holy shit! That wasn't supposed to happen. This wasn't supposed to happen! They were friends. No matter how much he might want more, friends were all they could be. Melanie didn't need to be saddled down with an emotional and physical defect like him.

He abruptly brought his senses together and broke off the kiss.

"Lainie, I'm sorry, I shouldn't have done that. I don't know what the hell I was thinking."

Luke shifted away from her and stood, needing to put some distance between them. Melanie got up as well and grabbed a couple waters from the cooler, handing him one. Her face was flushed and her lips were swollen from his kisses. Damn, she looked good.

"Luke, really, it's okay." Her voice trembled. "I'm not so sure you're the one

that started it, but I understand you wanting to stop it. No worries, no one was hurt.”

By the look on her face, Luke wasn't so sure of that last part. He didn't know what she was thinking. This morning when she'd seen the scars on his chest, he thought he'd read disgust in her eyes, but now he wasn't so sure. Had he hurt her feelings breaking off the kiss the way he did? Could she possibly feel something more for him than friendship?

He was trying to sort his feelings out when a flock of birds just off to their left flew out of the trees as if something had startled them. As they both turned toward the noise, Luke heard the sound of gunfire echo in his ears and fire burned in his side.

Military instincts prevailed. He grabbed Melanie's hand and pulled her over the side of the cliff. They landed on a rock ledge a couple of feet down.

“Luke, what the hell is going on?”

Melanie's voice shook, and her face had lost all color. Luke's finger sought the throbbing in his side. He pressed against the sticky dampness on his shirt. Damage control would have to wait for later. Right now, priority was getting Melanie off this damn mountain. He glanced down. They were going to have to do it the hard way.

“Someone’s taking potshots at us. We’re going to have to go down the gully.”

The gully was almost straight down with unstable pieces of slate, shale and rock; with tree roots and branches just waiting to trip a person up. It was a difficult descent when you took it slow, and there was no way they could take it slow.

Luke felt Melanie pull back on his arm.

“I can’t go down the gully. I’ll never make it in one piece.”

Luke could hear the panic in her voice, but had to ignore it. He had to keep her moving.

“Yes you will. I’ll go first, so no rocks get kicked down on you. If you slip, I’ll be there to catch you, but we have to go *now!*”

He pulled her with him until he had to let go of her hand to move in front. It was slippery as hell and difficult to get a foothold on the trail, but he managed not to fall ass over teakettle. Melanie on the other hand slipped a few times and sent shale and rocks raining down on his head. She kept apologizing and he kept telling her to keep moving. The pain in his side was worse and he was starting to get a little light-headed. Shit! They needed to get to the bottom, before he passed out.



Melanie was being forced to move faster than she felt comfortable doing, but she kept feeling like her back was in the crosshairs of someone's rifle. Who would be shooting at them? It was crazy. Her legs were cut up from the slate and her stomach muscles were so tight from trying not to fall, she felt like she'd done a hundred crunches. Luke was about six feet in front of her, but he seemed to be slowing. He kept getting hit in the back and head from rocks she couldn't help kicking out from under her. She was trying hard, but just kept slipping.

She was going too damn fast and her footing was coming out from under her. When her foot landed on the next piece of ledge it slipped out from under her and she went down hard, hitting her head on the rock beneath her.

She lay there for a minute as flashes of light danced in front of her eyes. The pounding in her head took over her breathing. Her breath came in short gasps and her head felt like it split open. Luke called her name, but in her breathless state, she couldn't find her voice to answer him.

In seconds he was at her side, cradling her head in his lap.

"Lainie, sweetheart. Look at me. Focus on my eyes."

She looked up at him and saw that his features were upside down. Good Lord, she must have brain damage. When she realized she was looking at him upside down with her head in his lap, she let out a small chuckle.

“You’re upside down, Luke. I can’t focus on your eyes.”

She saw him let out a breath and he leaned over and kissed her quickly on the mouth.

“Can you stand? We need to get moving.”

She noted the urgency in his voice. Slowly, he helped her to her feet and held onto her as the dizziness passed. She finally nodded and told him she was ready to keep going. At the bottom, he gestured to the parked truck. She glanced over her shoulder. What had taken over two hours to climb, had taken fifteen minutes to descend.

Luke held his side as they ran to the truck. He motioned for her to get in the driver’s side while he slumped into the passenger’s seat. She started the engine and faced him.

“You’re hurt. What happened?”

“I think that bullet sideswiped me. You’re gonna have to drive us out of here. You need to hurry though. I don’t know how far the guy with the rifle is behind us, and I don’t know how long I can keep my eyes open.”

“Oh, God. Luke. I’ll get us to the clinic, just hold on.”

Melanie tore off onto the dirt road sideways and sped down the dirt road. As she came to a sharp corner in the road, she pressed on the brakes, only to have

the pedal go to the floor.

“Luke! The brakes are gone.”

As she looked over to him for help, she saw he’d lost consciousness.

Looking back to the road, she let out a scream as two huge maple trees came into view.

Chapter Twelve

Melanie whipped the wheel as hard as she could to the left and punched the gas, bringing the truck into a one hundred and eighty degree circle. The back-end of the truck flew to the left, slamming into the massive trees. The rear tires hung up onto the ditch, bringing the pickup to an abrupt halt.

Melanie's chest hit the steering wheel and she bounced back against the seat. Pain shot through her chest and shoulders. Taking a deep breath, she took a moment to get her bearings, and then reached over to Luke, who'd been thrown up against the passenger door.

The adrenaline coursing through her veins just moments ago left her body in a rush. Melanie's hand trembled as she tentatively placed it on Luke's shoulder and shook. Oh, God, please let him be all right.

"Can you hear me? Please, Luke, wake up."

Groaning, Luke opened his eyes and slowly turned his head toward her.

"Oh, thank God. You just sit still. I'm going to get us out of here."

Luke grabbed her wrist when she started to draw away. His thumb caressed her pulse point as he shifted in the seat, trying to right himself. The warmth from

his hand drifted up Melanie's arm and she shook her head to stay in the reality of the moment.

The reality was she needed to get help for them, now, before whoever was after them caught up. They'd passed several houses and farms on the way up to the mountain. She knew there was one close.

Melanie pulled her hand out of Luke's grasp, afraid he was going into shock. She reached behind the seat, grabbed a jacket and covered him up. When she moved away, he sat up straighter.

"Lainie, I'm fine. What the hell happened?" Luke's hand went to the wound in his side, which was still bleeding. He balled up the jacket she placed over him and pressed it hard to his side. His jaw clenched and his face grew taut. Beads of sweat dripped down his forehead.

"You're not fine, Luke. You've been shot and thrown around the inside of a pickup truck. I have to go get help."

Luke grabbed her hand again. "What happened to the truck?"

"I was going around the corner too fast and lost control. When I went to hit the brakes, there was no pressure. The pedal went straight to the floor. I noticed it felt spongy when I backed out of the field, but didn't even think about it. Anyway, I turned the wheel and stomped the gas. Instead of hitting the trees head on, I

clipped them with the box. We're hung up on something. I'm sorry about your truck."

"Honey, I don't give a shit about the truck. Are you hurt anywhere?"

Now that he'd mentioned it, the crushing pain in her chest was brought front and center again. She rubbed a hand over it and took a deep breath. Most likely just bruised, but damn, it hurt all of a sudden.

"I hit my chest on the steering wheel. It just hurts a little. Luke, I've got to go get us some help. We can't drive the truck and your gunshot wound needs attention immediately. I'll walk down to the nearest house and call for help."

Luke tightened his hand around hers. "You're not going anywhere without me. Whoever put this hole in my side is still out there. There is no way I'm letting you out of my sight. We'll get help together. It takes more than a simple scratch to get me down."

Luke reached into the glove box and took out his Glock and clip. Once the gun was loaded, he turned back to face her.

"No worries, Lainie. Everything will be fine. Let's go."

He opened his door and slid off the seat out of the truck. Melanie watched as he drew his shirt up to inspect the wound. The flesh on his side that had been so tight and tan now looked like hamburger and she closed her eyes as the

contents of her stomach tumbled up into her throat. It wasn't the sight of blood and torn flesh that bothered her. She'd seen more than enough of that during her marriage to Tony.

It was Luke's blood that made her feel as if she was about vomit. Her chest tightened as she thought about what he'd gone through in Iraq. He was away from that now. It was supposed to be safe here. How could this be happening to them?

Melanie silently berated herself. She needed to get help for Luke, not feel sorry for herself. She slid over to the passenger seat and got out of the truck that way. Nothing was wrong with the driver side door; she just wanted to be closer to Luke, in case he needed anything.

Luke tore off the sleeve to the thin jacket, folded it up and slapped it on his side.

"How bad is it?"

"Just a flesh wound. The bullet grazed my side and took about an inch of skin and fat with it, but that's all. The bleeding has all but stopped. I'll need a few stitches."

Lainie met his gaze. He must have seen something there because he dragged her into his arm and held her close, drawing his hand slowly over the back of her head. Warmth radiated off him and permeated her body. It was as if she could

draw from his strength through osmosis. Lainie knew she was safe here. In his arms, no one could touch her. She buried her nose in his chest and drew in his scent. All man, sweat and spice. It was the scent of home to her. Home and safety.

Good God, what was she thinking! This man was her past, not her future. She had no future with any man, not the damaged goods she was now. It would serve no purpose becoming dependent, or heaven forbid, falling in love with Luke again. She'd only open herself up to more pain and heartache.

Melanie pushed out of Luke's embrace, looked at the road, her feet, and the truck. Anywhere but at him. Then she walked to the front of the truck. "We need to find help.. If you insist on going with me, that's fine, but we need to go now."

She took two steps and was stopped when he grabbed her by the shoulder. He spun her around, but she only looked at his chest. "Lainie, what's going on? What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong. We've been here too long. It's not safe."

Luke shook his head. "That's not it and you know it. Something just happened between us and you froze up. Are you afraid of me?"

"Don't be ridiculous. Of course, I'm not afraid of you. Nothing happened between us. It was just a hug, Luke. That's all."

Luke was cut off from any response when she turned her back to him at the

sound of a vehicle approaching.



The old farmer who came along gave them a ride to the local doctor's office. They used the phone to call the police and were examined by the doctor on call. Luke lay on the examining table, waiting for the doc to come in and stitch him up.

He had already talked to the police detective that arrived and knew that he was now getting Melanie's statement. He told the detective about Tony and what happened in New Hampshire; about the dead roses and Joey Giordano's threats. He was dead-on certain that the phone call this morning, the gunshot, and the failed breaks were Joey's doing. The sonofabitch was going to get his ass handed to him as soon as Luke found him.

This was more than threats now. The man was trying to kill them, and that pissed him off, to put it mildly. The asshole just took things to a whole new level, and Luke was more than willing to set things straight. Damn!

He was also pissed about what happened on the mountain and by the side of the road. Number one: he shouldn't have let the kiss go so far, but it did, and he couldn't be sorry for it. Melanie had been right there with him, and with the embrace they shared. He'd felt her body melting into his. Heard her indrawn breath with her nose dead center at his chest. Saw her hands tremble before she

circled his waist with them.

Then, like a switch had been flipped, her body tightened and turned cold. In the blink of an eye, she pushed herself out of his arms and shut him out. She knew damn well what happened between them was more than a simple hug. He could tell by the way she wouldn't meet his eyes. She hadn't looked him in the face since the old man had come along in his truck.

Luke rubbed his hands over his face and swore. Jesus, he just wanted to get out of here and get Melanie safely home. Maybe she had temporarily forgotten everything he'd told her on the mountain, then suddenly remembered and was disgusted by what he was. He couldn't blame her. She deserved someone whole, without all the baggage that came with him. But damn, he wished things were different. He could get lost in the fantasy of having Melanie in his life. She was everything he wasn't. She was family and love and warmth. He was alone, with the darkness of hatred to keep him cold at night. Shit!

He started to get up off the table when the doctor came in. "Oh, you're not going to escape that easily. We've got some stitching to do."

Relieved to not be alone with his feelings, he more than welcomed the burn of the anesthetic. This he could handle. The burning ache in the hollow space where his heart used to reside, he could not. He longed for the empty coldness that

used to be there. Before Melanie had reentered his life.

Ending up with fifteen internal stitches and twenty external, Luke was happy to be leaving the small emergency room of the clinic. Melanie and the detective were in the waiting room, Melanie silently staring out the window with her arms wrapped around her waist. He wished he could do something to ease the fear and tension he felt rolling off her body. But with her earlier reaction to him fresh in his mind and this damn ache in his side, he didn't feel like opening himself up to more rejection.

The detective stood and walked over to Luke when he walked through the waiting room door.

“Mr. McLean, Luke, I've had your truck towed to the barracks in Rutland so our techs can go over it. I want to see if the brakes were messed with. As soon as I get back to the office, I'll start checking on Mr. Giordano's whereabouts. If he is in the area, we'll find him.”

The detective shifted on his feet and took a deep breath. “Look, Luke. Melanie's brother is a good friend of mine. That makes this personal. I will do everything in my power to see this man is caught. I know your military background. You're Dan's partner. It may go against the grain, but I need you to stay out of this investigation. You need to leave this to us. I don't want to see my

friends hurt, — new and old. Don't worry, I'll be telling Dan the same thing when he calls which I know will be as soon as he talks to you.”

Luke shook the cop's offered hand and nodded, but didn't say a word. There was no way he was staying out of this. No way was he letting this Italian scumbag slip through his fingers. Joseph Giordano was his.

Chapter Thirteen

After Detective Fuller dropped them off, Luke headed to the computer and Melanie made a beeline upstairs. She needed the sanctuary her bedroom offered. She was confused, and her chest was killing her. The doctor had given her some pain medication after Luke insisted she be examined. She inhaled slowly. For what were just bruises and contusions, it sure hurt like hell.

But it wasn't as bad as the pain Luke was in. They hadn't spoken more than a word or two since the incident by the pickup truck. She could almost see the dark cloud that hovered over Luke. His face ridged, eyes cold and dark as coal. If she didn't trust him the way she did, she would be scared to be here alone with him.

And wasn't that a miracle in itself. She trusted a man not to hurt her, especially with the state his mind must be in after all he'd been through. But she did, and she wished there was a way she could help remove that ominous cloud. It didn't take a rocket scientist to know he was mad about being shot. Mad that, in his eyes, he hadn't protected her, but he had. He got her off the mountain with a madman and a gun on their asses.

If she hadn't been so worried about him, she wasn't sure how she would have reacted to the brake failure. Would she have tried to save herself? Or take the easy way out and just let it happen?

Melanie shook off the morbid thoughts. She needed to find a way to reassure Luke, yet at the same time guard her heart. The more she was around him, the more she wanted to be. She yearned for the comfort of his arms. Needed the strength he emitted just by holding her. In his embrace, a natural part of herself, once thought dead, came to life. She almost felt like a real woman.

And that kiss. Damn, what a kiss. She'd lost control over her emotions and maybe even her heart during that kiss. Holy shit! She wanted him. Wanted to make love to him. Wanted to feel his hands skimming over her body. To feel his weight as he lowered himself to her. To welcome him into her body as she'd never welcomed Tony. She hadn't wanted to be with a man since Tony had shattered all her illusions of love on their wedding night. Yet here she was, wanting to experience everything she'd never felt with Tony.

He didn't think he could make love to a woman. Yet, when they'd kissed, she'd felt the bulging in his jeans that indicated differently. He reacted to her. Could she do this? Give him her body without giving away her heart and soul? Or was it too late already? Did he already own her heart? Hadn't he always?

It didn't matter. One way or the other, she wanted this. He'd done so much on that mountain today. He'd given her understanding and hadn't judged her for her mistakes. He'd shared things from the deepest part of his soul. Told her things he would take to his grave without telling another soul. Trusted her with his secrets.

Yes, she could help him. Could remove that cloud and hopefully bring just one moment of sunshine. If she were to be honest with herself, she knew she fell in love on that mountain today. She could live with that knowledge, but would keep it to herself. Never would she burden Luke with her feelings.

If he took what she was about to offer, that would be enough for her. Really, what more could she expect out of her life anyway? Teenage fantasies were over. She was a grown-up now. Just sharing her body with him would have to be enough. It was all she was worth anyway.



Luke stepped out of the shower and tore off the wet bandage covering his stitches. He turned to get a dry bandage and caught his reflection in the mirror. Christ! What a disgusting specimen. He'd always taken his body for granted. He'd always been lean with a muscular build. While he hadn't been obsessed with his body, he worked out to keep in shape for the work he did in special ops, but didn't

go overboard like some of his buddies had.

But looking at himself now, it was all just painful reminders of a time he would never forget. It helped to talk today to Melanie, but it still didn't erase the guilt that he'd survived that place and his troops hadn't. Yeah, maybe he knew there was nothing he could have done, but it still didn't sit any better with him. He should have died there, too. His soul and humanity did. His body should have as well.

Luke turned away from the reflection of scars and carved up skin. The wounds may have healed, but the memories kept them as fresh as yesterday to him. He slapped on a new bandage, dragged on a clean pair of boxers and stalked to his room. It was only eight o'clock in the evening, but he wasn't fit for company. Besides, he was fairly sure Melanie didn't want him around anyway.

She hadn't spoken one word to him. He couldn't blame her for her reaction to him. Hell, he could hardly stand himself. Why should she be any different? Shutting the door to his room, he checked the bedside dresser to make sure the Glock still sat there and crawled into bed. Turning the light off, he put his hands behind his head and stared at the ceiling. He'd done some checking online and called an old AF friend who lived near Giordano in Jersey. No one had seen the guy in a couple of days. The official story was he was out of town on family business.

Yeah, he knew just what that family business was. Well, the asshole picked the wrong person to piss off. Luke closed his eyes and could see himself punching a hole in Joey's chest, ripping out his heart and shoving it down his throat. He was itching to get his hands on the man and end this once and for all.

Melanie had made a breakthrough today. He'd watched her breathing in the fresh air, saw the joy flash in her eyes as she studied the scenery around her. She wasn't scared of being out of the house; she was reveling in it, until that bastard took a pot shot at her and sent her running for her life. Now she'd never leave the damn house again and who could blame her.

He punched at the air in impotent rage. His hands shook and his breath came in short gasps. The anger flowing through his body was at a boiling point. All Luke wanted to do was destroy something, someone. He needed to get out of the house, away from the suffocating walls that surrounded him, before he blew and lost control.

Luke threw his feet over the side of the bed and reached for the light. The sound of a shuffling outside his door stalled his movement. Blindly reaching for his gun, by habit he found and raised it.

With his back against the wall, he slowly and silently crept to the door as it opened.

Luke grabbed the arm of the intruder and spun around, violently pushing the intruder up against the wall, trapping him between the wall and his body, with his knee shoved in the guy's back. Arm twisted behind, he jerked up, threatening to break it. The piercing cry of a woman followed. The body he had thrown against the wall and trapped against his own was small and soft and about to collapse.

Dear God, Melanie!

Chapter Fourteen

Horrified, Luke backed away from Melanie. He shoved a hand through his hair. What the hell had he just done? He watched as Melanie turned and looked at him. Her eyes, huge and wet, searched his.

He could have hurt her. Did hurt her. What the fuck was wrong with him? “Lainie, I’m so sorry. I—I didn’t know it was you. Shit! I just didn’t know.”

Unable to hold her gaze, he stormed past her and out the door.

Melanie heard the back door slam and slid down the wall, hugging her knees. God, she’d been so scared, it’d been like being in the room with Tony. She frowned, no that wasn’t true. Luke reacted from all he’d suffered at the hands of animals as bad as Tony had been.

She knew Luke hadn’t meant to hurt or scare her. So much for getting rid of that dark cloud. It was now as dark and dangerous as an F-5 tornado, along with Luke’s mood. She’d just made things so much worse. She never should have come to his room. What the hell was going on in her head anyway?

She’d crept into his room in the middle of the night under the misconception that she could seduce him into feeling better about himself? What

a joke. She was nothing but a used up shell of a woman. How was she supposed to make any man feel good, when she didn't even feel good about herself? A bitter laugh escaped her lips.

.She needed to apologize to Luke before he thought this was his entire fault. She pushed herself to her feet, brushed the tears from her face and went to find him. She found him sitting on the back porch steps, staring off into the night. What did he think of her now? Opening the screen door, the hinges creaked and she saw him stiffen in the moonlight. He didn't say anything to her, not even when she sat down beside him.

For several minutes she sat, conscious of the heavy silence.

"I didn't know it was you, Lainie. I never thought it would be you outside my bedroom door," he said, breaking through the silence. His voice shook and he put his face in his hands. "Now you have some idea of how screwed up I am."

"I know you didn't mean to hurt me. It's okay, really. I should have known better than to show up in your room in the middle of the night unannounced. I'm the one who should apologize here, not you. What with everything going on, it's no surprise..."

Luke jumped up and bounded off the steps to pace the lawn, his fists clenched and jaw tight.

“Melanie, I was half an inch from breaking your arm. Are you going to sit there and tell me I didn’t hurt you? From the moment you passed out in my arms in New Hampshire, the one thing I’ve been telling myself and you is I’d never hurt you. I never wanted to look in your eyes and see fear directed at me. Or to see tears I put there because I’ve caused you pain. But it’s exactly what I did. Isn’t it? You were scared of me, weren’t you? Weren’t you?”

Melanie studied her feet. She’d caused his pain. Shame and guilt rocked her. “It’s my fault you—”

Luke stormed over to her. “Don’t you dare! Don’t you dare take the blame for my bad behavior? Look at me!”

Afraid she’d see contempt and anger in his eyes, Melanie shook her head. She couldn’t face being a failure in another man’s eyes. When she wouldn’t look up, Luke bent down to her level and tipped her chin with his hand.

He spoke in a quieter tone, but with just as much intensity. “Don’t ever blame yourself for a man being cruel to you again. What Tony did to you was wrong. Nothing could ever warrant that behavior. What I just did to you is wrong. You should be able to walk about your house without fear of being attacked. You should be able to come to me for anything, and not have to worry about how I’ll react. Do you understand? This had nothing to do with you and everything to do

with me and my fucked up head.”

Melanie nodded. The hand that held her chin shook and she knew he was hurting over what happened. She took his hand between hers.

“Yes. I understand that. I also understand you have PTSD. After what happened today, I should have realized you’d be even more jumpy than usual. I should have spoken outside your door, given you some kind of warning it was me. I should have thought, but I didn’t, and that is my fault.”

When he tried to speak, she pressed his fingers to her lips. “Please, Luke, give me some credit here. If you’d known it was me, this wouldn’t have happened. You are not like Tony. Tony wouldn’t have stopped, and he sure as hell wouldn’t be beating himself up over it. I’ve gotten a lot stronger since I’ve been home. Thanks to you. You should take credit for the good things you do. Please, stop feeling bad about this.”

Luke shook his head in disbelief. The woman sitting in front of him had to be the strongest, most compassionate woman he’d ever known. It amazed him, how she made him feel better, just by talking to him. While he’d never believe this wasn’t his fault, he knew better than to argue any more about it. “Ya know, you’re very special to me. I’ve never stopped caring about you. I’m so, so sorry I hurt you.”

“I have a way you could make it up to me, but I’m not so sure you want to

hear it.”

“Anything.” He’d do anything for her. Always would, always will.

“Would you think about talking to a doctor? Maybe a short trial of medication. From what I’ve read, the medication they use these days doesn’t wipe you out or make you walk around like a zombie, and you might only need it for a short time. It’s not a sign of weakness to ask for help. It’s a turning point. It’s taking back control of your life, and not letting those monsters run it any longer.”

He didn’t know if he could do what she asked. He also wondered if she realized she might suffer from the same thing, but didn’t really want to discuss it right now. Getting up from his kneeling position, he sat on the steps next to her again.

“I’ll think about it.”

“That’s all I ask.”

They sat in silence a few more minutes when Luke stood and grabbed Melanie’s hand.

“Let’s go in. Neither of us is dressed for an April night in Vermont.”

He continued to hold her hand as they went inside and back up the stairs to his room. Selfish as it might be, he wasn’t ready to break the connection they had or send her back to her room quite yet. Knowing she came with him without any

trepidation filled his heart. She trusted him not to hurt her again, and by God, he'd die before he ever did.

By talking today, sharing everything, they'd formed a bond, and he wasn't ready for the day to end. He led her over to his bed and pulled down the blankets. If he could persuade her into letting him hold her for a while, he'd die a happy man, but he wasn't sure she was ready for that yet. But when he patted the bed for her to sit down, that's exactly what she did, and slid her legs underneath the blankets.

Luke walked around to his side of the bed and sat. His heart threatened to pound out of his chest and he was suddenly short of breath. Good Lord, he felt like a randy teenager, and all he wanted to do was hold this woman in his arms, to feel her warm, soft body close to his.

Gathering his courage, he slid his legs onto the bed and leaned back against the headboard. Melanie's scent permeated the room. It was so quiet he could hear the soft intake of her breath. He wanted to feel her skin next to his. Could it possibly be as soft as it looked? Would she taste as sweet as he thought she would?

Damn! If he didn't know better, he'd swear he was starting to get hard. What he wouldn't give to be able to make love to her. To bury himself deep inside of her and wipe away all the memories of what that bastard had done to her. He

wished he could show her the beauty and tenderness of making love.

He turned to face her and was shocked to find her intent gaze locked on his. He sucked in a breath. Holy shit! She was one beautiful woman.

“Lainie, what were you doing outside my door anyway?” he asked, trying to hold onto his sanity.

She held his stare. Her throat bobbed and her own breath hitched. Then she spoke. The words were so fantastic, he rubbed his ear, trying to clear his hearing.

If what he heard was correct, nothing else could've tilted the world on its axis.

Chapter Fifteen

“Say something. You did hear me, didn’t you?” Melanie watched as the color in Luke’s cheeks faded. He’d gone stock still, and for a moment she was afraid he was going to pass out. She knew instinctively he was scared, nervous his body would fail him.

He wanted her; she knew that. The passionate way he kissed her and the hunger she sometimes caught in his eyes left no doubt of his attraction. He just didn’t believe it could happen for him. Well, she wanted to prove him wrong, and by God, she would.

“Luke?”

“I...uh...I’m not sure I heard you correctly. Could you please repeat it?”

Melanie laughed softly and rose on her knees to face him with newfound confidence. She slowly straddled his lap. Luke’s leg muscles stiffened under her and his fists clenched around the comforter under him. *I can do this*, she thought to herself.

Leaning forward, she brought her hands up to his face, one running through his hair, the other wrapping around the back of his neck. As she looked into his

eyes, she inched in closer to whisper in his ear.

“I want you to make love to me.”

His body trembled under her and she heard his sharp intake of air. His reaction emboldened her. Melanie nipped at his ear and ran her tongue down his neck. Again, she whispered in his ear.

“Please, Luke. I need you.”

Luke let go of the comforter and brought his hands up to rest on her shoulders. “Melanie, I can’t give you what you need. Lord knows I want to, but it’s just not gonna happen.”

“Let me be the judge of that. Just relax, close your eyes and feel. Don’t think about anything. Just let me do this for you.”

“But...”

She put her fingers on his mouth, effectively silencing him, then began her assault on his senses. Starting with soft kisses over his eyes, she worked to the corner of his mouth, then down his neck. Luke braced his hands on her hips and held stock still. She ran her tongue over the pulse point in the hollow of his neck, and then brought her mouth to one of his nipples. With both hands caressing his chest, she twirled her tongue around his flat nipple, alternating between nipping with her teeth and suckling.

The fingers burrowing into her hips told Melanie her efforts were having their effect. Gaining more confidence, she continued her seduction. As her hands flowed over his stomach, his muscles tightened in their path.

When she reached the ridge of his boxers, Luke's hand caught hers in a flash.

As she straddled his lap, she moved her bottom snug tight against him. Whether he wanted to believe it or not, the proof was in the pudding so to speak, and Luke was no bowl of Jell-O. No sir. What was growing underneath her, reaching for the core of her, was hot and hard as steel.

Melanie looked up and caught the shock in his eyes right before he brought his mouth down on hers.

Luke let go of her wrist and wrapped his arms around her, crushing her breasts to his chest. Their tongues battled for superiority as she savored the raw masculinity in his taste. It wasn't enough.

She wanted to be skin to skin. To have his hair roughened chest brushing the softness of her breasts. While he wasn't wearing anything but boxers, she was still fully dressed in a tank top and sleep shorts. It was too hot, the clothes were too confining, and she wanted out of them now.

Apparently Luke had the same idea. He dominated the kiss as he took over

the seduction.

When he broke the kiss, he clasped her face in his hands and looked into her eyes.

“Do you know what you have done for me? I didn’t know...Damn Lainie, only you. I’ve wanted only you for so long.”

She smiled, and then lifted her arms over her head so he could remove her top. When it was discarded on the floor, Luke held her away from him and admired her full breasts.

“You are so fucking beautiful.”

Melanie laughed at his staunch admiration. What man with his hands full of boobs wouldn’t say that? But she didn’t take offense in his language. She gloried in it, and when he brought his mouth down and drew her breast into his mouth, she thought she had died and gone to heaven. He kept a steady pull on her nipple, and then switched to the other, taking the nipple between his teeth in a gentle bite, and then soothing it with the caress of his tongue.

White-hot lightning shot through Melanie and settled in her core. An ache gathered between her legs, and it made her hips move of their own will. Hunger for this man replaced the fear Tony had left behind. Never before had intimacy felt so overwhelmingly right.

Soft sounds of ecstasy came from within her, encouraging Luke in his ministrations. He lifted up on his knees and lowered her down onto her back. His hands were everywhere. Roaming over her skin, leaving flames in their wake.

As he stretched out over her, he lowered himself and helped divest her of her shorts. She heard his groan when he realized there were no panties under them. Kissing his way up the inside of her leg, Luke buried his face in the center of her, slowly running his tongue over the raw bundle of nerves that threatened to make her body explode.

With his thumb rubbing and his tongue plunging, Melanie was certain she was going to burst into a million pieces. When Luke thrust his finger deep within her core, Melanie screamed his name as her body convulsed around him.

Luke kissed his way up her body, having lost his boxers. She was so damn responsive it was killing him. He was rock hard and aching so badly for her. And holy shit, wasn't that a fucking miracle? He had no doubt what-so-fucking-ever that no other woman could have done this for him.

He'd wanted to show her that making love could be gentle and sweet, but he ached so damn bad to be deep inside her, he didn't think there was much control left in him. No matter what, this wouldn't be rough and fast.

As he claimed her mouth in another toe curling kiss, her arms wrapped

around his waist.

“Please, Luke, now. I need you inside me, now.”

He was poised at her entrance, but wanted to make sure she was here with him and that there was no way bad memories could intrude.

“Look at me, baby. Keep your eyes open and locked on mine. I want to watch you when you come again.”

As he looked deep into her dark blue gaze, Luke thrust himself deep inside. So close to the edge, he couldn't help but close his eyes and hold his breath.

Heaven!

Home!

Love!

He couldn't put a name to the number of emotions running through him as he held himself still, wrapped in the tight, hot core of the woman who meant so damn much to him. Finally, he took a breath and opened his eyes to look at her and found tears running down her cheeks.

“Lainie, tell me I didn't hurt you. Aw, please, honey, tell me.”

She shook her head and with a shaky voice, spoke. “I just never knew it could be like this between two people,” she said with a slight quiver in her voice.

With a huge, smug, and oh, so male smile on his face, Luke started moving

slowly within her. Melanie met each movement with one of her own.

“Aw, shucks ma’am. Ya ain’t seen nothing yet.”

All smiles faded as their rhythm moved faster, harder and deeper. So damn good, this was so damn good, he never wanted it to end. He wanted to prolong the feeling as long as he could, but control was slipping fast. He was at the edge of abyss, about to fly into oblivion.

When Melanie screamed out his name and her inner muscles clenched down hard around him, Luke couldn’t hold on any longer. He lost control and shot off like a cannon. Stars flared behind his eyes and he swore he stopped breathing for a moment. He was almost scared he wouldn’t recover. That his heart had given out on him.

Oh, God, who cares? I’m going to die a happy man.

He collapsed onto Melanie and promptly rolled them both to lie on their sides. Still connected in the most fundamental way, they fought to bring their breathing under control. Sweat-slicked bodies still moved slightly together and he found her mouth for a long passionate kiss before they both fell headlong into sleep.



Outside, looking up into the bedroom window, Joey Giordano watched the

shadows slow their movement. *So this is the way the bitch pays her respect to her dead husband? The whore is getting it on with Mr. Fucking Macho, while my brother lays cold in the ground? I don't think so, bitch. No! Your day is coming. Your boyfriend can watch while I make you pay for everything. Then he can join you in fucking hell!*

Chapter Sixteen

Luke woke the next morning with an instant awareness of the woman wrapped around his body. All soft and warm and so close it was hard to tell where he ended and she began. It was the first morning since being home from Iraq that he could honestly say, he'd gotten through the night without the recurring nightmares.

Of course, he'd lost track of the number of times they'd made love. They probably hadn't slept more than three hours at a time, but those hours were met with peace, not war.

Rain pattered on the roof. He glanced out the window at the gloomy gray color of a spring storm, and smiled.

The sight, at one time, would have started him off in a foul mood for the day. This morning he could only think of what a great excuse it made to spend the morning in bed with Lainie. She'd rocked his world last night. Given him everything she'd had and then some, and in turn he'd shown her the pleasure and tenderness he'd never really known he had in him.

But it was there, and all for her. He'd loved her before, when they were

teenagers, but what he felt for her now was so much more, so much stronger, and based on a reality that came with having seen the good and the bad in the world.

He was grounded when he was with her. She gave him strength of soul and peace of mind. Those things hadn't existed within him for a long damn time. He had a lot of issues to work through, but for once, that didn't seem like such a daunting task.

If he did some hard work, he just might have a chance at a normal life, with Melanie at the center of it. And didn't that thought make for a gorgeous day? Rain or no rain, life was looking much brighter.

A scratching at his door caught Luke's attention, but he knew exactly who it was. A routine had been established when he'd first moved in. Every morning he would get a visitor, looking for attention. Well, wouldn't there be a surprise this morning? Laughing, he invited his visitor in.

The doorknob jiggled a couple times and finally the door was shoved open. Sarge came barreling into the room and lunged onto the bed landing directly on top of Melanie, who let out a bellow and jumped up.

Laughing out loud, all Luke could manage to do was pull Sarge closer to him and half off Melanie.

"Oh, real funny, Mr. Jokes. Get the hairy beast off me."

The corners of her mouth were trying to crinkle up, and he could tell she was fighting not to smile. Quite a woman, his Melanie. After regaining control of his laughter, Luke leaned down and took her mouth in an eye-opening kiss.

“It’s your fault. This is Sarge’s morning routine. He jumps up on bed, gets an invigorating rubdown and then we start the day. You’re ruining his morning.”

Sitting up in bed, Melanie’s mouth dropped open and she slammed her hands on her hips. “Me! I’ll have him know he interrupted a very promising dream, just as it was getting good. Talk about ruining a morning.”

Luke smiled smugly. “A dream, huh? Did I happen to be in it?”

“Why, it just so happens, you were.”

He wiggled his eyebrows and scooted closer. “Care to enlighten me?”

“Hmmm, I guess I could.”

Luke followed the path of her tongue as she wet first her top lip, then her bottom, extremely slow.

Damn, that tongue would feel mighty fine slowly going over his own mouth.

“Well, from what little I remember of it, we were in a cozy little log cabin in the middle of the woods. There must have been three feet of snow outside and you’d just started a fire in the open fireplace. I was lying on the rug in front of it and you came over to lie down next to me.”

Luke liked where this story was going and wanted to hear more. “Uh huh, keep going.”

“From nowhere, it seemed a bowl of berries and cream appeared on the floor next to me. I took a berry and dipped it in the cream and fed it to you. You were a little bit messy and had some of the whipped cream left on the corner of your mouth. So I slowly leaned over you and licked the side of your mouth. You know how I hate a mess.”

Luke leaned back against the headboard, swallowed hard and closed his eyes. He could see them in his mind. In front of the fire, feeding each other the fruit. He relaxed and listened to her soft voice.

“The cream was sooo good. I wanted more, but I didn’t want any berries. So, after I dipped my finger into the bowl, I slowly ran it down your chest. Stopping just at the ridge of your unbuttoned jeans. Did I mention your shirt seemed to have disappeared? Anyway, moving between your legs, I bent down and drew my tongue up your chest, savoring every bit. Somehow the cream managed to spread over your nipples. Well, I couldn’t have that. I suckled and kissed and nibbled until every bit was gone. Can I show you?”

Luke had long since grown hard and was aching to have her hands and mouth on him. Just her husky voice and softly spoken words were driving him

crazy.

“Oh, honey, please do,” he said. Eyes still closed, he anticipated her touch. Goosebumps broke out on his skin and his hips rocked involuntarily.

“Keep your eyes closed. I have just the thing to replace the cream.”

He knew she was talking about the chocolate sauce they used on their midnight ice cream snack. They never took it back down to the kitchen. He felt the bed shift, and then shift again, as she retrieved the syrup. Her breath on his neck was warm as she leaned close. Then the cool sensation of the chocolate syrup as she spread it across his chest. Good Lord, she was killing him.

The bed shifted again and her warm breath transferred to his ear.

“Feel the sensations, Luke. This is where my dream ended, but for you, it’s where it picks up.”

He heard her snap her fingers, but it didn’t really register until he felt a wet, rough, tongue dragging across his chest. His eyes snapped open to find Melanie rolling around on the end of the bed, holding her stomach with one hand and covering her mouth with the other. Who did the wet tongue belong to? Sarge’s big brown eyes and hairy face stared up at him as he licked the chocolate sauce off Luke’s chest and shoulder.

“Jesus H. Christ, dog. Get the hell away from me.”

Luke jumped off the bed in one bounce and gave Melanie a hard stare. She was laughing uncontrollably; she couldn't speak. Tears ran down her red face.

"You think that's funny do you?"

"I-I'm s-sorry. I c-couldn't resist."

"Really, we'll just see how funny you think it is when I tickle you so much you wet your pants."

With that he dove at her, capturing her under him and trying to tickle her squirming body.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry. No! Stop! I give. I give."

They were rolling around on the bed, with Sarge barking and bouncing on top of them, trying to get in on the fun. Tickles turned to kisses. When he had her pinned on her back, the phone rang. After the third ring, Luke swore and made a wild grab, answering the phone.

"Yeah!"

"Wow, you get up on the wrong side of bed or something?"

"Something." Luke growled at Dan on the other end of the phone. "Sorry, didn't mean to snap. You just caught me in the middle of something. Where ya' been? I've been trying to get a hold of you since yesterday afternoon."

"My phone completely died yesterday. I had to get a new one this morning.

Anyway, I just got your messages, what's up?"

Luke looked over at Melanie, who gestured for him to keep talking and headed to the door with Sarge. She mouthed bathroom to him and left the room. Luke filled Dan in on what happened on the mountain and the brake failure yesterday. Christ, was it just yesterday?

"Your buddy, Detective Fuller, is investigating. I'm waiting to hear from him this morning. He said he'd call with anything they found on the mountain."

"You think it's Giordano?"

"Who the hell else would it be? He's the only wacko we know that has a beef with Melanie. We know he is out of town, on so-called family business. He can't be accounted for because the sick bastard is here."

"I'll cancel the rest of the meetings for today and tomorrow morning and head back. We need to find this sonofabitch before he does some real damage."

Luke didn't know where the nagging feeling was coming from, but he had a gut feeling Dan should stay where he was. He couldn't justify it. It just was.

"No, you stay there. We need the business and I'm not going to let Melanie out of my sight. Besides, Detective Fuller has already warned me not to interfere in his investigation. So let's give him the next two days. If he can't come up with anything by the time you get back, we do our own thing."

“I guess. Is Mel okay? She holding up with all this?”

Luke could hear the brotherly concern in Dan’s voice and wanted to reassure him as best as he could.

“She’s better than fine. She’s pissed, fighting mad at this guy, and she’s not going to let anyone beat her down again. Your sister is pretty amazing.”

“That she is, my friend, that she is. Sounds like you two had a good talk on that mountain before the shit hit the fan.”

Luke knew what Dan was getting at, but he wasn’t ready to talk about it with Dan.

“We did, and you and I are due a talk in the near future. Thanks for being there, pal. I owe ya.”

“You don’t owe me anything, Luke. We’re friends. It’s what we do.”

“Yeah, well, anyway, I’ll keep you posted till ya get back. How’s it going on your end?”

“Most excellent, dude, on all counts. I’ll call ya later.”

He heard Dan laugh and then disconnect. Smartass!

Luke pulled on a pair of jeans and found a t-shirt. About to go in search of Melanie, the phone rang before he even hit the hallway.

“Lo.”

“It’s Detective Fuller. The CSU found some stuff on the mountain. Can you and Melanie meet me at the barracks in Fair Haven? There are some things I think you should see.”

Shit! Now what?

“Give us forty-five minutes and we’ll be there.”

“I’ll be waiting,” the detective said, then disconnected.

Chapter Seventeen

Melanie and Luke made it to Fair Haven in forty minutes and were escorted into Detective Fuller's office.

"Thanks for coming in."

Melanie studied the detective. He couldn't have been older than thirty-five, but at the moment he looked double that. His suit was ruffled, the dark bags under his eyes and the stubble on his chin attested to some long hours at work.

"We didn't have much choice, Detective. I want to know what you've found out about the person who shot Luke. I want this over."

She'd thought about it on the drive up. Last night with Luke was wonderful. More than ever, she wanted endless nights and days with him, but she couldn't enter into a relationship with this shadow hanging over her.

Tony had done enough damage to her psyche. His brother was not going to finish her off. She finally had something to live for. That was, if Luke felt the same way.

Don't even go there. You have enough trouble right now without borrowing more. But she so wanted the fear to be gone.

“I realize that, Mrs. Giordano, that’s why I asked you two here. We found some disturbing things on the mountain. I’m hoping you could help me out with them.”

“Please call me Melanie. I really can’t stomach that last name.”

The detective nodded, leaned to his right and opened his desk drawer. He grabbed a large yellow envelope and emptied it out on his desk. Melanie watched as several photos, a wallet, a large knife, and a syringe toppled onto the desk.

“We found a backpack up on Haystack Mountain, stashed in the woods just below the summit. Besides the stuff here, there was a pair of field glasses. This stuff here though is a little troubling. The syringe was full when we found it. I had the lab test it last night and it came back as a heavy duty sedative, most commonly used by veterinarians.”

Melanie took in the syringe and shivered. Luke seized a hold of her hand and squeezed tight, giving her his strength. Had the drug been meant for her?

“This wallet was also in there.”

She took the wallet from Detective Fuller’s extended hand and flipped it open. As if the damn thing had bitten her, she gasped and dropped it like a hot potato. Luke picked it up and opened it as she looked on, speechless. She had no idea what to say.

Luke spoke for her. “This is Tony Giordano’s ID and Badge. What the hell’s it doing in here?”

“Good question.” The detective looked at Melanie. “When is the last time you saw that?”

“He always carried it in his back pocket. At night, he’d leave it on his night stand next to his gun, but if he was awake, it was on him. He loved that badge more than...well, I’d say me, but that wouldn’t say much. I assumed he would have had it in his back pocket the night he died. I don’t know.”

“Hmmm, I thought maybe. I called Concord and talked to the detective in charge. It wasn’t on the list of items that came in with him, but there was a note in the coroner’s report that they placed his clothes and identification in holding for the investigating officer to pick up for evidence. One can assume that by ID they meant this wallet. Unless, he carried another ID besides this one?”

Melanie shook her head. “No, just that one.”

“So sometime between the coroners placing it in their holding closet and when the investigator arrived, it disappeared.”

He took the wallet back and handed her the pictures. She forced herself to look. The first one was of Tony, crumpled at the bottom of the stairs, bleeding from his nose, mouth, and under his head. She couldn’t understand why he was

making her look at this. Melanie looked over to Luke, who took the pictures from her shaking hands and stood.

“Look Detective, I don’t know what the hell you’re trying to pull here, but if you’re going for shock factor you’re succeeding. Melanie is the victim in this mess, you’re treating her like the criminal. What are you up to?”

Detective Fuller had the good grace to look a little guilty about his actions.

“You’re right. I apologize, Mrs. Gio-uh Melanie, but I needed your honest reaction to this stuff, and I needed to know if you had access to his ID or if he had another. You were in the hospital the same time he was downstairs in the coroner’s office.”

This time Melanie stood.

“Are you insinuating that after I delivered my baby by cesarean section, I went down to the morgue and stole my dead husband’s ID? For what purpose could I possibly have wanted it. My God! Just what are you trying to say here, Detective?”

“Please sit down, both of you. I’m not trying to say anything. I just need to cover all my bases. Please don’t get the wrong idea.”

Melanie couldn’t believe this. Was he actually thinking she was behind all this? It didn’t make sense. She looked over at Luke, whose face had turned red, and

his fists were clenched at his sides.

“It’s kind of hard not to get the wrong idea, based on where your questions are going. I think this interview is over,” Luke said before she had a chance to.

“Wait. Again, I’m sorry for starting off on the wrong foot. For what it’s worth, I don’t believe you have anything to do with what’s going on. We got an anonymous call last night. The caller stated you were trying to send everybody on a wild goose chase to get sympathy and also to cast suspicion away from yourself regarding your husband’s death. The caller claimed you murdered your husband and covered it up with the help of your brother and Mr. McLean here.”

This was just too much. What the hell were they going to tell her next?

“This is ridiculous. Can’t you see it was Joey that made that call?”

The detective stood and walked around his desk to lean against the front of it.

“That’s just it. The caller was female, and she sure as hell shed some doubt on your innocence.”

Luke spoke, again, before she had a chance to. “Enough beating around the bush, Detective. Tell us what this is all about.”

The detective kept his focus on Melanie. “Were you aware your husband filed several reports of spousal abuse against you?”

“What! Are you kidding me?”

“Unfortunately no, you’ve got quite the file in Concord. If it hadn’t been for that nine-one-one call, you’d be sitting in jail right now for murder. And before you say anything, no, I don’t believe what happened was your fault. Neither does anyone in Concord once they heard the tape, but that’s not to say he didn’t make you look really bad. I had to check out the call we got.”

“I really don’t understand this. How could he have made those reports without some kind of an investigation. Why wouldn’t anyone have questioned me?”

Detective Fuller shifted his position from one foot to the other, looking slightly uncomfortable.

“Your husband was a top detective, well respected on the force. My guess is he wrote up the reports, told his supervisor he was embarrassed about the information in them, had them co-signed and filed them away for a rainy day so to speak.”

“I can’t believe the man is dead and still giving me trouble. You do know it’s all lies, don’t you?”

“We do now, thanks to the nine-one-one tape. But like I said, if you hadn’t had that, you’d be in some serious trouble.”

Luke rubbed her shoulder and she couldn't help leaning into his touch. This was a nightmare, and sooner or later she would wake up, preferably in Luke's arms, and life would be golden.

Okay, so she was no good at lying to herself. It didn't hurt to try. Luke's voice brought her out of her musings.

"Fine, so you have the tape, everyone knows the reports were bullshit and she's innocent, now what? She's not behind this. What are you doing to figure out who is?"

"That's where those other pictures come in. I was hoping you could tell me when and where they were taken."

Luke glanced at the pictures again and frowned.

"This just gets better and better, doesn't it?"

Luke looked at Melanie, and she could see indecision in his eyes. Whatever the pictures were, he didn't want to show them to her.

"Just let me see them, let's get this over with."

Chapter Eighteen

Melanie sighed and snatched the pictures out of Luke's hand. She'd already seen the one of Tony dead and despite how she loathed him, she'd experienced a rush of sadness. She shuffled it behind the others. The next one had her slowly sinking back into the chair. It was of Luke and Joey Giordano. They were standing in front of her wheelchair, nose-to-nose. The photographer was off center, and while he had a view of both men's faces, she could look directly into Luke's eyes.

They were cold and dark and full of menace. His teeth were clenched, the white enamel showing through his slightly open mouth. He used his whole face as a threat, his eyes squinting ever so slightly, jaw tight, and chin jutting out. You could see the anger flowing out of his pores.

She also saw Luke's hand grasping the lapels of Joey's suit, and if she looked very close, there was the glimpse of a steel knife blade in Joey's lowered hand. It was pointed a millimeter from Luke's heart.

The picture radiated testosterone, anger, even hatred. Melanie shivered and moved on to the next one. This was taken at the hospital also. Luke had just lifted her into his arms and twisted a bit to put her in the truck. You couldn't see his face

this time, or hers. Her face was buried in his chest, and her arms, wrapped so tightly around his neck, made it look as if she was choking him.

Moving to the next one, she saw her brother standing outside a barn. If she had to guess, she'd say it was theirs, but it only showed the side of the barn and bales of hay.

The most disturbing picture came last. It showed her sitting in the bay window of her bedroom. Sitting there with her arms wrapped around her knees she stared out the window with tears running down her face. Just looking out at nothing.

In the past month, especially the past twenty-four hours, she'd made great strides into claiming her life back. She didn't feel like that woman sitting in the window. She was stronger now, both mentally and physically.

Even still, with everything she learned today, she knew in her heart she had a ways to go. It wouldn't take much to slide back into the timid, fearful woman she was.

Melanie studied the picture for a long moment, not moving or saying a word. What the hell did it mean? Who was taking the pictures? Would she ever be safe? She'd had no idea someone had been watching her, following her close enough to get a candid shot of her in her bedroom. Just when she was starting to

feel secure, four glossy pieces of paper managed to bring back all the fear and then some.

Not only was she not safe, but she was bringing danger to Luke and Dan. Luke had been through so much, but was making progress. She loved him so much, how could she stay and let something bad happen to him? Well, that was simple, she couldn't. She'd have to leave. No way was she going back to being the victim.

"Lainie!" Hearing Luke shout her name brought her back to the here and now.

"What? I'm sorry. Were you saying something?"

He was kneeling in front of her with his hands on her knees. She didn't even know he'd moved from his chair.

"I was asking you if you remember when the one of you in your room might have been taken. Are you okay?"

He was staring so deeply into her eyes, she forgot for a moment what he was saying. The depth of his concern was evident in his face and through his touch, the gentle caress of her leg.

"I'm-I'm fine, or I will be anyway." She tried to absorb some of his strength, as if she could do it by osmosis. She needed to pull herself together and get out of

here so she could figure out her next move.

“It could have been anytime in the past three and a half months. I spent lots of nights in that window.”

Luke stood and turned back to the detective. Melanie tried to listen as he spoke to the detective, but she found it difficult.

“Giordano didn’t take the first picture. But it could have been his mother, or someone else who’d been in the limo. The man is stalking Melanie. Isn’t that obvious to you? You’ve just wasted our time and your own putting her through the ringer, when you knew she had nothing to do with this.”

“I had to be one hundred percent sure which, by the way, I am. We’ve lifted two different prints off the photos. No match yet but we’re still working on it. The New Jersey state police have a BOLO out for Joseph Giordano, but I’m not entirely convinced he is in this alone.”

Luke paced the room. This whole damn day had been a waste of time, and he was extremely worried about Melanie’s state of mind. She’d withdrawn into herself since looking at the photos. Time to get this over with, and get her out of here.

“Number one: Joey isn’t in New Jersey. What the hell is a ‘be on the look out’ gonna do when he isn’t even in the damn state? Number two: I don’t give a rat’s ass

if fifty people are helping them. I want them found and I want her safe. So, you and the Jersey police can do whatever the hell you see fit, but that man will be found and stopped, even if I have to do it myself.”

He turned and grabbed Melanie’s hand, helping her, as her step faltered.

“Next time you want to harass an innocent woman, think twice. It was a really shitty thing to do. She’s been through enough, with cops who think they’re freaking above it all. This is the last time it will ever happen. Do we understand each other?”

The detective looked over at Melanie. “I am sorry if the way I handled this interview has upset you in any way. My only intentions were to get to the bottom of this. Believe it or not, I do understand what you’ve been through. You have my utmost respect for coming out of it all a survivor. I’ll see to it this man is caught.”

Melanie only nodded and took a step closer to Luke. He put his arm around her waist and guided her to the door.

“Luke, I understand you’re upset and don’t think I’m doing my job, but I am, and I’ll continue to do so. I’ll repeat what I said at the clinic. Don’t get in my way and don’t do anything stupid, like hunting this guy down yourself. PI or not, if you interfere, I’ll throw your ass in jail for obstruction. Do we understand each other?”

Luke stood in the doorway and looked back at Detective Fuller. If the man

wanted to get into some kind of pissing contest, so be it. He wasn't backing down. Not on this, not with Melanie's life on the line. Fuller could do what he wanted, just as he would.

With a gleam in his eye and a smile on his face, he nodded to the detective.

“Why, yes, I believe we do. See ya around, *Detective.*”

Chapter Nineteen

Melanie still hadn't spoken when they got out to the car. Luke helped her into the passenger seat, ran around the front, and slid into the driver seat. The car was a hell of a lot more comfortable than his truck, but he still missed it. As soon as the police released it, it was going straight to the body shop.

Melanie worried him. She was being too quiet, withdrawn into herself. Her face was pale and she just stared out the passenger side window. He slid his hand onto her thigh, but received no reaction.

"Hey, are you all right? Fuller's an idiot. He shouldn't have done that to you. I can go back and kick his ass if you want."

That got him a glance his way and a weak smile. "I'm fine, Luke. He was just doing his job. With everything Tony did, I don't blame him."

"Yeah, well, I do."

He slid slightly closer and took her face in his hands.

"Please, don't let those pictures get to you. I'm going to do everything in my power to keep you safe. I'll find him, honey, and this nightmare will be over."

If it was possible, he thought she went even paler. Did she think he couldn't

protect her? Probably. She didn't have much faith in men. Eventually, given time, he'd prove to her she could put her faith in him. He wouldn't let her down.

Melanie had turned his life around. Given him so much. If she'd let him, he'd spend the rest of his life giving back to her.

She pressed her cheek into his hand and nodded. Not very convincing, as far as he was concerned.

With one hand sliding to the back of her neck and the other caressing her jaw, he pulled her to him and captured her mouth. The warmth and softness of her lips drew him in, and he begged for more by running his tongue along her teeth. When she opened and let him in, a groan escaped from deep inside him as he plundered her mouth.

She was so damn responsive, it made him want her all the more. When he came up for air, he rested his forehead against hers. Still clinging to the back of her neck, he brought his breathing under control. Damn, one kiss and he was a goner.

Luke slid his fingers down her arm and tipped her chin up with the other. He wanted her to understand what he was feeling. Not that he really knew himself, but he had to try and tell her.

Unfortunately, before he got a chance to say anything, her stomach let out a growl that would have made Sarge proud. He looked at her and they both laughed.

Luke moved back over and started the car. “Let’s go get something to eat before that thing attacks.”

“Now that’s the best idea you’ve had all day. Well, at least since my brother’s call this morning. You had a pretty good idea going before we were so rudely interrupted.”

Damn, he liked the way her mind worked.

“Don’t you worry, little lady. Tonight, I’ll rip the damn phone out of the wall before we head to bed. No interruptions if I have anything to say about it.”

“Oooh, you manly man you.”

Luke pulled out of the police barracks and headed to one of the local restaurants, feeling a little lighter than when he’d gotten in the car. They would need to talk about the photos and the information Detective Fuller had given them, but it could wait a few hours. She finally had some color back in her cheeks and life in her eyes. He didn’t want to take that away.

He pulled into the Dive Inn Diner, mouth already watering for their famous burgers. They were seated at a table in a corner of the room. When the waitress left with their beverage order, he grabbed her hand from across the table and flipped it over palm up. With a finger, he slowly traced the lines in her hand.

“Let’s see, ah, yes. You have a longer lifeline here, which adds up to about

one hundred years of health and happiness. And this line here is a love making line. Yup, looks exactly like the life line. Another hundred years of a healthy and happy love life. Mmm, mmm, mmm. You lucky girl.”

Melanie finally laughed out loud, which was his goal. “Mmm hmm, a hundred years of great sex, huh? And what does yours show? Two hundred years?”

“Nope, just a hundred.” Luke couldn't hide the huge grin on his face if he wanted to. The thought of a hundred years of great sex with Melanie put it there. He watched as she shook her head at him.

But then the smile disappeared and he looked down to their joined hands. He couldn't tell what she was thinking, but whatever it was took the laughter from her eyes faster than a NASCAR pit stop.

“Hey, we're gonna get through this. You know that, don't you?”

When she returned his gaze, the look of sorrow and defeat in her eyes would have brought him to his knees, if he hadn't been sitting.

He brought his other hand up to cup her face. Damn this table separating them.

“Aw, honey. Soon, it will all be over. Then we can get on with our lives. When this is over, we have lots to talk about. Please try not to worry.”

Melanie opened her mouth to say something, but the waitress brought their

drinks to the table. They both ordered the house cheeseburger with fries and chocolate shakes. Everything was just as Luke had remembered from ten years ago; juicy burger with cheese, lettuce, onion, and coleslaw. The damn thing was so big, he couldn't open his mouth wide enough. Damn messy, but well worth it. Melanie more or less played with her food, drawing the same French fry through the puddle of ketchup on her plate. At least, he noticed, she was drinking her shake.

By the time he finished his meal, she'd eaten a quarter of her burger and done a good job on the shake. "You ready to go?"

"Yeah, sorry I've been lousy company. I've had a lot thrown at me today. It's going to take a little while to take it all in."

"I know you have. I wish there was something I could do to make this easier for you."

Luke threw some money on the table and they walked out to the car. He stopped her before she got in and drew her close to him. With her wrapped in his arms, he had all he needed. He tried to convey what he felt for her without words. Her arms tightened around him and she buried her face in his chest.

Damn, this woman meant the world to him. He'd do everything in his power to see her through this. He held her for a moment more, and then held the door

open as she slid into the passenger seat. He still worried about how quiet she was. Somehow he'd convince her to have faith in him.

As they neared Wells, her silence got the better of him.

“Try not to let Detective Fuller get to you. Tony wasn't stupid. He made things look really bad for you, but they know the truth. The reports Tony filed were all lies and the cops know that. Fuller's an ass, but at least he knows the truth.”

“And just what is the truth, Luke? Can you tell me that?”

The venom in her voice surprised him. She'd been silent the whole trip home, now she was angry and sarcastic.

“The truth is, he set you up. He abused you for years and set you up so when he...” Shit! He couldn't finish that sentence. Although from the tone of her voice, she knew where he was headed.

“Go ahead, Luke, finish. When he finally killed me, he could make it look like I'd attacked him. Like he'd been left with no choice but to defend himself against his crazy, abusive wife. Is that right?”

“Look, I'm sorry you had to learn everything you did today, but at least you know what he did didn't work.”

“That's pretty weak, Luke. ‘Sorry, Lainie. The guy put you through hell, but

at least you're not sitting in jail for his murder.' *Sweet.*"

This wasn't like her at all. She was being deliberately confrontational. For whatever reason, picking a fight with him was better than facing the reality of the day. Fine. If she wanted to take it out on him, he'd let her go for it. There was a lot she needed to get off her chest.

"That's not what I said. I just wish you shouldn't worry so much. I'm here with you and I won't let him hurt you."

"Don't worry! How can you say that? This guy has been close enough to be in our backyard, taking pictures, with no one knowing about it. He's got pictures of both of us. It's obvious he wants to hurt us both. How can I not be worried about that, Luke?"

Luke pulled in the driveway, shut the car off, and turned in his seat to face her.

"I know you think I've let you down and you're worried I won't be able to protect you, but I swear to you, Lainie, I will find him and end this. I will."

"Jesus, Luke. I don't think that. Not at all. If you really need to know what upsets me, it's that I brought all this danger to you. He wants to kill you. The only reason for that is me. You haven't let me down, just the opposite. Just when I start to think I can turn my life around, that I might actually deserve some happiness for

myself, that same life turns around and smacks me down. It reminds me who I am. Reminds me not to get carried away and want too much because it's just not going to happen.”

She opened the car door, but turned back to him before getting out.

“I'm such a fool. I'd begun to hope for things I'd had no right hoping for. The punishment for that was not only the danger to myself, but the danger I've brought to you. I think you should move out of the house. The farther away from me you are, the safer you'll be.”

Melanie got out of the car and shut the door. She made it to the door of the barn before Luke caught up to her. None too gently, he grabbed her arm and swung her around to face him.

“Let me just get this straight.” His dark eyes burrowed into hers. He didn't know if it was physically possible, but he could have sworn he'd just felt steam coming out of his pores. What the hell was she thinking?

“That was a nice speech and all, but basically what you're saying is you don't think I can handle the bastard. What sounded like a nice little pity party was just a big fucking excuse for you to cut your ties with the emotionally and physically damaged man you found yourself in bed with. Is that it? Because frankly, Lainie, if I didn't measure up to your past experiences, all ya had to do was say so. I may be

this pathetic used up ex-warrior in your eyes, but I'm not fucking stupid. You want me out, all you had to do was say so.” He roughly dropped her arm and stormed toward the house.

“Luke, wait! That wasn't what I meant at all.”

He threw his hand up in the air and kept walking away from her. What the hell happened? She was trying to tell him how she felt, that she was worried, and didn't want him in any more danger. Why was he being so hateful?

Rubbing her arm where he'd grabbed her, she went into the barn. After saddling Coco, she led the horse outside and mounted. A ride in the woods was what she needed to clear her head before she spoke to Luke again.

As she and Coco made their way across the river and up the hill, she thought back over her conversation with Luke. Maybe his misunderstanding was for the best. She was right in telling him to leave. She knew she was. If that maniac killed him, there was no way she could live with it. Bringing this kind of danger to him was unforgivable.

He'd spent almost two weeks being tortured and humiliated in Iraq. Nightmares still plagued him at night. How could she ask him to stay and face more horror? But this was his home now. Maybe she should be the one to leave, at least until Joseph was found. Maybe once the danger was over, they could see

where their feelings took
them.

But wasn't that just it? She'd gotten carried away with her feelings. Let herself fall in love with Luke again. And now, wasn't she being punished for trying to find happiness? Wasn't Luke's life being threatened because of her? Better to be alone than keep facing the loss of someone she loved.

There wasn't an end in sight. Sure, maybe Joseph would be stopped. She might even be allowed to be happy with Luke for a while, but somewhere, somehow, it would all blow up in her face. If she was meant to be happy...well...it would have happened before now.

Melanie let Coco meander along the trail at a slow pace. Barely aware of the trees and sounds surrounding her, she kept thinking about Luke. It was so unfair that she'd found him again and now had to let him go. Unfair or not, she understood it was what was best. Going back and forth about it wouldn't change a thing. But dammit, whether it was in the cards for her or not, when this mess was over, she was going after him. No more playing head games with herself.

Deep down, beyond the scars of abuse that no one could see, existed the truth. She didn't deserve what life had brought her. She had every right to be happy, to be in love and be loved. Maybe, sometimes on the surface, she forgot this,

but that didn't make it so. Yes, when this was over she'd make Luke understand why she pushed him away. They could be happy together—no scratch that—they *would* be happy together.

Ready to face him with her decision, she turned Coco around and headed home. Not wanting to hurry the confrontation ahead of her, she slowed the horse's pace and they lumbered along the path.

One moment she was on Coco's back sitting in the saddle and the next, the ground was rushing up to greet her. Pain burst through her skull. She was sure her hair was being ripped out of her scalp.

Melanie hit the ground with a thud. The air whooshed from her lungs, refusing to go back in. All she could process was the need for oxygen, but catching that elusive breath just wasn't happening.

A slap across the face had her gasping, filling her lungs back up with air. When her eyes finally focused, she saw Joseph Giordano standing above her.

Chapter Twenty

Luke could have kicked himself in the ass. Why the hell was he letting Melanie bait him like that? Obviously, he didn't have his temper under any kind of control.

After walking away from her in the driveway, he'd stormed up to the office and slammed the door behind him. Taking several deep breaths, he'd sat in front of the computer and performed several searches on the Giordano family and their various business ventures.

The family resided just outside of Atlantic City, and in fact, owned one of the hotel/casinos. They also had their hands in the import-export business, importing coffee, of all things, from Columbia.

The Giordano's had been investigated by the DEA and FBI, as well as several other alphabet agencies for racketeering, extortion, and drug trafficking. None of the agencies could make anything stick.

These people walked above the law. Well, little Joey was going down, and it would be Luke's boot that tripped him.

Luke heard scratching on the door and found Sarge waiting anxiously on the

other side. As soon as the door opened, Sarge ran down the stairs. “I get it, nature calls. Hold your horses.”

When Luke opened the kitchen door, Sarge sat in the doorway but refused to budge, giving a couple sharp barks.

“What is it, Sarge?”

But Sarge continued to bark at him, unmoving. Unable to understand dog language, Luke went over to Melanie’s stairway and yelled up.

“Lainie! Do you know what the hell is wrong with this dog?”

Silence greeted him.

“Lainie!”

Nothing. Shit. The hair on the back of his neck stood on end and his chest tightened.

Taking the stairs two at a time, he found her room empty, and tried to think if he heard her coming in earlier. He’d been so pissed at himself, and then engrossed in his search, he hadn’t paid attention to whether or not she followed him into the house.

Shit! He ran back down the stairs and out the door to find Sarge barking in front of the horse barn. When he arrived at the barn, he saw Melanie’s horse gone.

God dammit!!

Why would she go for a ride alone? She knew Giordano was out there somewhere. *Maybe because you just walked away from her.* Outside the barn, he could hear Sarge, trying to get his attention. Luke ran outside, and Sarge darted off across the river. Thanks to Sarge, he knew now which path Melanie had taken, and needed to get to the four-wheeler.

First, he let Sarge go. “Go on, Sarge, go keep her safe.”

The Sheppard took off into the woods, while Luke jumped on the ATV and sped in the same direction. His heart pounded out an irregular rhythm. Sarge was frantic, which meant something was wrong.

What a goddamned, stupid, stubborn, sonofabitch he’d been. If he’d listened to his heart and not his damn ego, Lainie would be safe inside, not in the sights of a psychotic predator. Luke prayed to God he could get to her in time.



Melanie inhaled deeply, bringing much needed air into her lungs. Joseph Giordano stood over her with a sadistic grin on his face.

“My, my, Melanie. Looks like you had a bit of a fall.” He laughed.

The sound of his laughter had Melanie’s throat closing again. Dear God, the man was certifiable. Memories of his brother standing over her, beating and abusing her, assaulted her like a flash flood. These were the same evil eyes boring

into her as they were then, the same maniacal smile. Why the hell did she have to go through this again?

“You’re a sick man. You need help, Joey.”

She tried inching backward on her elbows, but he pounced on her the moment she moved

“You’re not going anywhere, sugar.” He straddled her legs and grabbed both wrists when she went to hit him, pinning them both to the ground on both sides of her head.

Fear exploded. Her chest tightened and stomach heaved from the force of his weight on her. The grip he held on her wrists caused pain to shoot up her forearms and down to the tips of her fingers. His hold on her was as strong as a vice.

“I never could understand what the hell my brother saw in you, but maybe it wasn’t the outside of the package that had him so bewitched. Maybe it was what’s on the inside.”

Melanie struggled to break free of his grasp, but he was too strong for her to budge. He leaned over her and drew his tongue up the side of her face. Melanie recoiled and spit in his face. The smell of his breath had her retching.

Using one hand to hold both of hers, Joey landed a vicious punch to the side

of her head. Stars burst behind her eyes and extreme pain exploded throughout her skull. Tears welled and then ran over and down her cheeks. This couldn't be happening again.

Another blow came flying at her face. She turned her head but couldn't escape the painful connection of Joey's fist to her cheekbone. She couldn't move, couldn't get away. He would beat her and rape her just as his brother had done for years.

Oh, God, Luke. What would he think of her? Would he think her weak for just giving up? He went through weeks of torture and had never given up. She couldn't give up on their future. She wouldn't!

Joey used his free hand and went for his belt. He unbuckled it, unbuttoned his pants and pulled the zipper down, the whole time laughing at her. Calling her a whore and telling her she was getting what she really wanted.

But what Melanie saw was an opportunity. His grip on her wrists had loosened when she stopped fighting back. He was focusing on freeing himself from his pants, not on keeping her hands pinned down. This was her only chance.

Getting her right arm free was easier than she thought it would be. She brought her hand up and raked her nails down his face. Adrenaline surged through her veins. Using the elbow of her freed arm, she brought it down hard into the soft

area between his neck and shoulder. When he fell forward, she brought her knees up and shoved him off of her with all her might.

She was scrambling away from him on her hands and knees when he grabbed her ankle and pulled her back.

“You fucking bitch!” Joey screamed.

Melanie kicked wildly, trying to connect anywhere on his body. If he pinned her again, she wouldn’t have another chance. She knew she was making contact, but needed to hurt him. Then once again, he was on top. So fast, she didn’t know how it happened. This time it wasn’t a grin on his face.

Joey pulled a knife with one hand while backhanding her with the other. He straddled her again, his knees painfully trapping her hands.

She was dead; she knew it. She prayed Luke would forgive her for being so weak, so stupid. If only she’d listened to him.

He waved the knife in front of her face. “This could have been nice for you. But, then again, Tony said you liked it rough.”

She screamed as he brought the knife down, but instead of plunging it in her, he sliced open her shirt.

He brought the knife up again, and without warning, Sarge growled and hit him with such force, he was knocked completely off Melanie.

She quickly scurried away from the fight. Watching as man and dog battled savagely, she heard the four-wheeler coming from a distance away, getting louder.

Luke.

Looking toward the sound of help coming, she heard Sarge yelp. She turned to see Joey in a half limp, half run, heading into the woods and Sarge lying motionless on the ground.

Melanie crawled over to Sarge. He was still breathing, but was losing a huge amount of blood from his chest. She took off her ripped shirt and covered the wound, as Luke came to a roaring stop in front of them.

“Where is he?” he asked, emotionless, searching the woods.

“Gone.”

“Which way, I’m going after him.”

He’s turned into the warrior he’d been trained to be, Melanie thought. He wasn’t really seeing her or Sarge. It was as if he’d gone on autopilot.

“No! Luke. Sarge needs help. I need help. Please don’t leave us here.”

Chapter Twenty-One

Luke snapped out of the fugue-like state. He gazed at Melanie, then Sarge, jumped off the ATV, and knelt at her side, examining the dog.

Sarge was bleeding from cuts across his chest and head. His pulse was strong though, and he was starting to rouse.

“Stay still, Sarge. We’ll take care of you.” He continued to look at the dog, but spoke to Melanie. “Are you okay?”

Oh, good. Christ, what kind of question is that? Of course she wasn’t okay. The angry welts on her face were already starting to turn an ugly shade of red. He needed to get a grip on his emotions. If he didn’t, he’d be tearing off into the woods after Giordano. Logic told him he needed to be here, but his heart told him to go kill the motherfucker. Logic won, but only by a thin margin.

“Yes, please. Let’s just go and get him to the vet.” She got up off the ground and sat on the four-wheeler with her arms out, gesturing for him to put Sarge in them.

Once she held the dog secure, Luke took off his flannel shirt and handed it to her without speaking. He seated himself in front of her and drove back to the

barn. He couldn't look at her, couldn't meet her gaze.

For all his spouting off about how he would protect her, he'd let her down the first time she put him to the test. Yeah, she told him she didn't want him in her life, but he still had a duty to protect her, whether she wanted him to or not.

Once again, he'd let his anger control him and Melanie had suffered for it; so had Sarge. He failed at doing what was most important. Maybe she was better off with him out of her life.

He certainly wasn't doing her any good in it.

When he got to the barn, he pulled out his cell phone and called their eighteen-year-old neighbor. Josh was a good kid with an excellent head on his shoulders. He and Dan had taught Josh martial arts, hand-to-hand combat, and how to handle several different weapons.

The kid wanted to be a SEAL and was leaving for the Navy in a few months, right after graduation. He could trust Josh to keep Melanie safe while he took Sarge to the vet and figured out what to do next.

He loaded Sarge in the car and waited for Josh to get there, fully taking in what Melanie looked like as she slowly got off the ATV. Up in the woods, he'd been too focused on getting them out of there. He hadn't allowed himself to really *see* Lainie's injuries, but now they stared him in the face and wouldn't be ignored.

Her left eye was swollen. She had a gash on her cheek. Leaves were matted in her hair and her right arm was scraped and bleeding. But what stalled his breath in his lungs was her missing shirt. His flannel shirt hung open on her, and there was a thin red line on her skin from the base of her throat to her navel.

The bastard had cut her.

He stormed over to her and grabbed onto each side of his shirt, examining the wound. It was superficial and wouldn't need stitches, thank God. Could he be any more of a failure that he was right now? Goddammit!

“What did he do to you?” Luke demanded, his voice a low growl.

Melanie recoiled at his tone, pushing his hands off the shirt and clasping it together.

“I'm fine. You and Sarge got there in time.”

“Yeah, and look what Sarge got for his trouble. You shouldn't have been up there alone, Melanie. Just what the hell were you thinking?”

Melanie couldn't believe the anger radiating off Luke in waves. Did he blame her for Sarge being hurt? Oh God, did he think she did this on purpose?

“Luke, I—”

“How the hell is anyone supposed to keep you safe, if you go running off by yourself? Go take a shower, Josh is coming to watch over the place till I get back

from the vet.”

“I want to go with you! I need to make sure he’s going to be all right.”

Luke shook his head and turned toward the car when he saw Josh round the corner of the house.

“Just stay here and out of trouble. You’ve done enough for one day.”

Luke spun out of the driveway, kicking up stones and dirt, and sped toward town.

Melanie could feel her heart splintering into tiny pieces. Luke hated her now; that much was obvious. He blamed her for Sarge being injured. Well, wasn’t it her fault?

She hadn’t considered the danger. She’d only been thinking about getting away for a moment so she could think. She’d ruined everything. Hadn’t she known, somewhere deep down inside, this would happen eventually?

Having a man like Luke love her was too much to hope for, but dammit, it had felt so right for a while.



Luke walked out of the vet’s office and took a deep breath. Sarge would be staying overnight, but would recover just fine.

The laceration on his chest took ten stitches and his head had a big swollen

knot on it. The cut on his head didn't need closing; it was shallow enough to heal on its own.

Doc. Saunders figured Giordano slashed him with the knife first and then kicked him in the head, which made the dog lose consciousness. He was keeping him overnight to administer I.V. antibiotics and keep an eye on him, but when Luke left him, Sarge was up and walking around. He knew the dog would be fine.

He owed that dog his life. Melanie was his life, and even if she didn't want him, he loved her. Hopefully, when this was all over, he could get back their friendship. He'd settle for that if he had to.

He'd been a real ass when he left with Sarge. So damn angry with himself for letting her get hurt, he'd lost it. When he'd seen she'd been cut, it was like a sucker punch to the gut.

He'd taken it out on her because he couldn't face the fact that he'd let her down, just like she'd known he would. That was the reason she didn't want him around, and he'd just proven her right. He was incapable of keeping her safe.

He'd tried calling Dan several times from Doc. Saunders, but it had gone to voice mail. What the hell was going on with him anyway? Dan always kept his phone on and accessible. He'd never had such a hard time getting him.

Luke had to wonder if this new girlfriend of Dan's was going to interfere

with business. Not that the man didn't deserve a weekend away, he did. But with everything going on, Luke just wished he could get a hold of him a little easier. He left a message and headed back home. He had some apologizing to do.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Melanie sat cross-legged on her bed, staring out the bay window. Before today, she'd have chosen to sit there. That comfort had been taken away the moment she saw the pictures this morning.

So much had been stolen away after looking at them. Once again she didn't feel safe in her own home. She'd also pushed away the one man she'd ever loved. Because of her thoughtlessness, Sarge had been injured.

Dear Lord, she hoped he would be okay. That dog saved her life. There'd been no hesitation on his part, no fear. He'd just charged in and taken away the threat to her life.

Maybe there was a lesson to be learned there. Hadn't she lived in fear too long? The Giordanos had controlled her life for too damn long. Where had the fear gotten her?

Fear-filled years of abuse and loneliness and she'd lost her son because of it. But hadn't she been given another chance? She loved Luke. Not the kid she'd known, but the strong, loyal man he'd become. Loyal to his country, his troops, and the people he considered his family.

He possessed such a strong sense of honor. And stubborn, God, the man was stubborn. How could she think pushing him away was the right thing to do? She didn't want him hurt because of this mess, but isn't that what she'd done anyway? Maybe not physically, but she'd made him think she didn't trust him to keep her safe and thought she found him lacking.

Getting up, she stood at the window looking out into the black night. No! She wouldn't let the Giordanos control her life anymore. Fear had gotten her nowhere. It was time to take back her life. Time to put away the past and look to the future, and pray that Luke would want to be a part of it.

Melanie grabbed the phone book out of the nightstand drawer. Finding the number she wanted, she dialed, released a deep breath, and took a huge step toward the future.

When a female voice answered the phone, Melanie drew in another deep breath.

"Could I speak to Reverend Ross please?"



Luke pulled into the driveway at eight-thirty. Not yet ready to face Melanie, he slumped in the seat and laid his head back against the headrest. What was he going to say to her to make things right? Christ, he'd practically blamed the attack

and Sarge's injury on her. It wasn't her fault; it was Giordano's. He'd let fear take over and lost control. He'd played right into her hand. She'd baited him into a fight to push him away and he walked right into it. The stubborn, foolish woman thought she'd keep him safe by driving him away.

Luke huffed out a laugh, and shook his head. God, he loved her. It had taken him the drive home to understand what she'd done and why. But he'd blown it. She'd gotten hurt and he'd lost it. Now he was the one who'd pushed *her* away.

Luke startled when his cell phone rang. He glanced at the ID. Dan.

"About fucking time. Where the hell have you been?"

"Whoa, buddy, what's your problem?"

Luke sat up straighter in the car.

"You're kidding me, right? Don't you listen to your messages?"

"I didn't get any. Tell me what's wrong."

"Giordano got to Melanie."

"What the fuck do you mean 'got to Melanie?'" Dan yelled.

"She's okay," Luke added.

"Jesus Christ, Luke." After a silent moment Dan questioned Luke. "What happened?"

"She took the damn horse out back for a ride. When I realized she'd gone, I

sent Sarge ahead and took the ATV. Sarge got there first, attacked Giordano, and got knifed for his trouble. Giordano took off. Lainie's got some bruises, but she's okay."

"And Sarge?"

Luke rested his head back against the head rest. It'd been a long damn day.

"He'll be all right. They stitched him up and are keeping him overnight. I just left him."

"Where's Mel?"

"Inside. I left Josh here with her. She's safe with him for the moment. When are you coming back?"

"First thing in the morning. I should have been there with you guys. Maybe we could have caught the bastard."

"I don't know about that, but I can say I don't like the way you go incommunicado. What's up with that?"

"I don't know. I've had cell phone trouble the whole damn weekend."

"Um, hmmm."

"What are you trying to say, Luke?" Dan snapped.

"Nothing. I'm just frustrated, I guess. You should have been here today.

Detective Fuller interrogated Lainie like she was the criminal, insinuating that

Tony's death might have been more than self-defense. He put her through the ringer, and in the next breath says, 'Sorry I just had to be sure.'

"You're right. I should have been there. I guess I'm feeling a little guilty and projecting that onto you."

"Yeah, well, there's a lot of that going around. Listen, I need to get inside. I'll see ya tomorrow." Luke snapped his phone shut. There was more going on with Dan than just cell phone trouble—he could feel it in his gut.

Right now he had other things to worry about. Like getting Melanie to trust him again and forgive him for being a stupid ass.

Luke walked into the kitchen and found Josh sitting at the table with bottle of soda and a crossword puzzle.

"Hey, has everything been quiet?"

Josh folded up the crossword puzzle book and stuffed it into his back pocket.

"Yep. Melanie took a shower and has been up in her room the whole time you've been gone. No disturbances from outside either."

Josh rose from the chair and walked to the door. "Let me know if you need help with this guy. I may be young, but I know what I'm doing. Don't forget I was taught by the best."

Luke shook Josh's hand and opened the door. "I won't forget. Thanks for your help."

He shut and locked the door behind Josh and shook his head with a laugh. The kid was going to do well for himself. He had it all; strength in character, confidence, and good teachers.

With a smile still on his face, Luke took the stairs two at a time. Shower first, and then he would set things right with Lainie.



Melanie sat in the overstuffed chair next to her bed, trying to read the paperback in her hands. It was useless. She'd heard Luke come in and thought he might come up and talk to her, at least to let her know how Sarge was doing, but he didn't.

She heard the shower start and decided to give him fifteen minutes before she went to him. He may not be in the mood to talk, but she wasn't waiting any longer for her future to begin.

One of the many calls she'd made tonight was to the vet. He gave her an update on Sarge. Thank God, he would make a full recovery. She'd be feeding that dog prime rib for the rest of his life.

Right now though, she was jumping out of her skin to see Luke and tell him

about her epiphany. Giving up on the book, she tossed it into the basket by her bed and got up to pace the room. The shower shut off five minutes ago. The heck with fifteen minutes. He had five to get his butt in here or she was going after him.

Then came the soft rap on her door. The rhythm of her heart burst into action, and her stomach flipped and flopped enough to make a fish out of water proud. Good God, you'd think she was a teenager on prom night.

Melanie opened the door to find Luke standing on the other side wearing an old t-shirt and an equally ancient pair of sweats, and, oh my, didn't he look good?

"Can we talk?" he asked, somewhat hesitant.

"Of course, come in, please. I barely heard you knock. Were you hoping I was asleep?" She tried to lighten his mood.

"I'm not sure. Maybe."

Good grief, this was killing her. What was he trying to say? Had she pushed him too far? His face gave nothing away. She couldn't tell if he was angry, resigned, fed up, or...or...ughh!

"Luke, what is it? Just say it. You're driving me crazy."

Luke walked over to the window and stared out into the night. Silent.

Nausea started to climb up her throat and the room spun. She must have groaned aloud, because in the next moment he was at her side, guiding her to the

edge of her bed where he knelt in front of her. Worry now etched lines on his face.

“Are you okay? Christ, Lainie, you’re as white as a sheet.” He bent her head forward to hang between her knees and gently caressed her neck. “Take deep breaths and blow them out slowly.”

She did as he told her and the nausea and dizziness passed. Talk about working herself into a state. Melanie straightened and took one last deep breath. She needed to know where she stood with him before she had a full-blown panic attack.

“Luke, please just tell me what you came to. My heart can’t take your silence.”

He took her hands in his and lowered his forehead to her knees. “I’m sorry.”

Melanie’s heart stalled. “What?”

She pulled his head up so she could hear him more clearly. “What did you say?”

He held her gaze this time and enunciated each word. “I’m sorry. I was an ass earlier. I was scared for you and angry with myself and I took it all out on you. I am truly sorry.”

Melanie flung her arms around his neck with such force he toppled backward onto the floor, bringing her with him.

She peppered his face with quick kisses, finally landing on his mouth for a soul searching, toe curling, kiss. When she broke off for a much needed breath of air, she brought her lips to his ear.

“I love you,” she whispered.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The arms around her waist stiffened. Luke sat up with her straddling his lap. His eyes scanned her face, then locked onto her gaze. “Melanie...”

“I love you. I’m not going to let fear control me any longer. I made some decisions tonight. First and foremost, I want you in my life, if you’ll have me that is.”

Now it was her turn to be uncertain as she waited for his reply. If her heart and stomach survived this night, she’d be very surprised.

Luke brought his palms up to cup Melanie’s face. His thumbs caressed her jawline.

“If I’ll have you?” Luke echoed incredulously. “My God, woman. My life with you means everything to me. You’ve sealed your fate, honey. I’m never letting go.”

Luke brought his mouth down on hers and stole her breath with a kiss with so passionate, her eyes burned with tears of joy and love.

She gave him everything she could in that kiss; her heart, her soul, and her entire being. When they broke off to catch their breath, Luke rose and helped her to her feet.

“You said you made some decisions tonight. What else have you decided?” Luke asked as he took hold of her hand and guided her to the bed.

“I called Reverend Ross tonight. The ground has been thawed for weeks now. It’s time to lay my baby to rest. I’ve been putting it off so I didn’t have to face saying goodbye again, but I realized I’ve been hanging onto him because I was still stuck in the past.”

Melanie squeezed Luke’s hand and sat in the middle of her bed.

“Dylan will always be a part of me; always be my son. I realized I could let go of the past and move on with my future without letting go of him. He has a permanent place in my heart, and I’m not betraying him by being happy. Do you understand?”

Luke pulled her into his arms with her back resting against his chest. He was warm, strong, and the personification of home. Safe.

“Of course I understand. I was there, sweetheart. I know what losing him did to you. No matter how he was conceived, he was an innocent life that you loved, and he would have loved you. We can celebrate him every day by overcoming the past and living for our future.”

Melanie twisted in his arms to face him. God, she loved this man. “Thank you.”

Luke slowly lowered her to the bed. He began with soft whispers of kisses on her neck, moving to her ear, and ending with her lips.

His hand worked at the buttons on her shirt and gently pushed it back off her shoulders, his fingers lightly lingering as he drew the sleeves down her arms. His touch left tingles of energy in its place.

With deft fingers, he expertly unclasped her bra, freeing her heavy, aching breasts. Luke moved his mouth from hers to tenderly kiss his way down to first one breast, then the other. His tongue slowly circled the nipple, never touching it.

Melanie arched her back and groaned with frustration. “Stop teasing me, Luke.”

His lips curved against her skin just before taking her nipple into his mouth and drawing her in with fierce power.

“Oh,” was all she managed as she tangled her fingers in his hair, pulling him closer to her. He continued to feast as his hand moved down to the shorts she wore.

Expertly, his fingers slid under the elastic band, seeking the warmth of her core, exactly where the aching pulse between her legs was begging for him to be. Luke thrust two fingers inside and she lifted her hips to meet him.

“Oh, Luke. Yes.”

With his thumb relentlessly moving in a circular motion over her clit, and his fingers moving and massaging in an unflagging rhythm, Melanie flew apart in mere seconds in a climax that stole her breath and made a kaleidoscope of her vision.

Luke slowed the rhythm and slightly released the pressure of his thumb as Melanie floated back to earth. If he kept this up, she might die of heart failure. Time to even the playing field, so to speak.

Executing a move any soldier would be proud of, she turned the tables and had Luke on his back as she hovered over him, slowly drawing her body up his. Hips against hips, chest against chest, she nibbled the base of his ear and ground her pelvis against his, earning her a deep groan.

“Oh, you don’t play fair, do you?” Luke murmured.

“Turn about is fair play. I want to make you squirm beneath me.” She playfully bit his shoulder, then soothed the sting with her tongue.

Inching his shirt up his chest, she followed with her mouth until she drew it over his head and sealed her mouth over his. She teased him with a deep kiss, then worked her way down his body with a trail of soft baby kisses.

Melanie reached his sweats and carefully dragged them down his hips, discarding them on the floor as his erection sprang free.

“Going commando these days, soldier?” she teased as she took him in her hand and firmly caressed his manhood from stem-to-stern.

Luke hissed, his entire body stiffening beneath her. When she took him in her mouth, he groaned her name, to her pleasure .

His legs relaxed under her ministrations and soon his hips were moving ever so slightly. She drew her tongue over the scars left behind from a hideous event in his past, and poured out every ounce of her love for him in an effort to give him back the pleasure that was stolen from him.

“Lainie, I need to be inside you, now,” Luke uttered as he grasped her shoulder. He drew her up to him and flipped her on her back, driving into her with one powerful thrust. He drove into her in a frenzied pace, quickly bringing her to the edge once again. Breathless and boneless, she clung to him, urging him on harder and faster until they exploded together.

“Oh, God, Lainie. Holy shit, what the hell was that?” Luke grunted, breathless as he brushed her damp hair out of her face.

She smiled widely at him. “That, my love, was heaven.”

Luke laughed and collapsed against her, bringing them both to their sides.

“Oh, yeah. It was that.”

His bright eyes turned serious as he focused on her. “I love you, Lainie, more

than I could ever express. I feel like you've patched me up and put me back together. I'm still struggling with all the baggage I'm carrying around, but with you by my side, I think I just might be able to conquer some of these demons. I'll thank God every day for giving me a second chance. Now I know why I survived hell in Iraq."

Luke kissed her tears away, but she couldn't stop more from falling. Her throat constricted and her heart filled to bursting with love for this man.

He pulled her close against him in the cradle of his arm, stroking her hair and drawing circles on her bare back. She felt cherished. Safe.

She heard him whisper "I love you" as she fell into a sated sleep.

Melanie woke a couple hours later, firm in the last decision she'd made. She lifted her head to look at Luke and spoke softly to wake him.

"Luke?"

"Hmmm," he replied with a smile on his face.

"After the service for Dylan next week, I want us to set up Joey. I want to use myself as bait."

Chapter Twenty-Four

Luke's eyes snapped open and his smile disappeared in a flash. She did not just say that. Impossible, he was surely hearing things. Propping himself up on his elbow, he fixed her with a glare.

“Would you mind repeating that?”

She had the good grace to look a little nervous. Her throat bobbed in a swallow.

“Just hear me out before you go all Neanderthal on me.”

Luke sat up straight in the bed. *Had she gone mad?*

“Neanderthal? *Neanderthal?* Honey, when I drag you up the stairs by the hair and lock you in your bedroom, put plywood over the windows, and yank the phone out of the wall, then you can call me a Neanderthal. Which, right about now, seems like a really pretty good idea. Over my dead body are we going to use you as bait. Not in this lifetime.”

Melanie sat up and leaned against the headboard. “It's the only option as far as I can see. He's getting too close and we haven't been able to pin him down. If you and Sarge hadn't shown up when you did, I'd be dead. Every time he attacks,

he gets away.”

She put her hand up when he would have spoken. “That is not your fault by the way. Both times you were protecting me, but there has to be a way we can draw him in. Arrange it so he can’t get away next time.”

Luke was shaking his head. He left the bed and started pacing the room, unmindful of his state of undress. It was true, Giordano had gotten too close this time, but he wasn’t untouchable.

Once Dan got back, they could sit down and brainstorm, but nothing they came up with was going to involve Melanie. On that, he would stake his life. Right now, he had a bomb to defuse.

“Look, Lainie, I know you’re tired of feeling like a target, but please just leave this to Dan and me. He’ll be back in the morning and we’ll work out something. Right now, let’s get some sleep so we can think with clear heads. I don’t want to argue with you. Not when I can hold you in my arms.”

He slid back into bed and under the covers. Melanie just stared at him with her mouth slightly open as if she had more to say on the subject. Well, he could fix that.

Drawing her into his arms, he covered her mouth with his, and her body melted against him. Good Lord, he could spend eternity in bed with her, just like

this, so warm and soft against him. She belonged there.



Joey hiked the five miles through the woods, back to where his car was parked. With it being so damn dark, it had taken three times as long as it did going in.

Not only was the darkness slowing him down, but also the torn muscle in his calf and arm. Fucking dog, he hoped his knife had killed the damn animal.

He'd screwed up again, dammit. He should have just killed the bitch instead of playing with her. But no, he'd tried to have fun and the damn dog and boyfriend came running to the rescue.

Next time the boyfriend would be first. Then, as he was dying, Mr. No-Longer-Macho could watch as he had his fun with Miss Melanie. Then he'd finally kill her too.

As he started the car, his cell phone rang. *Oh shit, here we go.*

"Yeah?"

"Just what the fuck is going on there? You've screwed up royally this time. You do realize they have a positive ID on you now. Any plans we had of blaming the brother have just been ruined. Christ, you could fuck up a wet dream. If your brother were alive, he wouldn't be having this problem."

Joey shifted uncomfortably in the seat. Damn, his leg and arm were killing him, more so now that he wasn't moving anymore.

“Well, my brother isn't alive. Oh, and why is that you ask? Because the stupid bitch beat him at his own game and killed him first. So don't go spouting off about the almighty Tony Giordano. It doesn't fly anymore.”

“Next time you speak of your brother like that, I will personally rip your head off and feed it to that dog that got the better of you. It's time for you to lay low for a while and let the cops think you've left the state. I'll call you when it's time. And next time, don't fuck up, or it will be your last.”

The phone died in his ear. Shit! Shit! Shit! Fine, he'd lay low for a little while; give himself a chance to heal. But he had plans for the bitch, and he'd be damned if anyone was going to tell him otherwise.

Chapter Twenty-Five

The kitchen door slammed and Melanie heard Dan's voice bellow out a hello. Beside her Luke jumped, "Damn, I didn't want him to catch us like this."

She looked over at him. "Are you ashamed to be with me?"

"What? No of course not. I just...I don't know...I didn't want to put you in the position of having to explain yourself."

Melanie smiled. He really was a sweet man, even if he didn't know it.

"I don't have to explain myself. I think it's fairly obvious. Besides, Dan has never judged me like that, and he loves you. He'll be happy for us."

Luke didn't look convinced. One eyebrow raised and his mouth flattened.

"We'll be down in a minute, Danny," Melanie yelled out to her brother.

She shoved at Luke's shoulder. "Come on, let's get dressed and bring him up-to-date."

Luke nuzzled his face in her neck, bringing the covers up over their heads. "I kinda thought we could stay here all day and play under the covers," he mumbled into her shoulder.

Melanie laughed and swatted his bare butt. "Get up, coward."

Prying herself away from him, she got up and threw on her sleep shorts and t-shirt, then her flannel robe. She was anxious to see Danny, anxious to start some kind of plan for ridding themselves of the Giordanos, once and for all.

She stood at the top of the stairway, watching Luke step into his sweats and pull on his shirt. She knew very well he didn't want her participating in any plan they came up with.

If they could come up with a plausible course of action that didn't include her, fine. After all, she didn't have a death wish, she just couldn't think of anything else that would work.

They found Dan in the kitchen making a pot of coffee. His clothes were wrinkled and his eyes should have had toothpicks to keep them open. He looked like hell.

Melanie ran up to him and gave him a huge hug. "Are you okay? You look like crap!"

He huffed out a laugh, but held her tight for a moment, then pushed her away, still grasping her shoulders. "I'm so sorry, Mel. I should have been here for you. I've failed you so many damn times, I wouldn't blame you if you've lost all your faith in me."

Melanie brought her hands up to encompass his face. "I could never lose

faith in you. You're my big brother. I love you. You had no idea what would happen this weekend. Besides, I had Luke. He saved my life, Danny, and I'm fine."

He hugged her tight again then let go of her and walked over to Luke, who was leaning against the sink. Dan offered his hand to Luke, who took it. "Thanks, man, I owe you."

Luke shook his head. "You don't owe me anything. Listen, Dan, I want you to know that Melanie and I are together now. I also want you to know that I will love her and treat her with respect until the day I die. I'm hoping you won't have a problem with that."

Dan was silent for a moment, then burst out laughing. When he could talk again he told Luke just what he thought. "Man, you look so damn serious, it's hilarious. You're my best friend. Christ, we're business partners. With a few exceptions, I know you as well as I know myself. My sister couldn't ask for a better man, and I sincerely mean that. I'm very happy for the both of you."

Melanie saw Luke expel a long breath. She wiped the tears from her eyes and cleared her throat. Both men looked at her and by the raised eyebrows and slightly opened mouths, she figured they'd forgotten she was in the room.

Men—she'd never understand them or their bonding rituals. "How about some French toast? Then we can get down to business."

The men exchanged glances, and then Luke spoke. “Sounds great, Lainie. I’m going to go grab a shower and get dressed. Be right back.”

He kissed her on the cheek and left the room. Dan walked over to her and grabbed her hand. “I meant what I said. Luke is one of the best guys I know. I have every confidence he will work through his issues and be a very positive part of your life.”

Melanie nodded. “I know he will, even with all that’s gone on and Joey’s attack, I’m the happiest I’ve been in a very long time.” She studied Dan’s eyes. “What’s wrong, Danny, you look like you haven’t slept in days. Is something going on I should know about?”

Dan smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “It’s just been a long weekend. And after talking to Luke last night, I didn’t get much sleep. I really should have been here, and I feel like a jackass that I was off getting laid while you were being attacked.”

She was surprised by his bluntness, but couldn’t help smiling. “We all deserve a life, Danny. You’ve nothing to feel guilty about. Where is this woman of yours anyway?”

“I dropped her off at home. She’s leaving today for a two week business trip.”

“Ah, I see, no wonder you got no sleep this weekend. You were about to go on a two week drought.” She laughed and opened the fridge to look for eggs.

“You really are a brat.” But he was laughing as he said it. “Do you mind if I use your bathroom for a shower? I’d like to take one before breakfast.”

“Help yourself. Breakfast will be ready in about fifteen minutes.”

“I’ll be here,” he promised and kissed the back of her head on his way out of the room.



Breakfast consisted of French toast, sausage, home fries and orange juice. Dan told them about the business he’d picked up in Killington. Mostly condos at the ski area that wanted updated security systems.

The season was over for skiing, but people still came for the summer. They’d have to work out a schedule with the owners. It was imperative the work be done before the next skiing season.

Melanie would work out the schedules with the owner and order the equipment needed. They had two jobs in Dorset and one in Manchester before they could even think about going to Killington.

Melanie was done with shop talk. She wanted to get a plan in order to snare Joey. She wanted to get on with her life, yesterday.

“Okay, now can we talk about Joey. What we are going to do about him?”

Both men looked at each other and then back to her. Dan spoke first. “What do you mean we, Mel? You don’t really think you are going to be involved in this, do you?”

Melanie bristled. Her brother could be a condescending creep when he wanted to be. “This does involve me. It’s me he’s after. I have every right to be included in the plans to get rid of him, once and for all.”

“Melanie, this man wants to kill you, not play cards. This isn’t a game. Neither Luke nor I are going to risk your life any more than it already has been. You need to understand that.”

Dan moved to grasp her hand across the table. She snatched it back and stood. “No! You two need to understand. Tony took all control away from me. I couldn’t make a move without his say so. Now Joey is taking control away from me. I won’t have it. Not anymore. I’m done with the fear and I’m done with the men in my life making the decisions for me. No matter how much you tell yourselves it’s for my own good, you’re wrong. And if you don’t let me have a say in this, I’ll do it on my own. So think twice about your next move, boys, and let me know what it’s going to be.”

Melanie walked out of the dining room and took the stairs up to her room,

yelling one last time down to them. “And clean the table and do the dishes.” She slammed the door behind her.

Damn men anyway. They’d see things her way, or she’d go it alone.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Detective Fuller showed up mid-morning and they all gathered in the living room to talk. The detective stood stiffly by the window, watching them intently, holding his pad and pen.

“Melanie, I’d like you to go over what happened up in the woods yesterday afternoon. I know what Luke told me last night, but I’d like to hear it from you, please.”

Melanie squirmed on the couch, although sitting between Luke and her brother gave her strength to fill in all the details for the detective.

“I’d turned the horse on the path back toward home. I wasn’t really paying attention to my surroundings; I had other things on my mind. One moment I was atop the horse, the next, something caught me mid-stomach and I went flying backward, landing on my back on the ground.”

She’d hated the helplessness of getting her breath knocked out of her. Remembering the panic to breathe, and the pain in her lungs, caused a shiver, until she felt Luke’s warm solid hand envelope hers. She didn’t have to panic or be scared now.

“I couldn’t catch my breath, and when I was finally able to draw in air, I was able to focus on who stood over me. There was no question it was Joseph Giordano,” she stated.

The detective stopped writing for a moment. “You’re absolutely sure it was him? Because, up to now, it’s been merely speculation.”

Melanie sat straighter and raised her jaw just slightly higher. “Yes, Detective Fuller, I am absolutely positive it was him. I was face-to-face with the creep. At that proximity, you can’t miss the details. I’m not likely to forget the hate and anger etched on his face, or the foul stench of his breath. It was him,” she answered with a bit of backbone and sarcasm.

Fuller went back to writing as he asked her more questions. Half an hour later, he appeared satisfied with the account of events.

“We weren’t able to get much done last night, since it was dark by the time I was notified of the attack.” He said this as he gave Luke a scornful stare.

“This morning my men tracked a blood trail through the woods to the North Road. The trail stopped where tire tracks were found. We’ve got plaster casts of the tracks and found a neighbor who saw a dark blue sedan parked there in the afternoon, although he couldn’t give us a make or model. If he’s on the road, we’ll find him. If he’s laying low it may take a while longer, but this is a small town. He

can't hide forever. We've also sent the blood samples to the state lab."

Dan stood as he addressed the detective, his face red and hands clenched at his sides. Melanie could tell he wasn't happy with the report.

"Detective Fuller, I realize it's only been three days since his first attack, but as you say, this is a small town. How is it you are no closer to finding him now than you were the first damn day?"

Fuller's jaw clenched. "Look, Dan, we've worked together. You know I'm doing everything I can to find this guy."

"What I know is you dragged my sister down to headquarters and treated her like the criminal. You interrogated and humiliated her. How the hell is that doing everything you can to find him?"

Detective Fuller transferred his weight from one foot to the other, not standing so straight and tall anymore.

"I've apologized for that Dan. You know I had to follow every lead. Look, this is getting us nowhere. As soon as I hear any news, I'll let ya'll know. Meantime, stick close to home, Melanie. Don't take any unnecessary chances."

Melanie rose to her feet, but didn't offer to see him out. "I won't. But we are having a memorial service for my son at the end of the week, and the burial is in the Well's cemetery. Will we have any kind of protection there?"

“Absolutely. I’ll call you with the details in a couple days.”

Detective Fuller showed himself out as Dan paced the room. “I can’t seem to find any faith in the cops right now. I’m sure they’re doing their jobs, but dammit, I want this guy found! And I want him found now.”

Melanie winced at the force of her brother’s words as Luke’s hand squeezed her knee. “Danny, we all want him found, but ranting and raving isn’t going to do it,” she said, trying to calm him.

Dan nodded and brought his hand to his chin, rubbing thoughtfully. “Where the hell could he be hiding? Luke, have you found any of his family or business partners that own land or houses in this area?”

Luke leaned forward, elbows on his spread knees. “The closest associate is a Jackson Ross. He’s a business partner in one of the casinos they own and has a vacation home in Saratoga, NY, but that’s an hour’s drive. I find it hard to believe he’s spending all that time on the road, chancing getting caught, but I suppose it’s possible. I can give the guy’s name to Fuller.”

“Yeah, I’ll run a check on all the hospitals and out-patient clinics in a sixty mile radius to see if anyone’s come in with some torn up limbs.”

Dan eyed Melanie. “How much damage did Sarge do to this guy?”

Melanie shrugged. “He wasn’t wearing thick material. At one time Sarge had

hold of his leg, and just before Joey slashed him, Sarge had his arm, whipping it back and forth. I think Sarge went for Joey's neck, but he blocked. Sarge meant business."

Luke kept contact with Melanie's hand, softly massaging her palm with his thumb as he added his thoughts. "There was a lot of blood, not all of it Sarge's. If he left a trail of blood all the way to the car, the damage must have been pretty severe."

"Well, let's start there. You call Fuller first, and then come help me with the list of clinics. Mel, do you think you could start a list of everyone Tony ever mentioned, friends, business associates, other cops. Someone's got to know something."

Melanie jumped up and hugged her brother enthusiastically.

"Thank you for letting me help. I'll be upstairs." She kissed Luke on the cheek and ran out of the room.



Luke palmed his eyes, rubbing roughly with both hands. After six hours of phone calls and internet searches, they burned like hell.

Fuller had gotten a search warrant and along with the Saratoga PD, paid a visit to Jackson Ross, coming up totally empty. No sign that Joseph Giordano was

or had ever been there. Of course, good ole Jack hadn't heard from Joey in a month. Convenient.

None of the hospital ERs or outpatient clinics checked out either. No one with a gnawed up arm and leg had come for treatment.

Melanie's list of Tony's friends and family bombed also. The police had road blocks up for most of the day, netting nothing but a couple kids high on weed. Just fucking great!

Dan had taken Josh and gone to do a job in Dorset a few hours ago and Lainie was upstairs babying Sarge, who'd been freed from the vet by Dan before he'd headed for Dorset.

Where the hell was this asshole? He was near—Luke felt it in his bones. Someone was hiding his psychotic ass. He just needed to figure out who.

About to leave the office and seek out Lainie, Luke's cell rang before he made it to the door. Caller ID said it was Fuller. Luke hoped to hell the guy had something.

"Yeah?" Luke growled into the phone, not bothering with the normal niceties.

"We caught a small break. Besides the ERs and clinics, we've also sent a photo of Giordano to area pharmacies. We just heard from a cashier at the one in

Manchester, stating a guy matching Giordano's description was there last night just before closing, buying all kinds of gauze bandages, antibiotic cream, tape and Motrin."

Luke's hand clutched the phone until his knuckles turned white. He let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding.

"Manchester? That's a twenty-minute drive. He's got to be close by. Dammit, he's so goddamn close I can smell him."

"Yeah, well, I don't know about that. I'm on my way to the pharmacy to talk to the cashier. She just came on duty. That's why we weren't notified earlier. I'll keep in touch."

The pounding in Luke's head felt like a well driller's rig took up residence inside his skull, but the detective didn't have to keep them up-to-date. "Thanks, Fuller. I appreciate you keeping us in the loop."

The guy chuckled on the other end. "I've got some making up to do to your girl, and it's Graham."

The phone disconnected and Luke clipped it to his belt. Manchester. Twenty minutes away. Joey was probably lying low for now, but Luke knew he wasn't gone, and sooner or later he'd find him.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The tension in the house vibrated through Melanie. The week passed with no news on Joey; no sightings, no trails to follow, nothing. It was like he'd dropped off the face of the earth.

Even when Detective Fuller informed his mother of Joey's injuries, she'd refused to co-operate in finding him. He said she acted like she could have cared less if the guy was bleeding to death in a ditch.

Melanie always knew her mother-in-law was a cold woman, but jeez. Unless, of course, she knew exactly where Joey was, and had been the one who'd sent the psychopath.

Luke and Dan walked around with surly faces day in and day out. She was never alone. One or the other of them was with her continuously. Detective Fuller checked in with them several times a day, but never with any good news.

Melanie looked over at the bedside clock. Two-thirty in the morning. Sleep was elusive. She'd tried, but with her son's burial today she couldn't turn off her thoughts.

What kind of boy would he have been? What would he have grown up to

be? A doctor or a military man? A firefighter or teacher? She would have been proud of whatever he grew up to be.

It wasn't fair. He'd been taken away from her before she even had a chance to know him, and tomorrow she would say goodbye one more time. Oh, God she missed him so much. Wiping silent tears from her eyes, she turned her gaze on Luke.

Sleeping beside her, Luke started to stir. His head tossed from side-to-side and he groaned. He was still sleep, that much she could tell, but his breathing abruptly turned from slow and calm to swift and labored.

Moonlight shone through the window as a sweat broke out on his forehead and chest. She thought he might look and sound the same way if he'd run a marathon.

Groans turned into shouts of pain. He'd warned her that he suffered from nightmares, but she'd never anticipated something like this. He was being tortured all over again.

Melanie also knew how dangerous it was to startle Luke, but she needed to do something. She couldn't let this torment persist.

Tenderly, she placed her hand on the side of his face and softly said his name. Luke's hand shot out and brutally grabbed hold of her wrist, snapping it

away from his face. His eyes opened, his expression wild, he flipped to cover her body, his forearm pressing down on her throat.

Pinned underneath him, she couldn't move. His name came out as a squeak. Dear God, what had she done? She knew better.

From nowhere, Melanie heard Sarge's fierce growl. He clamped his mouth on Luke's arm in a powerful warning.

At once the pressure against her throat eased. Calmly, Luke spoke to Sarge as he moved off Melanie. "Easy boy, I'm awake now. Good job, Sarge, you're a good dog."

The dog released Luke's arm, jumped off the bed, and sat at attention a few feet away.

At a loss for words, Melanie threw her arms around Luke and drew him near. Her tears dripped on his chest as she fought for the right words to say to him.

"I'm so sorry."

Luke unhooked Melanie's arms from his neck. My God, she was sorry? Hell, once again, he could have killed her. If it wasn't for the dog, who knew what he might have done.

His breathing finally under control, he savored the comfort of her arms

around him. The faint smell of roses coming from her hair overpowered the memory of dirt, sand, and blood.

He thought he had some semblance of control over the nightmares and flashbacks. Clearly, that wasn't the case.

Luke pushed her away to examine her neck. An angry red mark glared back at him.

“Baby, I'm the one that's sorry. I hurt you. I swore I'd never do that again.”

Luke flung back the cover and sat on the edge of the bed as he rubbed his hands over his face. He wanted so badly to be done with this part of his past. How could he share a life with Melanie if she wasn't even safe sleeping beside him at night?

The soft silky skin of her arms encircled him again as she pressed her bare chest against his back. As she rested her cheek in the curve of his neck, the warmth of her breath on his neckline produced a shiver.

“I knew what might happen, Luke. But I couldn't let you suffer through that nightmare, not when there was a chance I could help you. I startled you. Next time, I'll find a better way to wake you.”

Luke brought his hands up to wrap around her arms. In the past after a nightmare like the one he'd just had, he'd be a bundle of nerves, ready to jump out

of his skin. The way she soothed him was nothing short of miraculous.

Her scent and touch brought to him a calm he'd never achieved before. No way could he lose her. He needed to find a way to successfully battle the shit his mind was overrun by, and he would for Melanie.

Luke leaned back against her, inhaling deeply. The monster was gone for now. It was coming less and less and with Melanie by his side, he *would* be the victor.

“You shouldn’t have to be afraid to sleep next to me, Lainie. Sleep is supposed to be peaceful, relaxed. Not restless and frightening.”

He turned and lay back down, bringing her with him to rest her head on his chest. He ran his fingers through her silken hair and concentrated on the steady rise and fall of her torso. Soon he was breathing in time with her.

“First of all, I wasn’t asleep. Second, I’m not afraid of you. Your demons, yes, but not you. You would never purposely hurt me. It’s what happens when you’re not in control that scares me.”

She brought her head up to look him in the eyes. In her gaze he saw uncertainty, but also unwavering love.

“I know I mentioned this last week, but would you consider counseling? I’ve read a lot about PTSD, and I suffer from it, too. You need help dealing with the

ghosts of your past.”

Luke scanned her face, and then brought his hand up to cup her cheek. Resolute, he fixed her with a gaze.

“I will do anything to keep you in my life. I’ll do anything to keep what happened tonight from ever happening again. I will do everything to show you just how much I love you.”

With the pad of his thumb, he wiped the tear that fell from her eyes. Out of the blue, Melanie jumped to her knees and drew his arm to her.

“Your arm. You’re not bleeding. There are barely any indentations. Sarge was just warning you, wasn’t he?”

Melanie called Sarge to the side of the bed, where she leaned across Luke’s stomach to pat the dog’s head and scratch his ears.

“You’re a good boy, Sarge. You trust him, too, don’t you? He just needed a little reminding, didn’t he?”

Luke was amazed, too. Sarge was one hell of a dog. He patted him and told him to go lay down at the foot of the bed. Melanie scooted back to her side and snuggled up to Luke.

“It’s true you know. He trusted you not to hurt me. He knew you’d come out of it. Otherwise, he’d have torn your arm to shreds.”

“I know. I owe that dog for so much. He’s smarter than most humans I know. By the way, why weren’t you sleeping?”

“What?”

“You said during my nightmare, you hadn’t been sleeping. Why?”

“Just thinking, I guess, worrying about tomorrow. It was hard saying goodbye to Dylan in the hospital and now I have to do it all over again. What if Joey shows up? I want a peaceful day for my son. I don’t want that monster anywhere around.”

Luke hugged her closely to his side and tightened his hold. “Sleep, honey. No more worrying. Detective Fuller has promised protection, and this time I actually have faith in his ability to provide it. Tomorrow isn’t a time to be sad. Tomorrow Dylan will finally be laid to rest and be at peace. He’s already with the rest of your family. Tomorrow you celebrate him and let God bless him. Okay?”

“I do love you, Luke.”

Luke lay awake stroking her hair and back until she fell asleep. He was just as worried about Joey showing up tomorrow as she, but didn’t want her to know. If the son of a bitch showed his slimy face at Melanie’s son’s burial, he was a dead man.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Melanie woke Saturday morning to an empty bed. The urge to bury her head under her pillow and stay there all day burned low in her belly, but today wasn't about her. It was about her baby. She needed to honor him, and honor him she would.

Sitting up, she noticed the bed wasn't quite empty. Sarge lay at the end, lifting his head when she moved.

Her heart warmed at the sight of him. Patting the mattress next to her, the dog belly crawled until he was lying across her lap. She buried her face in his soft fur and gently hugged him.

"You know, you're a little big to be a lap dog, but I won't tell anyone if you don't."

Sarge barked a response; a second later, footsteps sounded on the stairs. Luke appeared dressed in black dress slacks, a dark blue dress shirt that hugged his sculpted chest, and a light blue silk tie.

My God, he was a handsome man. "Wow. Just...wow!"

His mouth formed a grin that transformed his face into the tender, loving

man she knew when she was alone with him. By the looks of him, it was time to get ready to go.

“I was about to wake you when I heard Sarge. Dan’s already left for the cemetery. He’s meeting Detective Fuller there so they can check out security.”

Luke walked to the side of the bed and placed his warm, strong hand on her shoulder and squeezed. His gaze shot straight to her face; the love that shone in his eyes softened his scrutiny.

She laid her hand on his. “I’m fine. At least I will be, with you by my side.”

Luke nodded and backed away from the bed. “I’ll meet you downstairs.”

Melanie nodded and drew in a deep breath. “Okay, I’ll get dressed and meet you. I don’t suppose there is any coffee ready?”

“Not only that, but I’ll pop some bread in the toaster for you.”

“I don’t know what to say or how to thank you. You’ve been so giving and understanding of what this day means to me.”

Melanie stood and went to him. Luke wrapped his arms around her and pulled her to his chest. One big hand caressed the back of her head.

“Lainie, if Dylan had survived the fall, he would have been my world, just as you are. I know I have no right to mourn the loss of his life the way you are, but I do. He was a part of you that’s gone forever. I would give up my life if I could bring

him back to you, but I can't. For that, I am so, so sorry.”

He buried his face in her shoulder as she blinked away the tears his words created. This man was a soldier, trained to be strong and unflinching in his mission. He was all that, but he was also the most generous, bighearted, caring man she'd ever known, and he loved her. Would have loved her son as if he were his own.

Luke cleared his throat and turned toward the stairs, but not before she noticed the moisture in his eyes or the dampness on her shoulder.

She watched Sarge follow Luke down the stairs. He didn't want her to see his vulnerability. She loved him so much for that.

Turning her attention to the task at hand, she went to the bathroom and started the process of becoming presentable.

Anxiety over the upcoming hours seemed to be messing with her stomach. She was nauseous. The smell of the toast wafting up from downstairs made her mouth water, and not in a good way. She needed to calm down before she vomited all over her dress.

The burial ceremony would be brief. They had a short service in the hospital chapel when she lost Dylan. With their parents gone and no other relative living near by, it would just be them.

When she'd lost Dylan, the ground was still frozen and with this being a small town cemetery, it didn't get plowed. There'd been two feet of snow covering the ground and entrance. It was customary to wait for spring for burial.

It should have been done two months ago, but she hadn't been able to face it. Now, though, she knew she wasn't letting him go. Just letting him be at peace.



As Melanie and Luke arrived at the cemetery, she raised her hand to her chest, shocked to see the amount of cars lining the entrance.

Luke came around the car to help her out, and she stood on shaking legs. When his arm came around her waist, she leaned against him for support.

As she walked to the site, she was greeted by neighbors, old teachers, local store owners, and friends she hadn't seen in five or more years. So many people who'd once been a big part of her life. People she thought she'd lost because of Tony.

She looked at Luke, confused. He handed her a handkerchief for the tears she was unable to keep at bay any longer. Tony took a lot from her, but it was less and less than she'd thought.

"Maybe now you'll finally realize how many people love you. It's all about

home, family, and support.”

Luke enveloped her in his arms until she gave him a nod that she was steady enough to continue.

When they made it to the site, she was engulfed in Dan’s arms. “I love you, little sister. I’m so sorry I couldn’t protect Dylan for you. I know it doesn’t make up for a damn thing, but Luke and I bought Dylan’s head stone. I hope you approve.”

She glanced around him and saw the thick marble stone carved in the shape of an angel. Engraved on it were the words: *Beloved son and nephew, Guardian of our future.*

She’d told herself she wouldn’t cry today, but who was she kidding. With the outpouring of support and love from neighbors and friends and the beautiful gift from Danny and Luke, she couldn’t keep the tears from pouring down her face.

It was more than she’d expected, but the painful lump in her throat prevented her from telling him so. She’d tried so hard to protect him that last night with Tony, but couldn’t. When she held his tiny, still body in her arms at the hospital, it was gut-wrenching. He’d smelled like baby powder. It was a scent she’d never forget.

She stood between Danny and Luke throughout the service. She knew her son was happy and safe, but it was so unfair. He stomach roiled and her heart

burst as the minister finished the ceremony. The only thing left to do was say goodbye. At the end, Luke handed her a bouquet of baby blue carnations to place on his tiny casket.

Luke and Danny in turn laid blue carnations down as did the rest of the people in attendance. As she backed away from the coffin, she had an overwhelming feeling of peace. A warm, soft breeze picked up and blew her hair off her shoulder, and she was surrounded by an intense feeling of love.

They were here — Dylan and Nana and Poppy — and he was all right. It wasn't her time yet, but when it came, she knew they'd be there waiting for her.

She walked back to Luke and held him close. He and Danny had turned this into a beautiful celebration of life and for that, she'd be forever grateful.

Everyone was invited to the church afterward for a potluck lunch the church ladies put together. She was welcomed back into the town's fold as if she'd never left. It wasn't a fake welcome, either. The sincerity in everyone's face was obvious.

She made a lunch date with one of her best high school friends, and even old man McKenna told her she was back where she belonged.

What would have been a somber, dismal day became one of tribute and observance — honoring a child, who would never fulfill his potential, yet touched

so many lives.

By the time they returned home, she was thankful for the quietness of the house.

The day was beautiful. Dan and Luke made sure of it. Even Detective Fuller — Graham, as he'd insisted — made sure the day went off without a hitch from Joey.

She changed into an old, comfortable T-shirt and pair of sweats and flopped on the couch in front of the TV. Today totally depleted her energy. When the time came, she'd have a hard time climbing the stairs to her bed.

Luke ran to the video store and rented a movie, Dan popped popcorn, and they spent the rest of the evening watching TV and hanging out. It was a peaceful ending to the day.

When Dan's girlfriend called, Melanie watched his face light up before he excused himself from the room. She was pleased her brother was so happy. He'd told her earlier Diane would have canceled her business trip if she'd known about the burial in time.

From the way Dan talked about her, she was a beautiful, caring woman, but Melanie wanted to judge that for herself. She hoped they could get together when Diane got back from her business trip next week. It was time to meet the woman

who made her brother so content.

Chapter Twenty- Nine

The next week flew by, at least, that's what Luke said. They'd been so busy installing security systems all over the state of Vermont that they hadn't had time to do any searching for Joey. The man had been quiet on all fronts with no sightings in two weeks.

Melanie hadn't been much help. She'd been sick in bed with the flu for the better part of the week and was just starting to feel slightly human again.

Luckily, Josh was on spring break so they took turns; one staying at the house to protect her and the other two out doing installments.

Diane was due back in town tonight and Danny had a big evening planned with her. He'd told them he'd be away for the night, but back in the morning. Maybe even bring her home for breakfast.

Which was wonderful, really, but the thought of breakfast made her stomach turn. Oh well, for Danny, she'd suffer through.

Luke crawled into bed next to her and shut off the light, drawing her into his arms.

She snuggled down close to his body. "I felt a lot better today. I think it's

finally passed.”

“If you’re feeling better tomorrow, I thought maybe we might take the boat out on the lake and do some fishing. Getting out of this house might do you a world of good.”

“You’re right. I really, really need to get out of this house. The lake is a wonderful idea.”

“Excellent. Now, close your eyes and dream good dreams. I do love you so much, Lainie. By the way, the medication the therapist started me on Monday seems to be working. It’s only been five days, but I can feel a definite difference in myself. It’s hard to explain, but the anxiety that has been with me since Iraq seems to have lessened.”

“Oh, Luke, that’s wonderful. I’m so glad she’s helping. And I love you, too. Always and forever.”



Luke snapped straight up in bed, instantly awake after hearing Sarge’s sharp bark coming from downstairs. He glanced over at Melanie, who was waking. He leaned down and kissed her forehead. The bedside clock said it was three-thirty in the morning. The dog sure did pick a hell of a time to take a leak. Groaning, he sat up, then patted Melanie’s shoulder.

“Go back to sleep, I’ll go see what he’s barking about.”

Getting out of bed, he drew on his jeans and stuffed his bare feet into a pair of work boots. Sarge’s demands grew louder, each bark more anxious the closer Luke got. When he arrived in the kitchen, the dog was doing circles in front of the door. When he saw Luke, Sarge barked again and clawed at the door, frantic to get out.

“Hold on bud, what’s wrong? Did I forget to let you out earlier?”

With his hand on the doorknob about to turn it, Melanie came flying into the room.

“No!”

Luke dropped his hand. “What is it?”

He noted she had a pair of his old sweats and t-shirt on and was slipping her feet into sneakers.

“The horse barn, it’s on fire. I saw it from the bathroom window. Come on, we have to get the horses out. I don’t want Sarge out there.”

Melanie grabbed the cell phone and they ran out the door together, leaving Sarge inside barking furiously. As they headed for the barn, Melanie called nine-one-one and reported the fire.

Flames shot out the open hayloft door. Luke heard the three horses

stomping in their stalls, trying to escape the flames. The fire crackled and the barn beams groaned as the blaze spread.

Jesus, it was hot. As he approached the barn door, the heat radiating from the building doubled in intensity.

“Stay out here. I’ll get the horses out,” he shouted over the cracking of the timber.

Ignoring him, Melanie shoved past him and down to the last stall. Luke followed her and stopped at the middle stall. They got the stall doors open at the same time. Coco, the horse in the middle stall bolted past Luke, straight outside. Boaz on the other hand was having none of it. He backed himself into the corner and reared as Melanie entered to grab his halter.

With his front legs flying in the air, Melanie stayed back until he landed. As soon as his feet were on the ground she ran and grabbed his halter, but the horse was too scared to realize she was trying to help and reared again, causing her to fall to the floor directly under his hooves.

Just as Boaz brought his front feet down again, Luke grabbed Melanie by the shoulders and dragged her backward.

The horse’s hoof caught Melanie on the knee as he came down; then he flew out the open stall door. With the ceiling coming down around them, Luke scooped

Melanie up in his arm and made for the door.

“No! Luke, no! We still have to get Angel.”

“I’ll go back in, after I get you out.”

Melanie just about jumped out of his arms and forced him to stop. “I can make it. Go get Angel.”

They didn’t have time to argue about it. Luke put her down and ran for the last horse left in the barn. The three of them made it out of the barn just as the roof caved in, sending flames, sparks, and burning embers flying out the door and up into the sky like fireworks.

Brushing burning cinders off his back and shoulders, Luke went in search of a hose. The horse barn may be toast, but there were still two other outbuildings close to it. He didn’t want to lose them too.

He saw Josh come sprinting across the field to meet him by the water hydrant.

“Holy shit, man. What happened?” Josh asked in wide-eyed amazement.

“Don’t know yet. Start spraying the other barns down, will ya? I’ll go help Melanie round up the horses and make sure she’s okay. Boaz clipped her in the knee pretty good.”

“Sure thing, Luke.”

“The fire company should be on their way.”

Luke went off toward her. He wasn't as worried about the horses as he was Melanie. This fire didn't start by itself. It was burning too hot, too fast. No, someone helped it along, and he didn't want Melanie wandering around out here by herself in case the bastard was still around.

Damn it! Enough was enough. It was time to find little Joey and finish this.



Melanie walked the pasture, trying to round up the horses. She didn't blame them for going as far from the barn as they could. They were scared. There could be nothing worse for a horse than being trapped in a burning building. It was going to take some work now for them to trust a building again.

No, she didn't blame them at all. She'd run far away from all this if she could. Then again, that wasn't true. She was tired of running, of cowering away from a fight. Tonight left no doubt this was a fight, and now Joseph Giordano was bringing the fight right to her home. There was no doubt in her mind that this fire was his doing. She felt it deep inside.

He was trying to punish her for living while Tony died. She'd known this from the beginning of his campaign against her, but still didn't understand how a person could function with that type of warped thinking. It was an accident. The

police ruled it an accident and after months, she was able to believe it herself.

But facts didn't matter to the Giordanos. The whole damn family was warped. A mother who condoned violence. Who stood by as her son threatened a woman that used to be a part of the family. Hell, she practically gave him her blessing when they had the confrontation at the hospital. *They're all freakin' nuts.*

It was getting harder to walk through the tall grass; her knee was starting to stiffen up and felt about the size of a basketball, but she could see the outline of the horses by the farthest fence line. They were fenced in and not going anywhere. She just needed to make sure they didn't have any injuries.

She was almost to them when they spooked and took off. There was no way her knee was going to allow her to follow them any further. It was going to be hell walking back to the barn as it was, so she gave up and turned back.

As she turned, two things happened. Someone called her name and she saw a movement just to her right. She had only a second to register the voice as that of Luke before a large black object hit her full force in the face. Pain burst through her head as the ground came rushing up to greet her. She looked up through blurry eyes to see a shovel coming back down at her head as she blocked with her arms.

Another yell from Luke.

Another hit from the shovel.

She tried calling out, tried telling Luke where she was, but her voice wasn't working. The pain was all consuming. Her head was bursting. She'd made a small attempt to curl in a ball and cover her head, when the shovel made contact again, and she felt her arm shatter. This time her voice did work as she let out a scream that could have woken the dead.

One more hit from the shovel.

Melanie felt as if she was detached from her body. The pain was no longer blinding, just a tingle of feeling. She couldn't hear Luke anymore. She couldn't hear the whoosh of the shovel as it cut through the air toward her, or the sadistic laughter from the man assaulting her, just a gradual peaceful slide into darkness. Relief and the radiant face of her son.



Josh had the hose hooked up and was about to spray down the closest building to the barn, when he heard Luke yelling to Melanie. He set the hose on the ground and hopped the fence to the pasture.

Luke shouldn't have had any trouble finding her. With the fire, the field was partly lit up and he could almost see to the far fence. Josh heard Luke yell again, and the tone of his voice worried Josh. It sounded shaky and scared, almost panicked.

Then he saw the outline of a man in the field swinging what looked like a shovel.

“Luke! Luke! Someone’s out here.”

At Josh’s frantic call Luke broke into a dead run. Then he heard an ear piercing scream. Lainie! With his heart in his throat, Luke moved faster than he ever thought possible, but it seemed as though he were going backward. With every stride, he felt he was farther away from her.

Luke could see Josh coming too. The closer he got, he saw the form of a man swinging a large object.

Fuck! Every time he needed his damn gun he was without it. Yelling her name, he ran as if his life depended on it. He and Josh made it to her at the same time.

Luke never missed a step, and with a lunge, caught the man square in the jaw and sent him flying backwards. Luke was on him in a second, pounding Joey’s face with his fists, until Joseph Giordano lay still beneath him.

Still, he would have kept hammering until he heard Josh sharply yell his name, and saw Melanie crumpled on the ground. Bleeding and broken.

“Oh, God! Get back to the house and get help. Go!”

Luke grabbed a shocked Josh by the shoulder and shook him. “Now, Josh!”

Chapter Thirty

Luke fell to his knees at Melanie's side. Blood poured from a huge gash on the side of her face, soaking into her hair. She lay in a fetal position, arms trying to cover her head and legs curled up to her chest.

Luke heard the sirens and glanced up to see the flashing red lights of the fire trucks as they pulled into the driveway along with a dozen other car lights. The town's fire department was volunteer and it looked as if the whole town had turned out to help.

What he didn't see yet was the ambulance. He prayed to God it got here soon. Luke tore off the t-shirt he was wearing and pressed it over the wound on her head, the contact making her groan. *Where the hell was the damn ambulance?*

Her right arm was bleeding and in the moonlight Luke could see the bone fragment that had broken through her skin. The clothes she wore looked like rags, torn and stained with her blood.

Melanie groaned again and Luke tried to soothe her, but was afraid to touch her anywhere for fear of hurting her even more.

"You lay still, baby, I'm right here with you. Help is coming."

He carefully moved the hair away from her eyes. Dear God, let her live.

Luke heard her mumble and moved his ear directly in front of her to hear what she was saying.

“Horses?” The word was so faint he fought to understand what she was saying. When he realized she was asking about the horses’ safety, he lost it.

He looked up at the sky then enveloped her head gently with his arms. Aware, but not caring about the tears flooding down his face, he placed his cheek against hers.

“You stubborn woman, the horses are fine. It’s you that needs help, and I’m not leaving your side until you’re all fixed up and walking down the aisle to me. I love you so much, baby. You need to stay strong so you can marry me. Do you hear me?”

“Haven’t... been ... asked.” Her voice sounded miles away.

“Melanie Hunter, would you please do me the honor of becoming my wife? I swear to love you forever. I’m nothing without you.”

Luke felt her lips curl up on the side of his cheek. It was a slight movement, but she was trying to smile.

“Silly man...”

“Lainie? Come on, baby, stay with me. Lainie, please baby. Answer me.

Lainie!”

She whispered in his ear one more time, but before Luke could react, he felt a hand on his shoulder. Looking up, he recognized Hank LeClaire in his paramedic uniform.

“We’ve got her, Luke. You need to back away and let us help her. *Now.*”

Hank said the word strong enough to register with Luke he needed to give them room. Running up to him was Detective Fuller, Josh, and another paramedic team.

It took a moment for Luke to realize the other paramedics were for Joey, who lay where he’d left him. The paramedics went to Joey as Fuller and Josh stopped where Luke was standing.

“Josh has filled me in on what happened. Is she going to be okay?” the detective inquired.

“She has to be.” Luke hadn’t taken his eyes off Melanie and the men working on her. They had a neck collar on her, her head wrapped in gauze, and strapped on a back board.

“I’m still going to need your statement, Luke, but I doubt the DA will bring you up on any charges. It’s an obvious case of self-defense.”

For the first time, Luke looked over at the detective. He wanted to tell the

man he could care less about charges or whether Joseph Giordano died. He hoped the scumbag did. But his main concern right now was Lainie.

“I’m not leaving her. Your statement will have to wait.”

“That’s not a problem. We can catch up at the hospital. Has anyone notified Dan yet?”

Dan, shit. Luke needed to be the one who notified him. “I’ll do it on my way to the hospital.”

Luke left the field, following the paramedics carrying Melanie to the ambulance. As they loaded her in, he jumped in his truck and followed them out of the driveway. In his rearview mirror, he glanced back at the men trying to douse the flames. He hoped Joey Giordano died. He prayed for it.



Dan woke abruptly to the ringing of his cell phone. He quickly flipped it open so as to not wake Diane, who slept beside him.

“Yeah,” he said quietly into the phone.

“It’s Luke, there’s been a fire at the horse barn. Giordano attacked Melanie, and she’s on the way to the hospital.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Dan yelled into the phone. He sat straight up in bed, forgetting about trying to not wake Diane.

“Just what the fuck I said. He attacked her with a fucking shovel, Dan. She’s bad, real bad. I suggest you get there, ASAP.”

“How the hell did this happen? I thought you had her covered.” Dammit, he didn’t mean to say that. He knew it wasn’t Luke’s fault.

“Yeah, funny that. Why is it every time you’re not around, she gets attacked? You ever think about that one? Stop blaming me and start figuring out where the fucking leak is. By the way, Giordano’s on his way to the hospital, too. I managed to kick his head in. Hopefully he doesn’t wake up. See ya there.”

Dan shut the phone and threw it across the room. Luke was his best friend. This wasn’t the time to be throwing accusations around at each other, but the guy was right. Why was it he was gone every time something happened? He couldn’t think about that now.

He jumped out of bed and threw his clothes on.

“Dan, what’s wrong, honey? Who was that on the phone?” Diane asked, concerned.

“Luke. There’s been an attack on my sister. She’s on the way to the hospital. He say’s its bad, Diane. I’ve got to go.”

Diane got up and started getting dressed.

“I’m going with you. I may not have met her yet, but I love you and I’m not

letting you go through this alone. Let's go."

Dan looked at the woman in amazement. She was everything he'd ever been looking for. With everything going wrong, she was the one bright spot in his life, and she loved him.

He embraced her in a hug and kissed her with a passion she returned tenfold. "Thank you. I do need you, so much."

"Then let's get to the hospital."

Chapter Thirty-One

Luke sat in the waiting room while the doctors examined Melanie. Jesus, wasn't this where they started? He ran a hand through his hair, then rubbed his face. His mind couldn't register everything that was happening.

Joey had been examined in the ER and with the exception of a broken jaw, was just fine. Fuller would be escorting him to jail as soon as they wired his jaw.

Luke couldn't even wrap his mind around how he felt about that. The man belonged in jail, but for one out of control moment, he'd wanted to kill him, and that scared the shit out of him.

He'd killed people in Iraq, but he'd been doing a job he'd been trained to do in defense of his homeland. It wasn't political; he didn't over-think it. Even then, he hadn't *wanted* to kill anyone.

Except Giordano. For a split second, he'd wanted to kill him so bad he could taste it. If Melanie didn't make it, he was making no promises that he wouldn't finish the job he'd started.

Christ-All-Mighty, what the hell was taking so long? Thirty minutes had gone by since she'd been brought in. A family advocate person had come out to tell

him she'd been sent to MRI for a scan of her skull, since the doctors were afraid of a fracture.

Luke heard the sliding doors open and saw Dan and a blond woman rushing through them. He raised his hand to them and they made a beeline for him.

“What’s going on? What’ve they told you? Is she going to be okay?” Dan finally inhaled.

The guy looked like hell, hair standing up every which way on his head, clothes all wrinkled and thrown on like he'd grabbed them off a pile on the floor, which he probably had. His forehead furrowed in what looked like permanent creases.

The blond looked a heck of a lot better. Her hair was pulled back in a tie but it looked neat, and at least the jeans and sweatshirt weren't wrinkled. She had her hand firmly clasped in Dan's and looked to be offering him her strength. This must be the infamous Diane. Hell of a way to meet.

Luke motioned for Dan to sit, but he shook his head no. “Just tell me what the hell they're doing for her.”

“The family advocate came out a few minutes ago. They've taken her to X-Ray for an MRI of her head. The doctors are worried about a skull fracture. Her left arm is broken in three places and she'll need surgery to place a rod in there.

Her left shoulder was dislocated, but they were already able to put that back in place.”

Luke took a short breath. It was still hard to think about the pain she must have endured. Dan still eyed him, apparently waiting for more.

“Most of the damage was done to her left side. She managed to curl up in a ball and protect her head with her left arm as he continually beat her with a shovel.”

Dan did sit this time. Luke watched what little color he had left drain from his face. “Dear God, a shovel?”

“Yeah, she’s going to need stitches in her left hip, but there were no broken bones in her leg. Her ribs are a different story. She’s got three fractured ribs, but they are not misplaced and as of now, there is no danger to her lungs.”

Diane knelt in front of Dan and wrapped her hands around his waist. “I’m so sorry this has happened, baby, but as long as the MRI comes out okay, it sounds like she’ll recover.”

Dan kissed the top of her head. “Diane, this is Luke, the lug-head I’ve told you so much about.”

She held her hand out and Luke grasped it. “I’ve been waiting to meet you. I’m sorry it has to be like this. I know Melanie wants the chance to get to know

you. I'm praying she gets the opportunity."

She sat down next to Dan and held his hand. "Well, you're all in my prayers tonight."

Dan kissed her hand. "Thank you for being here for me. It means a lot."

Luke caught Dan's glance. "Look, about what I said on the phone, it wasn't called for. You're allowed to have a life. I was just scared to death about Lainie."

"Same here, pal. I know this isn't your fault. I just freaked. Tell me what happened at the house."

Luke stood, because he couldn't sit any longer. The waiting was driving him out of his ever-living mind.

"Sarge woke us up with his barking. Lainie noticed the barn on fire so we made Sarge stay in and went to get the horses out of the barn. We got them out just as the roof caved."

Luke stopped pacing and leaned up against the wall. His shoulders slumped and he hung his head. Gut-clenching pain was all he felt as he told Dan the story.

"Boaz caught Lainie's knee when he reared and came down. I guess it wasn't hurt as bad as I thought, because she took off out in the field after them. Josh came, so I had him start hosing down the other barn and took off after her."

He spun around and punched the wall. The wall not nearly as giving as

Giordano's face. Shit, wasn't that a damn stupid thing to do. He shook it off and went back to pacing.

"I couldn't have been more than five minutes behind her. When I got halfway across the field, it was so lit up from the fire I could see their outlines. I yelled to Lainie, but either Joey didn't hear me or didn't care..."

Luke sank into the chair, bending at the middle as he dropped his head in his hands. His shoulders shook and he felt physically ill.

"He just kept swinging that damn shovel. I was running as fast as I fucking could, but he just kept swinging it down onto her. She just lay there in a crumpled, broken ball." His voice shook as he continued.

"When I reached them, I just lost it. I beat the shit out of him. Dammit, Dan, I almost killed the man. Hell, I wanted to, and still do." Luke finally looked back at his friend.

"She was out of it when I first got to her, but she came around. The damn fool woman asked if the horses were okay."

Luke took in the hand Dan laid on his shoulder and appreciated the reassurance and comfort for which it was meant. He looked over at Dan, whose eyes were damp. Diane's arms were around him offering him what comfort she could. She looked torn up herself.

“Maybe that’s a good sign. She came around and was talking to you, right?”

Dan looked so hopeful, it was hard to tell him the last thing he’d heard her say. He didn’t know if he should, but in the end, Dan deserved to know everything, didn’t he?

“Dan, the last thing she said to me was that Dylan was with her and everything was fine.”

Chapter Thirty-Two

Luke rose as the doctor came into the room and shook the man's offered hand.

"Mr. McLean? I'm Dr. Foster, one of the surgeons working on your fiancé's case. I thought you might like an update. I'm also going to need some consent forms signed for the surgery." He looked at Dan.

"Are you Melanie's brother?"

Dan nodded. "Yes, I am."

"You'll have to sign the forms since you're next of kin. Right now, Melanie is holding her own. The good news is, there's no skull fracture, but she does have several broken bones in her face. The plastic surgeon will be operating to correct that. The man is very good at what he does. She's lucky to have him on her case."

"Will she be disfigured?" Dan questioned.

"She will have a scar along her hair line from her forehead to her ear, but you'd have to look very close to see it. I'm her orthopedic surgeon. I'll be setting her arm where it's been fractured. She's going to need a rod and screws placed. We're looking at a long recovery and physical therapy. There is a lot of damage.

Frankly, there's a chance she'll lose her arm. It was almost severed at the elbow and her wrist is crushed, but since I don't like to lose, she's in good hands. That arm is what saved her life."

"When will you start the surgery?" Luke asked.

"As soon as we get her prepped. I'll be working on her arm first. If she tolerates that well, the plastic surgeon will go next. If not, he'll operate tomorrow. Now about the consents, we need to go over a few things before you sign them."

Dan stood and shuffled from foot to foot.

"Just do what you need to do to save my sister."

"You need to be informed of all the complications, one in particular. Before any X-rays or MRIs are performed on women of child-bearing years, it's protocol to run a pregnancy test. Your sister's was positive. From the blood counts I'd say no more than two weeks. Every precaution was taken during the x-rays and MRI to protect the baby from radiation and the anesthesiologist will also take her pregnancy into consideration while choosing the best anesthetic for her, but you do need to be aware of the risks any surgery or medication can have on a pregnancy before signing the consents."

Dan looked to Luke, who'd lowered himself back into the chair because the floor tilted beneath him. The blood must have drained down his body and out his

feet, because the room still spun and his chest was caving in on him.

A baby! His baby!

Luke cleared his throat. “You do what you need to do to save Melanie. Without her, there won’t be a baby. Just don’t take any unnecessary chances. If she can’t handle the second surgery, don’t do it. She’d want every precaution taken for her baby, and I mean *every* precaution.”

Dan spoke up. “He’s right. She lost a baby pre-term four months ago. This baby would mean the world to her. Do everything you can.”

Dan signed the papers and the doctor left to get everything rolling. Luke still sat in the chair. All he could think of was that he was going to be a father. Hot damn!

“I’m going to go get you boys some coffee. It’s going to be a long night,” Diane said as she kissed Dan and bent down to kiss Luke on the cheek.

“Congrats, daddy. I’ll be back before you can miss me, darling.” Diane headed to the cafeteria for the coffee.

Luke didn’t know what to say. To hear the extent of her injuries, and what the recovery would be like was more than enough to send him into a tailspin. But a baby too? Hell, he knew what this baby would mean to her. Christ, it meant everything to him. He needed to talk to the one person who could help.

“Listen pal, I need to go do something. If anything comes up with Lainie, have them page me. I’ll be back in fifteen.” Luke got to his feet and headed down the hallway.

“You need help with anything?” Dan offered.

“No, I gotta do this one myself, but thanks.”

Luke walked until he found the chapel. The place was empty so he sat in a pew in the middle of the room and hung his head. He wasn’t sure how to do this, so he just started talking.

“Oh, dear God. Please take care of her and see her through this. I’ll do everything I can and stand by her through all this. I’d take the pain for her if I could. I swear she’ll have a great life with me. Just please help her. There is one more person I need to hear me. Dylan, I know you’re with her. She’s felt you there, and I think I know why. You’re being a big brother. Your mom said you would’ve made a great older brother, looking after a new baby in the family. This is when your little brother or sister needs you most. Right now, Dylan, you go watch over that baby and your mama. You’re their guardian angel. Send your strength to them, baby. Send your strength.”

Luke stayed in the chapel a while longer, just praying to God and Dylan to bring Melanie through all this. He finally left and found Dan and Diane sitting

side-by-side in the waiting room.

“Melanie’s been in surgery a half an hour now. The nurse just came out and updated us. She’s holding her own so far,” Dan advised.

Luke glanced at Diane. “Diane, you look exhausted. This most likely wasn’t how you’d envisioned your evening. I’m sorry for that.”

“Oh, Luke, this isn’t your fault. It’s that awful man’s fault.”

“Luke’s right, sweetheart. Why don’t you go home and get some shut-eye? It’s going to be a long wait before we hear anything. I’ll call you in the morning and let you know how everything is going.”

“Are you sure, baby? I don’t mind being here with you. I know there’s nothing I can do but hold your hand, but that’s something,” she said as she rubbed his back.

“It’s everything, but someone needs to be strong tomorrow, too. That will have to be you.”

“Oh, honey, you can count on it. I’ll leave. There is some business I need to attend to in the morning and I have to cancel another trip I was supposed to take. Then I’ll be back here.”

“Don’t cancel a trip because of this. I’ll always need you, but you have to take care of business too,” Dan protested.

“We’ll see. I love you. Talk to you in the morning.” She kissed him with fervor and left the hospital.

“Wow,” Luke exclaimed. “Seems like things are heating up with you two. She’s a nice lady, Dan. I’m happy for you.”

“Thanks. She is a great lady, and was totally supportive of me tonight. It felt good. My last relationship, as you know from my letters, was disastrous. She was needy and demanding, and I still thought I loved her. In the end, I think we were both left with some hefty emotional scars. This time I’ve found a woman secure in herself and our relationship. It’s a good feeling.”

Luke nodded; he only wanted the best for his friend. Damn, he wished they’d come out and give him some news.

“And what about you, buddy? A father? Holy shit! Did you ever think that would happen? Luke McLean, a father. Good Lord, I hope it’s not a boy. I don’t think we can take another Luke.” Dan chuckled.

“Can you believe it, Dan? I’ve always wanted a family with Lainie. Can you imagine a little baby girl, dressed in a pink frilly dress and yellow bows in her hair? She’ll be so beautiful, just like her mama.”

Dan burst out laughing, “Pink dress and yellow bows, where the hell did you get your fashion sense? My God, let Melanie do the clothes shopping.”

Luke smiled. He could almost feel the little girl in his arms. He just knew it was a girl, and he had every faith that her big brother was watching over her.

A nurse came through the door and both men rose to greet her.

“There’s been a complication during the surgery. I need the two of you to come with me.”

Chapter Thirty-Three

They were brought to a waiting room outside the intensive care unit. Luke's stomach roiled and a cold sweat coated his neck and arms. His hands shook so badly he was forced to dump the cup of coffee he'd been drinking in the trash.

Lainie had been in surgery five hours. What the hell had gone wrong? And why wouldn't the nurse just tell them instead of torturing them with her silence? Dan stood ramrod straight next to him. He didn't know about Dan, but he was too damn scared to even speak. They just waited in silence for the doctor.

It was Dr. Foster who finally came through the ICU door. Luke and Dan crossed the room to where he stood, anxious to hear what he had to say.

"Whoa, gentlemen, first let me say Melanie is doing better than we expected at this point. I'm not sure what you were expecting, but by the looks on your faces, it wasn't good news."

Luke inhaled deeply, trying to get air past the painful lump in his throat.

"The nurse said there was a complication."

"Ah, the complication wasn't your sister's health. The plastic surgeon received an emergency call and wasn't able to operate. Because of Melanie's

pregnancy, we felt it was just as well for her to wait until tomorrow for the facial surgery.”

Luke sat, his legs too damn shaky to hold him up. His heart finally started to beat a regular rhythm.

“Her arm, frankly, was a mess,” The doctor said. “She now has enough metal in her to set off the detectors in an airport. But, the surgery went extremely well, and barring any complications such as infection and other things, I believe she’ll have at least eighty-five percent use of her arm and hand. This won’t be her last surgery, and it’s going to be a long haul with physical therapy, but I’m very encouraged at this point.”

“Can we see her doctor?” Dan questioned.

“She’s just coming out of the anesthesia. Wait about half an hour. The nurses will get her settled and then come get you. For now, only one of you at a time, for five minutes each. The nurse will be out to let you know when you can go in.”

“Thanks, doctor,” Dan offered, and sat down next to Luke. “That was good news, pal. What’s up with the look of doom?”

“This isn’t going to be a simple fix for her. It’s going to be a long, painful recovery. That was her old life. I didn’t want her life with me to be filled with so

much pain.”

“Jesus, Luke, you sure do take a lot on for yourself, don’t you? There are so many differences between her life with Tony and the one she has with you. The major one being you. You’re not causing her pain. You’ll be there to help her through it. She knows she’s not alone anymore. Show her some faith, Luke. Stop thinking you’re God. You can’t prevent her from ever having pain. What the hell do you think it’s going to be like when she gives birth to your baby? From what I’ve heard, it ain’t no picnic.”

Luke groaned at the thought of Melanie in labor. “You’re right. Thanks for the pep talk.”

They looked up as Detective Fuller came around the corner. He sat in a chair across from them, looking rather glum. “Glad I found you guys. How’s Melanie?”

“Holding her own. What is it?” Luke asked. “Something’s wrong. I can tell.”

“Joseph Giordano was shivved in his cell last night by one of the inmates. He’s dead,” Fuller informed them.

“So it’s over. I hope you weren’t expecting us to shed a tear,” Luke replied. Deep down, if he had to be honest, Luke wished it had been him that killed the psychotic sonofabitch.

“No, I was just looking forward to him spending the rest of his life in jail.

You win some; you lose some. Anyway, I thought you boys would like to know.”

He rose to leave then turned back around.

“By the way, when I informed his mother of his death, I got the feeling she wasn’t too surprised. She sure as hell wasn’t broken up over it. See ya around, gentlemen,” Fuller said as he left.

“Well, can’t say I’m too broken up. At least the taxpayers were saved some money,” Dan offered Luke in a conciliatory voice.

“Yeah, I agree. The man got what he deserved. Wish I could’ve been there to see it.”

The nurse came out to the waiting room. “One of you can come with me; the next in five minutes.”

“You go. I have a feeling she’s waiting for you,” Dan said.

Luke slapped him on the back and jumped up to follow the nurse. She had him scrub his hands and arms and put on a sterile gown over his clothes before bringing him to see her. The floor tilted beneath his feet and his chest squeezed tight. He grabbed the door casing to steady himself for a moment.

Melanie had tubes coming out everywhere. The left side of her face was wrapped in white gauze. She was positioned slightly on her right side supported by pillows under her left side. She was facing away from him, so he took a deep

breath and walked around the bed so that when she woke, she could see him.

Her eyes were closed, the left covered by gauze, the right puffy and red. Her whole face appeared swollen. He slid the chair up to the side of the bed, sat and cautiously took her right hand in his. Her eyes fluttered opened. She squeezed his hand and closed her eyes again.

Luke didn't say a word to her; he couldn't force anything past his frozen vocal cords. The tightness in his chest eased some when she continued to keep the pressure on his hand. Slowly, he gently laid his head on the bed next to hers and lightly kissed her lips.

He stayed that way until his five minutes were up and the nurse gestured for him to leave.

"I love you, Melanie. Don't you ever leave me. There are a lot of things in this world I could take, but I couldn't handle that. You sleep. I'll be back as soon as they let me."

He placed her hand back on the bed, then left the room and went directly to the changing room. With his back against the door, he slid to the floor, covered his face with his hands, and let the tears flow as his body shook with the frustration and helplessness he felt at not being able to help her, and the relief that she was still alive.

With Giordano gone and the doctors and nurses taking care of her, he felt powerless. It wasn't a feeling he was comfortable with, but he'd wait around for his next five minutes to be with her until he never had to leave her side again.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Six days later, Melanie was moved to a private room. The slow bleed under her skull healed enough that they no longer worried about the pressure building up in her brain. The punctured lung had sealed itself and she no longer required the tube that was inserted to keep her lung inflated. But the best news was that she was breathing on her own and wasn't supported by the respirator.

Her arm hung suspended from the bed by a cotton sling. Two metal pins stuck out of her forearm and one from her humerus. She wasn't exactly sure what they'd done to fix her wrist, but nothing was bandaged and it made her sick looking at it, like looking at Frankenstein's arm, so she tried not to.

Her throat hurt like hell. Even though she'd been off the vent for twenty-four hours, it was still hard to talk. She touched the bandages that covered half of her face. Her stomach roiled at the thought of what that looked like.

Dr. Paterson, the plastic surgeon, said the reconstruction to the left side of her face went very well. There would be minimal scarring along her hairline, from her forehead to her ear. Her hip hurt. Apparently nothing was broken but she did have fourteen stitches from one of the hits of the shovel.

God! The shovel. She'd woken several times screaming as loud as her hoarse voice would let her. She just kept seeing that shovel coming down to hurt her someplace new. Luke had been there every time she woke, soothing her with words of the love he felt for her.

She tried to lift her head to see if Luke or Dan were in the room, but pain from the movement had her whimpering. Luke was at her side instantly.

"Lay still, baby, what do you need?" he said, his face all scrunched up in worry.

"You. I just need you." It came out a little rough and Luke gave her a few sips of water. The straw hurt her lips.

"Thank you. Come lay down with me. It's been so long since I've felt your arms around me. Please."

"What if I hurt you? There is barely room for you in there, much less me."

"I need to lie on my right side now anyway. My back is killing me, and while I'm on my side there will be room."

She watched as Luke's face paled. "I'm not moving you. Are you crazy?"

Melanie pushed the button so the nurse would come. She gave Melanie some more pain medication and with precise instruction, Luke helped her move Lainie onto her side.

“They’ve moved you up to a semi-liquid diet today, so you can look forward to a cream soup for lunch,” the nurse said, teasing. “Seriously, Melanie, you’re doing amazing at this point in your recovery. You just need to be patient with your body. You’ll get there. You have so much to look forward to.”

After the nurse left, Luke lay down next to Melanie and carefully managed to hold her in his arms. He swiped an errant tear from her cheek and studied her face.

“Is this too painful for you?”

“No, this is everything to me.”

“Then why the tears?” He softly ran his fingers through the hair that wasn’t wrapped up in a bandage.

“Just feeling sorry for myself I guess. The orthopedic doctor said I’d need months of therapy on my wrist and even then I may only get ninety percent mobility. I want to be home, with you. Hiking and fishing and doing everything we couldn’t before. I’m free from that monster, and yet I’m still a prisoner in a hospital bed. The Giordanos have just taken so much from me.” She sobbed steadily onto his shoulder.

Luke tilted her head to face him and removed her tears with his thumbs.

“They took one thing from you and one thing only – Dylan — and he’s been

with you every day since he died. You felt him at the cemetery and he was with you in that field. So in a sense, you still have him with you, too.”

Melanie nodded.

Luke kissed her gently on the mouth. “They brought us together, Melanie, and I’ll thank God everyday for having you back in my life.”

She wished she could wrap her arms around him so she could feel the beating of their hearts together, and the rise and fall of their chests as one, but she could barely move.

“I do so love you, Luke. I couldn’t do this without you.”

“You’ll never have to. Listen, uh, there is something the doctors found during all your tests. I didn’t want to tell you about it until you could talk and stay awake for more than five minutes at a time.” He chuckled at his last sentence.

But all she could think was more bad news.

“What is it? Please don’t keep anything bad from me. I need to know everything,” she said somberly.

“Aww, baby, this isn’t bad news. At least I hope it’s not. I guess I never thought how you would feel about it...”

“Luke, please, just say it.” Now she was getting impatient.

He put his nose to hers and kissed her passionately, then brought his mouth

over to her ear.

“You’re three weeks pregnant,” he whispered; then leaned back.

For moments she didn’t move. Pregnant? A second chance? Luke’s baby? Oh God, a baby. The tears flowed from her eyes like water from a faucet, but for once, they were happy tears. Luke held her as best as he could. When she finally stopped, he was looking at her, his face ashen, eyes filled with sorrow. *Oh, Lord, he thinks I’m not happy about the baby.*

With the one hand that was functional, she reached up and cupped his cheek. “You’ve given me a second chance, Luke. To carry your baby in my belly, to feel it kick and move, it’s more than I thought I’d ever have. I can’t wait for a little Luke running around getting into all kinds of trouble. I love you, and I love our baby.”

She felt Luke’s warm breath on her neck as he softly nuzzled his face into her shoulder. His shoulders shook and she felt the wetness on her skin.

“I thought you were crying because you didn’t want another baby.” He mumbled into her shoulder. All at once she realized what this baby meant to him as well.

“I will always want you and any babies we may have. You’re my life, Luke McLean. You’ll have me and our children forever.”

Luke leaned up and wiped his eyes. If he was trying to look macho, he blew it. Then his face grew serious and his forehead wrinkled. “And it’s not a boy; it’s a girl. I know these things. You can do the clothes shopping.”

“Huh?”

Chapter Thirty-Five

After two weeks in the hospital, Melanie was finally home. She'd spent the past two weeks going to appointments with respiratory and physical therapists, and still she continued to find herself getting slightly short of breath just climbing up the stairs, but her respiratory therapist told her she was progressing on schedule.

The bruising and swelling in her face had mostly subsided. It was still painful making certain facial expressions, but all in all, after four weeks, she didn't scare herself looking in the mirror any more.

The orthopedist removed the pins in her arm today and applied the cast. The full arm cast started from just below her shoulder and encompassed most of her hand. The cast bent at the elbow, but at least her fingers were free. There was the ability to move her arm and things she could do, although not much. Basically, she hated it.

Luke had been great, taking her to every appointment and fulfilling her every whim, but still driving her nuts at the same time. She wasn't a fragile flower. Hell, she'd survived a beating from a mad man with a shovel, for God's sake.

He tried to get her to drink milk and tell her she was eating for two now. She was going to go absolutely freakin' nuts. To say the man was obsessed over the pregnancy and her health was a gross understatement.

Dan also hovered. Diane had been away on a business trip since the day after her attack, but she was home today and finally coming for lunch so they could meet. Luke was up in the office, trying to catch up on paperwork, Sarge at his feet lending his support. Although with the mix of rock and country music he had blasting from the stereo, she wondered how he could get any work done. Dan had just left to pick up Diane.

Melanie poked her head in the office door. "I'm going stir crazy here waiting to meet Diane. I'm going to go out and pull weeds from the flower bed."

Luke rose, turned the stereo down and walked to her. "Are you sure you should be doing that?"

She let out a long-suffering sigh. "Luke, I still have one good arm and I don't think pulling weeds is going to be too taxing on me."

"You haven't pulled weeds in a while, have you?"

"Agghh! I'm pregnant, not an invalid. Well, okay, a little bit of an invalid, but we pregnant invalids are allowed a walk in the yard now and then."

Luke pulled her into his arms. "Stop picking on me. This is all so new. I've

never been a father, ya know.”

She kissed him, then pushed him away. “I’ll be fine. Lord help this child if it’s a girl. Finish your paperwork. I’ll call you when they arrive.”

She left the room and laughed as she heard the music go back up.

Once outside, she inhaled the smell of fresh cut grass and lilacs. The lilacs were in full bloom and had a strong fragrance she just couldn’t get enough of.

She walked over to the flower boxes near the back door and began pulling weeds, a task she normally loathed. But, being outside, knowing she was free from danger for the first time in her life — even the weeds made her love her life.

Melanie looked up when she heard a car pull in, and watched as Dan parked by the porch. Finally, she’d meet the woman who’d stolen her brother’s heart. She walked toward the car as Dan walked around and helped Diane out of the passenger seat.

As they walked toward her arm-in-arm, Melanie grew lightheaded and the ground shifted beneath her. She could practically feel the warm blood drain from her body, leaving her cold and shaking.

She must have looked as bad as she felt, since Dan came up to her and held on to her good shoulder.

“Mel, what is it? You look like you’re going to pass out.”

Melanie tried to find her voice, but nothing seemed to be working. She just wasn't comprehending any of this. Her heart stalled for a moment and jumped up into her throat.

"She's just surprised to see me, Danny. We go way back, don't we, Melanie?" The woman's voice was sarcastic and cold.

Melanie found her voice. "Danny, Danny th-that's Lisa Miller. Tony's partner. The woman I caught him having sex with in his office the day he died."

This wasn't happening; she must have fallen asleep in the garden and was now having an extremely bad nightmare. How could this have happened? How could Lisa be the woman Dan had been seeing?

Reaching behind her back, Lisa pulled a gun she'd hidden in the back of her pants, and in an instant had leapt away from Dan, the gun pointed at Melanie's head. "Don't do it, Dan. Don't even flinch. I'll kill her right now."

Dan stopped where he was and put his hands out for her to see he was doing nothing.

"Don't you mean the day you killed him, Melanie? The day you took the life of a beautiful, intelligent man destined to do so much with his life. I was supposed to be with him on his way up. He had so many connections, so many opportunities. He would have been a very powerful man. You would've had a

tragic accident, but you ruined all that. I loved him, you bitch. I loved him! You took it all away.”

Dan nodded his head at Melanie and mouthed the word *talk*.

“It was an accident, Lisa. I didn’t mean for it to happen. Do you think I would have jeopardized my baby on purpose?”

Dan made a swift move toward Diane. Unfortunately she was quicker, and shot him straight on. The bullet pierced through the right side of his chest, knocking him to the ground.

Melanie fell to her knees at Dan’s side, trying to stench the flow of blood. “You shot him! Why? Why did you do that?”

“To show you I’m serious. Now get up or I’ll shoot him again. You were a wonderful distraction, Dan, but ultimately a means to an end. Sorry.” She swung the gun back at Melanie. “Now get in the car, Melanie. We’re going for a little drive.”

“You’re crazy. I’m not leaving him here to bleed to death. You’ll have to shoot me first.”

Lisa didn’t hesitate; she aimed her gun and shot Dan in the left thigh.

“Now! We leave now, or I’ll wait for your boyfriend and put a few holes in him.”

Lisa grabbed Melanie by her bad arm and jerked her up. Fighting the pain that streaked threw her, she went. Luke would be down any second. She didn't want him hurt and he'd get Dan help. She walked with Lisa to the car.

"Ya know, just to be on the safe side..." She fired the gun at Dan's head, then grabbed Melanie and shoved her through the driver's door.

"Nooo! What are you doing? Leave him alone," Melanie cried.

"Over to the passenger side, and don't try anything stupid or I'll shoot you in the stomach and kill your damn baby first."

Melanie did as Lisa said and sat in the passenger side as still as she could. Try as she might, she could not get the picture of all that blood covering Danny out of her head. And she was sure that last bullet hit something vital. Oh God, he was probably dying right now, and she'd be next.



Luke continued to catch up on paperwork, even though every instinct told him to go wait outside with Melanie for Dan and Diane. It was clear she thought he was hovering and obvious he was driving her crazy at the moment.

Well, too damn bad. He was going to be with her every step of her recovery and every step of the pregnancy. He could learn to give her space every now and then, but dammit, the thought of the baby growing inside her had him weak in the

knees every time he looked at her.

Luke opened the office window, letting the warm breeze blow in the stuffy room, the lilacs' scent wafting through the window. Through the music, he heard what sounded like a car backfire and instinctively flinched.

Sarge jumped immediately and Luke turned the music down just as his cell phone rang. Josh's caller ID popped up.

"Hello," Luke said, a little irritated about the delay.

"Dude, you having shooting practice over there?" Just as he asked the question another gunshot sounded.

"Shit! No, get over here and call nine-one-one on your way."

Luke flipped the phone shut and ran out of the room as a third shot sounded. He flew down the stairs, through the kitchen and out the back door, just in time to see Dan's car tires spitting stones as it shot out the driveway.

Sarge was already chasing the Mustang down the road when Luke spotted Dan on the ground, a few feet from the driveway. "Holy fuck!"

He knelt down at Dan's side and checked his carotid pulse. Faint but there. Tearing his shirt in half, he rapped one piece around Dan's head and applied pressure to the wound in his buddy's chest with the other.

Josh tore into the driveway, kneeling at Dan's other side. He ripped his shirt

off and applied pressure to the thigh wound. Josh pushed Luke's hand off the chest wound and with both hands tried to slow down the blood flow.

"I called help. They're on the way. You need to go. I saw Dan's car go by with a woman driving and Melanie in the passenger side, headed toward the lake."

"Take care of him."

Luke ran to his truck and headed down the road. There were two ways he could go. Straight, toward the New York border or right toward the lake. He trusted Josh, even though it made more sense to head out-of-state. He floored it. The lake it was.



Melanie had to keep her head straight and think of a way to get out of this. "So, it was you the whole time. Joey was just your puppet."

"And a stupid one at that," Lisa said, momentarily taking her eyes off the road.

Melanie thought about taking her chances and just jumping out of the car, but injuries to herself she could deal with. Killing her child again? No, she couldn't take that chance.

"He wasn't worth this you know. Tony would have used you and found a way to get rid of you once you served your purpose. He didn't love you," Melanie

taunted, noticing the woman lowered her gun and took her eyes off the road.

“Liar. He did love me, you stupid bitch. He was going to marry me as soon as you were out of the way.”

Melanie laughed. This was it; enough was enough. “You were just his mistress Lisa, his whore. The only person Tony loved was Tony.”

Lisa’s knuckles turned white around the steering wheel, and her breathing turned shallow. She took her eyes off the road and pointed the gun at Melanie.

“Shut up, you don’t know anything,” Lisa shouted.

Melanie took her one chance. With the heavy cast on her left hand, she swung and knocked the gun out of Lisa’s hand. It landed on the floor. Melanie swung again connecting with Lisa’s head, causing an enormous pain to shoot through her arm.

Lisa’s head hit the driver side window and she went limp. The car swerved. When Melanie looked up, she only had time to register the metal on metal screeching as the car careened through the guardrail and the explosion of water as the windshield smashed into the lake.



Luke drove up the lake road, the truck tires screeching and jumping around the sharp corners, dust flying and gravel pinging against the box. Getting to

Melanie was his only focus. He came around one corner to find Sarge standing by the side of the road barking.

Sliding his truck sideways to a stop, Luke jumped out and ran to Sarge. That's when he saw the downed guardrails, but nothing more. With his gut in his throat, Luke took a breath and dove into the water, swimming down until he saw the car through the murky water.

Melanie was already trying to swim out of the broken windshield, but was snagged on a piece of jagged glass. Her eyes were wide and bubbles of air escaped her lips. Luke gripped her jeans where they were caught, but the fabric didn't give. Melanie shook her head at him and pointed toward the surface. She wanted him to leave her.

No way in hell.

He grabbed her face, slammed his mouth onto hers and gave her the last breath he had in his lungs. He would die himself before he let her drown in this lake. Luke went back to her jeans, unbuckled them, and helped her slide out of them.

Just when he thought he wouldn't make it back to the top, a tug on his belt loop catapulted him up.

When they broke through to the surface, he coughed and inhaled the

blessed air.

Together they swam over to the embankment as they heard sirens and cars screeching to a stop. Luke held Melanie and couldn't tell who was shaking more, her or him.

She looked at him and held his gaze. "It's over, right? It's really over this time?"

"It's over baby." Luke said and soundly kissed her.

"Danny. I need to see Danny."

Chapter Thirty-Six

Six months later.

Luke waited outside the hospital room door. Inside, Melanie was saying goodbye to the therapist and the other patients in the Physical Therapy department. This was her last appointment. After six months, she now had ninety-five percent mobility in her wrist, and eighty percent range of motion in her elbow.

Her left arm only extended one hundred and sixty degrees instead of one-eighty, but she said as long as she could pick up her baby and hold him in her arms, taking care of him the way a mom is supposed to, then she'd be happy.

From what the therapist had told her, she'd be able to do all that and more. Luke loved the smile that covered her face these days. She'd gone through a lot of hard work getting her body put back together after Joey and Lisa tried to kill her, but she'd beaten them.

He also loved the way she absently caressed her growing belly. She was six weeks away from her due date and was more beautiful each and every day. He could stand there for hours and just watch her.

He'd never known what it meant when he heard people say a pregnant woman glowed. Well, he did now. She almost had a yellow aura of happiness around her. Everyone she spoke to lit up when she was around.

And, yes, he knew about auras, meditation, and all kinds of things a soldier would never know. They'd been going to therapy as a couple and separately. Together they'd worked through a lot of intense issues, and by now, he knew he'd always have to work at keeping his demons at bay. But for his soon-to-be wife and child, he could do anything.

His troops were always with him, but it was the good things he chose to remember now, not their deaths. He knew if they were with him right now, they'd be laughing their asses off over their Sarge talking about glowing women and auras. Hell, half the time he laughed himself.

He'd always told them he'd never have a family. That he'd screwed up the one good relationship in his life. Who knew he'd get a second chance with that same woman? Sure as hell not him. He'd make damn sure he never screwed it up again. She was his life, the very air he needed to breathe. And, if they were up there laughing at him...well...*salute!*



As Melanie said her goodbyes, she kept an eye on the man leaning on the

inside of the doorway, arms crossed and looking deceptively calm. She knew better. After they left here, they were going straight to Dr. Leland's office.

With six weeks to go, they just wanted to do an ultrasound to make sure everything was progressing as it should. Melanie rubbed her belly with love. Every minute of this pregnancy had been filled with it. Luke played around all the time telling 'her' stories of her mamma growing up, reading 'her' stories and every night, kissing his baby girl goodnight.

Melanie had no idea why he was so sure they were going to have a girl, but the man was insistent. She told Luke it would be a boy and he'd have a hellion on his hands. A little boy just like him. She'd laughed at him when he'd turned green in the face at the thought.

She walked over to him and threw her arms around his neck. "God, I love you, you handsome man."

Luke squeezed her gently and kissed her forehead. "That was supposed to be my line."

She let go of him, looked up into his face and laughed. "Mighty conceited these days."

He laughed along with her. "Not the 'handsome man' part, the 'I love you' part."

She twined her fingers in his. “You ready to go see your son?” she asked as they got onto the elevator for the next floor up in the hospital.

“You mean daughter? Hell yes, I’m ready. I’m ready to hold her in my arms. I don’t know why you had me set up the cradle and crib; she’s sleeping right on my chest every night.”

Melanie laughed out loud. “Oh, no, she — now you’ve got me saying it. Our baby is not sleeping with us, you big jerk. We’re not going to start that, mister,” she said, trying to sound stern.

Luke snorted. “We’ll finish this discussion at another time. We’re here.”

They were escorted into a dimly lit room. While Melanie changed into a hospital gown, her eyes watched Luke. He fidgeted with his hands and paced back and forth. He was pale and sweat dotted his forehead. Moving to him, she traced her fingers softly down his cheek and along his jawline until she caught his eyes with her own.

“Hey, are you okay?”

“Hell, no, I’m not okay. My God, Lainie, I know I’ve insisted you’re carrying a girl for seven months now, but I truly don’t care. I just want a healthy baby. What if they find something wrong? What if I do something wrong after it’s born? What if something happens to you? It could happen, you know. I’ve read some

articles where the mother has complications during delivery. I can't lose you, Lainie, I just can't."

Holy mother of God, the man was freaking out big time. She guided him to one of the chairs in the room. As hard as it was to maneuver, she knelt down between his knees, both hands now clasping his face.

"Luke, breathe. Take a deep breath and slow down. We will handle anything that comes our way. If something is wrong with the baby, then we deal with it — together. There is absolutely no reason to think something is going to happen to me during delivery, *and*, you're going to be the best father our baby could ever hope to have. Besides, we have our own little guardian angel. Nothing will go wrong."

She kissed him, their lips slightly parted, exchanging every breath in the soft passionate kiss. He wrapped his arms around her, sank his head onto her shoulder, and smothered a laugh. He helped her to her feet and then onto the table to wait for the doctor.

"Guess I kinda lost it there, huh?"

"Just a momentary lapse. I won't hold it against ya."

The door opened and the doctor walked in. "Okay, you guys ready? If I can tell, do you want to know the sex of your baby?"

“Yes,” they answered in unison.

The doctor spread the warmed gel over Melanie’s belly, tapped on the keyboard of the ultrasound machine, and the monitor came to life. Not quite knowing what they were looking at, they waited for the doctor to show them what was what.

Melanie’s chest tightened and her heart began to race faster when the doctor didn’t speak. She just kept taking measurements and tapping on the keyboard. Luke squeezed her hand and she held on tight to him.

Finally she couldn’t stand the doctor’s silence any longer.

“Dr. Leland, is something wrong with the baby?”

Dr. Leland glanced at her and then Luke.

“No, oh, no. I’m sorry; nothing is wrong. It just seems I’ve missed a big part of the picture here.”

Now she could feel her hand sweating in Luke’s. “I don’t understand. Please tell us what’s going on.”

Dr. Leland pointed out the baby’s head and arms and fingers and toes. Everything was perfect.

“Do you remember the last two visits? Your measurements weren’t adding up. I was afraid you were going to have a very big baby, especially given the

father's height and build.”

“Yes, so what's the problem? Am I carrying a fifteen pound baby?” Melanie asked, trying to lighten the affect of the room.

“Well, not exactly. The baby I just showed you is your very healthy daughter...”

“I told you!” Luke shouted, then shut his mouth as he realized the doctor wasn't done.

The doctor moved the ultrasound wand to the other side of Melanie's belly and pointed. The baby was sucking her thumb and kicking her mother's ribs.

“This, mommy and daddy,” the doctor said, pointing to another part of the baby's anatomy, “is your very robust son.”

“What?” Again, both spoke in unison.

“It happens. One baby's heartbeat will mask the other and when we listen, we only hear one heartbeat. That's one of the reasons we like to do ultrasounds later in the pregnancy.”

“Twins? A boy and a girl? Oh, my God! We're not ready for that.” Melanie started to panic much as Luke had done earlier.

Luke leaned down and kissed her lips, then whispered in her ear. “Together, honey. Together we are ready for anything.”

The doctor continued, “This changes things a little. Your blood pressure and urine protein has been fine up to now, but I want to see you weekly from here on out. We’ll set the C-section date for a week before your due date. I know you wanted to try a natural birth, but these two are big already. Since you’ve had a C-section before, I feel more comfortable going that route this time.”

Melanie was trying to take all this in, but she was in shock. She hoped Luke was paying attention or the doctor was writing it all down. Twins!

“You’re doing really very well now, so I’m not putting you on bed rest, but you do need to rest often and no lifting anything over five pounds. I’ll let all this soak in and see you in my office next week. I’m sure you’ll have a list of questions for me. Don’t worry, Melanie. You’re doing great.”

After the doctor left the room, Melanie got dressed and they left the hospital for the parking lot. Once in the truck, she took a deep breath and as she was about to speak, Luke exploded.

“Twins, Lainie. Can you believe it? A boy *and* a girl? Holy shit! Just...holy shit! It’s the couch for you, little lady. No more doing anything. I mean it, Melanie. You’re grounded.”

She just sighed and slid over to his side. “I do love you, Luke. So very much. Thank you for giving me my life back.”

He slid his arms around her and held her for a long moment. “Ditto, right back at ya, babe.”

“I want to go to the cemetery and tell Dylan. Do you mind? Then we can go to the rehab center and tell Danny.”

“Well, let’s go then. Of course I don’t mind.”

“I’m worried about Danny, Luke. He’s so angry all the time. I think we’re doing the right thing by bringing him home to continue his physical therapy. The only time he smiles is when we talk about the baby.”

“He has a right to be angry. That woman nearly killed him. A quarter of an inch in either his shoulder or head and he’d have died instantly. Plus she shot him in the knee. He’ll never walk without a limp. He’ll never have full use of his shoulder. After six months of therapy, he’s still in a wheelchair. After he’s done with therapy, he’ll be back to normal. As far as his brain function goes, he is now, but he’ll never be the same. He’ll never trust again, not like he did. She may not have killed him, but she did kill his heart.”

Melanie knew he was speaking from experience. All he’d been through and he still had the capacity to love and be loved. She could only hope Danny could do the same.

“Do you think we were wrong in hiring a woman to stay at the house and

work on his therapy with him? Shouldn't we have hired a man?" She was concerned he wouldn't respond to Karen the way he would a man.

"She's got excellent references. She's young, energetic, and I don't think she'll put up with any of his shit. She seems to have a very strong backbone. I think she'll be good for him."

Melanie wasn't convinced. Danny still needed to do so much more work. She hoped to hell having a woman staying there and being his physical therapist wouldn't set him back.

"Besides, when the twins come, I think he'll work even harder. Being an uncle is everything to him. He'll be okay, honey. It'll just take some time. Trust me."

She did. She trusted him with her heart and soul and her life.



At the cemetery, they placed baby blue carnations at Dylan's headstone and she told him all about the babies.

"You'll always be part of my heart and soul, Dylan. Now you'll be a big brother for two babies."

Luke handed her a book.

"What's this?" she asked.

“Open it, silly.”

She opened it to find a baby book, for all the babies’ firsts. On the inside of the front cover was a black and white ultrasound film of a baby boy that had almost made it into the world. Underneath, written in Luke’s handwriting was,

Dylan Hunter, beloved son of Melanie Hunter, Guardian of her children and keeper of our hearts.

Melanie ran her hand over the old ultrasound film as tears formed in her eyes. Her breath caught in her throat. Luke’s arm wrapped around her waist and she leaned back against him for support.

“This is beautiful, Luke. How...where...did you get this?”

“I’ve had it since we cleaned out your house. It was on your refrigerator. I was just waiting for the right time to give it back to you.”

Her heart burst with love as her eyes overflowed with tears. They’d both been through so much separately. From now on, forever, they were no longer alone. She turned in his arms to face him.

“We’ve got to get Danny walking, ya know. I told you I’d marry you as soon as he can walk me down the aisle. I want that so much, Luke. I love you with all my heart.” She reached up and covered his mouth with hers. The love he returned in the kiss warmed her body, head-to-toe.

They walked side-by-side, arm-in-arm back to the truck. “It’ll happen, sweetheart. Until then, a piece of paper makes no difference. We’re already a family.”

The End

Author website

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Born in Wichita Falls, Texas, at the age of two Debbie and her mother moved to New Jersey, spending many happy years on her grandparent's horse farm. You'll sometimes find this setting a backdrop in her work.

As a teenager, she and her mother found a new home in Vermont, where she currently resides. With a daughter in the Air Force (along with Debbie's three-year-old grandson), Debbie now shuffles her time between a husband and two rambunctious sons while writing and actively participating in Lethaladies.

About two years ago, while looking at over three hundred treasured books lining her shelves, she realized there was a multitude of stories of her own clamoring for release. Since then, she's seriously persevered in keeping the keyboard in constant motion.

With two manuscripts complete, Mountain's Echo and Infidelity. Debbie is now submitting chapters of Betrayal to Lethaladies, while preparing do the same with Sins of the Mind, her fourth manuscript.

Debbie has been a member of KOD, FTHRW, ELEMENTS and RWA Online.

